

# South Asian Ensemble

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## *Contents*

### **Editor's Note 5**

#### *Poetry*

- Ten Poems** Manglesh Dabral 6  
**Four Poems** Priscila Uppal 15  
**Five Poems** John Brandi 18  
**Blue Water Lilies** John Siddique 23  
**Human Work – A Poet's Statement** John Siddique 24  
**Soham** Sidharth 26  
**Four Poems** Sasenarine Persaud 34  
**Two Sonnets** Ben Antao 38  
**Three Poems** Gagan Gill 40  
**Five Poems** Neeru Aseem 43  
**Three Poems** Rana Nayar 49  
**London Diary** Anuradha Ghosh 53  
**Six Poems** Ashutosh Dubey 55  
**Five Poems** Gurdev Chauhan 60  
**Five Poems** Jaswant Deed 67  
**Three Poems** Devneet 71  
**Two Poems** Sandeep Dhanoa 74

#### *Nonfiction Narrative*

- The Fortune-Teller's Widow** Rajesh Sharma 76

#### *Fiction*

- The Nicest Boy** Cyril Debydeen 86  
**Cinnamon Jungles** Kamleshwar 93  
**A Porcine Tale** Talilula 103  
**The Predicament** Rajesh Kumar 109

- Revenge of the Meek** Subhash Chandra 115

- Love Chakri** Rosalia Scalia 125

- The Night She Slept** Deepti Zutshi 150

#### *Essays in Criticism*

- Critique de la Raison Dialectique** Harjeet Singh Gill 154

- Two Readings: Gurdial Singh's *Night of the Half Moon* and *Adh Chanani***

- Raat*** Gurupdesch Singh 165

- Pash's Theory of Poetry: A Study of His Letters** Lakhvinder Singh Bedi 173

- The Legacy of Violence in *The Wasted Vigil*** Mudasir Altaf Bhat 185

#### *From My Bookshelf*

- Imaginary Maps* by Mahasweta Devi** Gurdev Chauhan 192

#### *Book Reviews*

- Light of the Universe* by Ashraf Aziz** Swaraj Raj 198

- The Blind Man's Garden* by Nadeem Aslam** Sumandeep Kaur 207

#### *Not by Way of an Obituary*

- On Khushwant Singh** Bhim Singh Dahiya 212

#### *Contributors 213*

## **Editor's Note**

A lot of good South Asian writing is taking place outside the dominant circuits of recognition. It was our assumption when we started *SAE*. Five years down the road, it is a conclusion.

Leafing through pages from the past, we see many installed stereotypes crumbling. Yet much survives that seems to identify us.

What is still awaited is a radical mobilization of the elements of the ensemble that is us and our experience, a mobilization that dislocates, disassembles and creates afresh beyond merely reproducing. This would require infusion of energies from outside the ensemble's boundaries.

But haven't cultures always outsourced? Isn't imagination the great outsourcing machine? Isn't literature always in another place, always already elsewhere?

South Asia is a horizon that must be transcended. Only when it begins to be transcended – with freedom, without guilt, with responsibility – shall great writing again begin to find home here. Domestication is a pre-requisite. Homelessness, a necessity.

Perhaps we should seek our singularity in losing ourselves in our own ways.

Rajesh Sharma

## Mangalesh Dabral

### Ten Poems

#### Outside

I closed the door  
and sat down to write a poem  
outside a breeze was blowing  
there was a little light  
a bicycle stood in the rain  
a child was coming home  
I wrote a poem  
which had no breeze no light  
no bicycle no child  
and  
no door.

*Translated by Asad Zaidi*

#### City

I looked at the city  
and smiled  
and walked in  
who would ever want to live here  
I wondered  
and never went back.

*Translated by Girdhar Rathi*

## The Missing

In the urinals and other frequented places of this city  
One still comes across posters of the missing people  
Who had left home quietly many years ago  
At the age of ten or twelve  
They are shown possessing an average height  
Complexion wheatish or dark but never fair  
They wear rubber slippers  
A scar on the face from some old injury  
Their mothers still cry for them  
Finally it is mentioned that anybody  
Providing any news about the missing  
Will be suitably rewarded  
Yet no one can identify them  
They do not resemble the faded images  
On those posters anymore  
Their initial sadness is now overwritten  
With the endurance of suffering  
Their faces reflect the changing seasons of the city  
They eat little sleep little speak little  
Their addresses keep changing  
Facing the good and the bad days with equanimity  
They are in their own world  
Looking with faint curiosity  
At the posters recording them as missing  
Which their parents still issue from time to time  
In which they continue to be  
Ten and twelve

*Translated by Asad Zaidi*

## **Torchlight**

Back when I was a child  
my father once brought home a torch  
the patterns on its glass somewhat like headlights of today's cars  
It was the first machine of light in our parts  
As its beam fell, like a miracle night parted into two.

One morning a granny from the neighbourhood appeared at the door  
– Son, give me a little fire from this machine to light my stove.  
Father smiled– Auntie, this has no fire, just the light  
We switch it on only in the dark night to make  
the rugged mountain paths visible.  
Oh – the grandma said – how good it would be if there were some  
fire too  
As night falls I worry for making the fire in the morning.  
Father fell silent for a long moment.

After all these years that light from the torch  
the granny's demand of fire and father's helplessness keep returning  
like a poem in the irony of our time.

*Translated by Rupert Snell*

## **The Accompanist**

Supporting the heavy monolith of the main singer's voice  
His own was graceful, thin and quavering.  
He is the singer's younger brother  
Or a pupil

Or a distant relative who comes on foot to learn.  
Since long ago  
The resonance of his voice has echoed  
The sonority of his master's;  
And when the singer's lost his way  
In the tangled jungle of melodic uplands  
Or strays into the void of unstruck sound  
Beyond the further reaches of the scale  
It's the accompanist who holds the steady theme,  
Gathering up the things the singer left behind,  
Reminding him of childhood days  
When he was a novice;  
When the singer's voice gives way in the higher register,  
Inspiration deserting him and fervour waning,  
An ashiness shedding from his voice  
Then the accompanist's tones emerge to blend with his;  
Or it may be that he joins in simply  
To show the singer that he's not alone  
And that the song that's sung and done  
Can be sung anew once more  
And that the audible faltering in his voice  
Or his willful avoidance of the higher notes  
Is evidence not of ineffectuality  
But of humanity.

*Translated by Rupert Snell*

## **Civilization**

We believe a man must be out there still, in some unknown cave  
readying his bow for battle. If he should be sighted our cameras rush

to record his nakedness. It is said that he lived in our houses once with his entire clan. They worshipped masks and worried about nothing but talking to the birds and the sea. We put our masks on them in place of theirs and took their bows, useless in this modern day and age, for our own purposes. One by one their birds fell at our feet. Scholars have many theories about where they have gone. Perhaps they were drowned at sea or disappeared with the birds or maybe our masks were too much for them. However some people say a long battle was fought and when only a single clansman survived we gave him back his mask and bow and banished him to a distant cave. Civilization demanded that there be one man there - not just a picture but a living breathing naked thing.

*Translated by the poet and Christi Merrill*

### **A Picture of Grandfather**

Grandfather had no interest in getting pictures taken  
Or he didn't have the time  
There's just a single picture of him, hanging on an old stained wall  
He's sitting there calm and serious  
Like a cloud heavy with rain  
All that's known about Grandfather  
Is that he gave alms to those who sought them  
He turned anxiously in his sleep  
And in the morning on waking  
Straightened the rumpled bedding  
I was very young then  
I never saw his anger  
Never saw his ordinariness

Pictures never show a person's helplessness  
Mother says that while we're sleeping  
Surrounded by strange nocturnal creatures  
Grandfather stays awake in this picture  
I didn't grow as tall as my grandfather  
Or as calm and serious  
But there is something in me resembling him  
The same rage, the same ordinariness  
I too walk with head bowed  
And live seeing myself sitting  
In an empty picture frame.

*Translated by Rupert Snell*

### **The Quiet House**

The sun by slow degrees heats up the walls  
There's a fire smoldering somewhere near  
There's a ball lying on the bed  
the books, storehouses of disaster, are silent.  
I'm half awake, half asleep  
Half asleep, half awake  
Listening to sounds outside  
No sobbing in them  
No threats being made or fear expressed  
Nobody praying, nobody  
Asking for alms.  
And no bitterness in me  
But space, empty, waiting to be filled  
And easily inhabited

Nor do I feel helpless  
But an aching spreads through my limbs  
And I recall the house of my childhood  
Its backyard, lying on my stomach  
Basking in the sun.  
I ask nothing of the world  
And can live as squirrels do  
As grass does or a ball  
That a small jolt will bring  
This quiet house down  
Doesn't worry me.

*Translated by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra*

### **The Places That Are Left**

These days, I keep forgetting things, keep losing them,  
I misplace my glasses, lose my pen,  
a second ago, somewhere, I saw the colour blue,  
now I do not know where it has gone.  
I forget answering letters, paying my debts,  
I forget saying my hellos and goodbyes to friends,  
regretting that my hands remain full with work  
that has little to do with me,  
sometimes, having forgotten a thing,  
I cannot even remember forgetting it.  
Mother used to tell me to go to those places  
where I had last seen, taken off or kept those things.  
This way I usually found them and was thrilled.  
Mother used to say that these things, wherever they are,

make a place of their own and do not let go easily.  
Now mother is no longer with me,  
only her place is left.

Things get lost but their places remain,  
moving with us all our lives,  
We move elsewhere, leaving our homes, our people,  
the water, the trees,  
like a stone, I had washed away from a mountain,  
that mountain must still have a little place left.  
Meanwhile, my city was submerged by a big dam,  
they have made another city in its place  
but I said this is not it, my city is now an empty feeling.

Things happen and then pass  
but where they happened, those places add up,  
those places move with me,  
reminding me of all that I have forgotten  
and of all that I have lost.

*Translated by Akhil Katyal*

### **This Number Does Not Exist**

This number does not exist.  
Wherever I go whichever number I dial  
At the other end a strange voice says  
This number does not exist *yeh number maujood nahin hai*  
Not too long ago at this number I used to reach people  
Who said: of course we recognize you  
There is space for you in this universe

But now this number does not exist it is some old number.  
At these old addresses very few people are left  
Where at the sound of footsteps doors would be opened  
Now one has to ring the bell and wait in apprehension  
And finally when one appears  
It is possible that he might have changed  
Or he might say I am not the one you used to talk to  
This is not the number where you would hear out your grief

Wherever I go numbers maps faces seem to be changed  
Old diaries are strewn in the gutters  
Their names slow-fading in the water  
Now other numbers are available more than ever with and without  
wires  
But a different kind of conversation on them  
Only business only transactions buy-and-sell voices like strangers  
Whenever I go I desperately dial a number  
And ask for the voice that used to say  
The door is open you can stay here  
Come along for a while just for the sake of it any time in this universe.

*Translated by Sudeep Sen*

## Four Poems

### Who Will Bring You Breakfast When I'm Gone?

Who will bring you breakfast when I'm gone?  
Who will butter your toast & know to butter your toast along the  
edges only?  
Who will pour your orange juice & know to fill it right to the brim?  
Who will brew your green tea with jasmine—& stew it long enough  
so you forget you are drinking green tea with jasmine?  
Who will scramble your eggs & flip them by telling dirty jokes?  
Tell me who, who will do these, among other things, once I am gone?  
And how am I to keep on living, knowing this?  
How can I possibly be strong?

### High Tide

My heart washed up on the beach.  
Bloated like the Man o Wars the posters  
warned us about. A casualty of

the storm, I'd thrown it overboard,  
convinced it would sink as I listened  
attentively for its last petty bubbles

to fizz out, for the ocean to perform  
its own cold blue burial rites, for slick  
fish to carve out a coral reef. I motored  
back to shore. Before sunset, the water

coughed up its lungs and there you  
were again, bruised and soggy as always,  
begging feebly for resuscitation. I tossed  
Frisbee with the clouds while the locals  
frantically shooed the children away

who strung your valves into necklaces.

### **Teaching is Becoming a Dangerous Profession**

Pull out a book,  
you might as well be pulling out  
a grenade.

No one seems to recognize  
what it is or how to use it  
before it's too late.

### **The Day the World Ends**

*a found poem*

Leave all purses and other personal belongings.  
Line up against the right wall,  
women and children first.  
Check under the door for signs of heat or smoke.  
If clear, walk in single file.  
Do not use elevators.  
Walk out of the building to a place of safety.

If heat or smoke is evident, block the outlet.  
Open a window if one is available.  
Do not try to be a hero.  
Wait calmly for assistance.  
Do not panic.

**John Brandi**

Five Poems

**The World, the World**

Uncanny, the way the world works.  
Lots to be learned out there. Here I go again, arriving  
at the new Indira Gandhi International Airport,  
all those larger-than-life shiny bliss-bestowing Buddha hands  
in various mudras on the wall over the ATM machines.  
Even though my eyes are bleary from the 14-hr nonstop flight  
across the north pole, Chicago to Delhi,  
I know I can handle this.

I put on my specs, take out my Visa,  
insert, and nothing happens, turn it around, do it  
the other way, and nothing happens. Take off my specs,  
wipe them with shirt tail, get ready for another try.  
And here's Mr. Courteous, out from nowhere, to help me.  
Please Sir, I shall try for you. He takes my card,  
polishes it on his pants leg, swipes it, and  
it works—out comes the dinero,  
and, as I am counting it, into his pocket  
goes the card.

**Ghalib's House, Old Delhi**

How many rooms, now only sky,  
opened their shutters to this ruined courtyard?  
What nerve song, what bruised threshold  
saw more than what the eye let in?  
Ghalib burns like a wound, soothes like pine resin  
on the breeze. Irreverent with uneasy secrets,  
I hear him call from a missing window  
as I return to the streets:

“Let the poem be beyond  
you, a meaning not quite understood.”

A girl on a bicycle, her painted toes  
whirling on blinking-light pedals, kaleidoscopes  
through alleys of blood-red doorways framed in blue.

A boy rolls a hoop between women  
in jangling anklets who move like veiled islands  
past a beggar's hand outstretched in sleep.

Ghalib wants to make sense of these shadows  
slipping through me like smoke. He asks,  
“is something hiding  
behind the Curtain?”

## Varanasi

—*en memoriam, Pandit Ravi Shankar*

A bouquet of thunderbolts  
splits the anchor from its chain.  
A bear begs change while his master  
sips tea on the steps where Kabir sang.

Look, the rained-on shoes—  
the dusty eyes of the market fish.  
Here relatives of the poor sell  
what is left of their hair before they die.  
Here a musician tunes a sitar  
and the sky becomes a page of octaves.

Look, the anvil—  
the bellows, the mirror, the hammer.

Here grief turns to rapture  
as a broken rudder floats to sea.  
Here the veil lifts a thousand questions  
from the answer.

### **To the Drone of Insects** *Green Plum Tea House*

This might have been happenstance  
but the flower on your table  
just landed in my cup.

Perhaps you are trying  
for my attention. Certainly the sword  
flying across the room

in the shape of a paper plane  
wasn't coincidence, nor the look  
on your face when I turned

wasn't just a trick of the flesh.  
I think I'll move closer, sharpen my pencil,  
draw you a poem on a napkin.  
We've spoken before  
haven't we?

### LAZING ON AN UNNAMED RIDGE

In a granite shelter  
we sit with two mountain asters,  
glazed peaks rising on all sides

no oxygen, rope, or guide  
no future calling us into the past  
no regret gnawing the heart

Only a bearded old-world raptor  
gliding up to us between  
heaven and earth  
No void, no face in the mirror  
No trail up, none down—

Only mists closing in,  
the prised gleam of sheer rock  
becoming water

falling off toward the raptor  
gliding far below, high above  
the world's haze  
the madness, the dust  
—what people seek.

### **Cutting through the Morass**

*for Malala Yousufzai*

No matter how far out I go,  
the news is always close. Monk, shepherd,  
a baker in his shack tell stories  
of another blown-up school,  
teachers threatened, girls thrashed  
by men who raise themselves high  
with eager stones.

I fix my walking stick into ice,  
let breath dissolve into planet light.  
Wonder how many families are on edge  
with fear tonight?

By sunrise, I might cross the pass,  
meet a soul-bright bloom on her way to school,  
scout a new frontier, find an authentic man,  
share tea, cup my hands  
around the gift of peace.

**John Siddique**

### **Blue Water Lilies**

*In Memory of Sayed Bilal*

In a room where no sound gets in or out  
there is a scent of water lilies.  
No sound must break the night air,  
this night has been arranged to appear  
to be just like any other night.

You try to live,  
to not stand out,  
not attract attention  
but they know you,  
they know us all.

They call you to Al Raml Police Station  
to help them they say.  
We become questions we dare not ask.

How many rooms are there in this world  
hidden in the night?  
Rooms from which no light may spill?  
Rooms in which Sayed Bilal thinks of his wife  
at home seven months pregnant  
she must be tired,  
she needs me to make dinner.  
Thinks of his brother Ibrahim,  
his mother who will have to receive his body.  
Rooms scented with blue lotus  
though they have never seen a flower.

**John Siddique**

## Human Work – A Statement

Our lives take us on so many paths, I could have been a physicist, a gardener or a monk; each of these possibilities was real at one time. Instead poetry and literature chose me as their own, as if in reality it was always meant to be that my life would be intertwined completely with theirs. Then I could have been happily following the typical role of the poet: writing, lecturing, and writing criticism of other poets in a mainly hermetic world, but the revolutionary act of bearing witness to the lives I come into contact with, through simply looking when I write, has shown me what a hard yet beautiful world it is that we live in. The simple meeting of life with one's true gaze is the greatest act of humanity and dignity there is. To find a way every day to continue doing this, to keep reporting back in poems, stories and photographs, is my own small fight for a better world.

There are times when I drown in the politics of the world, things I have seen in my own life, in the very town and country I live in, as well as on my travels in the edge-lands of Northern Ireland, The Americas, Europe and India. There are things that are much worse than death. It is not true that words can never hurt us, human dignity can be destroyed with a single word, neighbour can be turned against neighbour, and war can shout its name in the guise of being for peace. In this whirling mess of emotion and division, the only thing that can restore us is that light within ourselves, this where art is at its most valuable. Not in argument or sentimentality, but in truth, in dreams, expression, and storytelling. Just as words can destroy us as readily as the gun, so it is that a true line written down can unlock a life that has not dared to breathe for years. It can bring empathy and dignity through the simple sharing of stories, through the medium of black ink on paper, or when spoken aloud in a room in another country. It can give life to those who have never had a chance at one, and it can

lift us, though we may not even know how much we need this medicine.

Authenticity, bearing witness and taking action are more important than ever. We are always riding at the front edge of time, and there will always be those who desire that these are the worst of times. The artist, the dreamer, the worker and the scientist are necessary. Ask yourself, what real contributions do banking or politics make as they stand at this time. How do they help with understanding, evolution, and the human spirit? I for one will continue to progress by travelling these roads with hope and love as best I can, erasing the borders that have been drawn on the map in order to divide us. For there are no borders, and there is no war between ordinary people when we truly see for ourselves that there is no separation.

## Sidharth

### Soham

*a long poem*

*Translated from Hindi by Navtej Bharati and Ajmer Rode*

For the renowned artist Sidharth, art is a spiritual journey, a quest for capturing the ineffable on the canvas. All colours of Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism, the influences he acquired while still young, find a way into his paintings. Soham is a testimony to this quest. As he says, *Soham* is inspired by a tale in *Vishnu Dharmotra Purana* which he heard in his boyhood from Dyal Dass, a blind village bard.

Sidharth says, 'I have always been thinking what became of that seeker. Did he go to other teachers in his search? Did he finally become an artist?'

The thought made Sidharth sit up one fine morning and write. He says it was as if the writing came of itself.

Only the first two parts of the long poem are being published below. The poem has been translated by Navtej Bharati and Ajmer Rode. It will shortly appear as a book in Hindi as well as English version.

\* \* \*

Teach me, guru, how to write painting,  
said jigyasu

Tathaastu, so be it,  
said the maharishi guru.  
But learn sculpture first then come to me.  
Go seek a sculptor.

Instruct me, master,

how to sculpt.  
Sure I will  
but first learn dance, the nritya  
then come to me.

I've come to learn dance, nritya guru.

Welcome. But first you've to learn  
music: its laya sur, taal, note, the beat and rhythm.  
Go to a music acharya.

And the music acharya said:  
learn to listen  
before you learn laya, sur, taal,  
Go and pause, listen to sabad, the word eternal  
in Nature and in you.

Go listen birds sing  
the beat of leaves  
trees exuding silence  
streams and springs chanting kal kal kal.

Then come back. And learn  
to play instruments  
sing songs of love and celebration.

Jigyasu left.

*An excerpt from the Vishnu Dharmotra Puran  
The narrative continues....*

## Form

Jigyasu: I thought and thought  
till I could think no more  
and understand no more.  
For days my eyes saw  
without comprehending without knowing  
without voice,  
empty words, void all around.

Then one day the sky cleared.  
A realization dawned. Whatever is visible  
is form: Light, darkness, sun, moon, stars,  
wife's face, eyes, hands.  
A sudden realization it was.

I too am a form.

And form is everything outside me  
earth is form  
mother is form  
father is form  
the entire world is forms

Who made these forms,  
who is the former?

I saw my wife  
as if I saw her first time.  
A beautiful form  
alive in every limb.  
The figure the bosom,

never ever I saw such a graceful creation.  
Never could I see it before.  
It was an auspicious, auspicious sight,  
saw it in earnest, first time.

Such a grace  
an abundance in color  
love, ananda.  
I saw I touched  
as if I had never touched it before.  
Thus was filled my void.

Had I not been seeing so far?  
Same eyes same world around  
same time-space  
but now it looked so different

I see forms  
walking dancing standing  
lying here and there.

I see a tree. Arms spread  
over the shade,  
leaves fluttering in rhythm.  
An ant hurrying home, something  
precious in her mouth.  
A stone sitting on a stone  
like a yogi in meditation  
Vines spiral on tree trunks.

Little flowers pop open from the grass  
look upwards,

some bloom in a ditch.  
Naked deer naked tiger naked dog  
naked sheep, naked cat.

Naked child looking at his hands.

A pigeon picks a grain in silence,  
flies away, then another does then hundreds.  
The sky quivers  
stars twinkle,  
the sun the moon rest on the platter,

trees leaves twigs fruits,  
an ant with a grain, pigeons peacocks,  
flowers in the grass. Butterfly  
dog deer leopard sheep child  
mother baby  
milk butter tea  
cow buffalo water shadow  
mountain river fountain  
clouds changing forms, the blue sky:

figures and forms all around  
all real.

I see them I touch them.  
The earth extends to the sky  
filled with forms.  
Painting is mere illusion of them.

It is illusion. Whatever is visible  
is form. Forms are real and performing.  
I see them I touch them.

The earth full of forms extends to the sky.  
The painting is mere illusion of them.

It indeed is illusion, nothing else.  
Without seeing knowing comprehending forms  
illusion cannot be constructed.

Maharishi,  
after you asked me to go  
and learn how to sculpt, I saw the forms  
I could not see before.  
I could not learn painting  
without knowing how shapes figures forms  
the time-space, changing seasons,  
colors, shadows, sun, dark, change.

Right you said, guru,  
no painting no illusion  
can be created without  
seeing knowing and experiencing the form.

This I have understood  
that I too am a cosmic form.

There are human forms.  
Milk, a churning rod,  
a churning pitcher,  
ear earrings gold  
plate roti, the brass bowl,  
water pump, glass pale,  
knife needle axe  
house trunk bag rupee

turban cabinet shirt  
table chair eyeglasses  
notebook pen inkpot  
hearth, spatula, brass pan, spoon  
a toy cart, pit, plough hammer,  
clothes pillow car drums, bell temple, harmonium -  
how burdensome all this stuff, guru.

How burdensome to deal with  
these countless things and forms.  
what shall I pick to sculpt  
how shall I sculpt  
why shall I sculpt forms  
When they already exist  
why shall I recreate.

Forms are all around, guru,  
hey guru, chitarkar

I was surprised by the abundance,  
thousand questions rose,  
it was heavy, guru,  
could not bear it for long.  
So my steps led me to the door of the  
sculptor.

I bowed, prayed at his feet  
to teach me the patience the meditation  
the secret the magic of sculpting.

The sculptor said,  
go, learn dancing first

then come to me for sculpting.  
He sent me away.

Maharishi: then tell me, how did you feel  
what did you do?

Jiggyasu: I came back home with  
heavy heart and thousand questions.  
I thought, being a guru the sculptor must've  
followed the same path he is prescribing me,  
must be right  
that's what I believed.

I came back home  
once more, hey Maharishi.

*The narrative continues.....*

## Sasenarine Persaud

### Four Poems

#### Staff Trimming

*Sweetgum*, he said turning  
to the glass wall and morning  
sun on our shoulders. *Sweetgum*  
*not maples*, he corrected. *You know*  
*how it goes*. He didn't look up  
exiting the VP's office,  
a manager waiting as he gathered  
his things. She accompanied him  
to the exit. A moving picture train.  
They didn't use security guards  
this time no explanations  
except the whims of the new CEO  
who could never be a pandit replaced.  
*Sweetgum*, he said, and was gone.

#### Stealing Memory

These white polka dots on a blue summer  
shirt are the saijan's blossoms against sky.  
*What? Tell me their name again*, you say.  
Drumsticks. *No, not that. What you said*  
*before*. Saijan. It is raining all week,  
ever since we returned from Boston. One night.

The cats are fed. The dog scratches a sofa.  
In Key West, tourists take pictures  
outside Sloppy Joes's. You fancy the raindrops  
are a typewriter's keys pounding 8.5 by 11 inches  
sheets as white as your blouse.

When did the top buttons become undone?  
An ivory nude on her stomach reading at night.  
We were gay, then: one man, one woman laughing  
in your garden; we will not let anyone  
patent our memory. You say: "*Come back to me*  
*My language. Come back to me, my love.*"

#### My Father's Bubbles

The glass-topped pot boils  
like a waterfall. We angle the cover  
and get surf on a sugarbrown  
beach—Georgetown's or Miami's?

Every pot makes its own percolation  
and yet sounds the same. *Don't wash*  
*everything out*, he said. Rinsing  
chopped gill-baker with lime.  
It is years and even now  
his concoctions permeate this kitchen.

Steam rising from lava-thick surwa—  
Gravy, you say—infused with tomatoes.  
I, too, cook with no recipe.  
Red fruits from Florida, channa

From California, jeera—cumin and  
khari from India. No doubt, our mothers,  
real and step, made tasty dishes.  
I remember nothing of our birth  
mother's, who died too young.

*He was cooking since he was a boy,  
Inez, my mother's cousin said—  
Growing up across the street, we laughed.  
A boy cooking! She was laughing still  
at his wake. Only girls cooked. But his stepmother  
when his father, your Aja, was away!  
Working on the American airbase during WWII.*

This channa curry—chole—can never taste  
as good and yet will taste the same  
as his kichari medley. The open pot  
is an Atlantic-Kolkata-Ganga delta surf,  
water on shells, deadfall: ancestral curry thumb.

## **One Thousand**

Bourbon went with Hapsburg or portraits  
in oval frames. Perhaps, Marie Antoinette.  
We were mesmerized by curls. Those years'  
cravings ran to beers and twelve-year old  
Demerara rums. No Johnnie Walker black or gold,  
no vodka, or London gin on-the-rocks  
was smoother. How explain voices  
from childhood films? Shaken not stirred.

We have no business being so beautiful.  
Raleigh set out for El Dorado somewhere  
in Guiana. Everyone in Elizabeth's court  
had curls, we thought. We saw only hers. Mommy  
made waves in dark tresses, letting us watch

As the curlers locked—click, click, click—  
in her friends' hair and hers. You smell  
the lotion a thousand miles away, a thousand  
years diving into the Atlantic, wet hair  
emerging on her white shoulders. Men stared.

Loved or lusted, who can say? Daddy's special  
was Russian Bear Rum from D' Andrade's  
rum shop that went under. He switched.  
Turmoil in Europe and elsewhere. Napoleon  
never made it to Moscow. Nor Hitler. All that snow.  
No good for vegetarians. A fish bumpersticker.

How could Van Gogh truncate smiles?  
The merchant or the merchant's wife:  
starry nights, apples, sunflowers are  
a thousand renditions, the waves of paint  
on canvas making impressions. Freud or Oedipus

Pink heels peddling the Singer.  
The Magician of Lublin named his horse Shiva.  
We moved yet again. Diasporas crossing  
and re-crossing oceans in the same optic ship.  
There is no plain Jane. But how do you know  
Bond was wrong? A thousand names for Vishnu,  
A thousand for you—shaken and stirred.

## Ben Antao

### Two Sonnets

#### Namaste Ganapati!

Elephant-faced god of Hindu pantheon  
The Ganapati worshipped as idol  
Of good luck and wisdom given paeon  
Of praise on birthday each year like medal

By business for removing obstacles  
The son of Shiva and Parvati shaped  
In poses and attitudes and wild roles  
That artist's lush imagination helped

He was a man in dhoti with bare chest  
Created idols of infinite array  
From clay of bluish-gray with modest zest  
On Ganesha Chaturti to display

With sloping trunk Ganapati did trumpet  
For sweet rice balls his favourite crumpet

## The Snake Charmer

The snake charmer under the pipal tree  
From basket allowed a yellow and black  
Cobra to crawl sinuously yet in glee  
Towards the fur-fluffed mongoose to attack

The foot-long mongoose stood still. Maestro blew  
On his flute, moved two paces to his left  
Cobra flared its hood, hissed for all to view  
Mongoose leaped but cobra dodged the paws heft

The spectators three deep clapped, yelled 'Once more'  
Charmer now crossed the ring, sounded the flute  
The reptile wriggled, mongoose jumped to the roar  
The snake crawled away to the basket route

An urchin went around with basket lid  
To collect few *paise* whose count he did

## Gagan Gill

### Three Poems

*For Chetan, my 22 year old nephew, who went missing on way to exams in another city and has not been found yet ...*

1

Is the child dead, my womb?

I feel him not in my womb  
I feel him not in my heart  
Nor in my groin  
In my head

Is the child dead, my womb?

I feel a stab  
I feel a knife  
I see no blood  
No trickling  
I sense no stink, no rot yet

Is there a wound I cannot see?  
Is my water dead, my womb?

If not here, where is he?  
If not these, which waters then?  
If not these, which depths then?  
If not here, which rocks and bank?

I feel him not in this body  
Nor his presence  
Nor his absence  
Has he taken off with some wings?

Not in my heart  
Nor in my head  
Not in my legs  
Nor in my groin  
I feel no where a single thing

Already dead, am I, my womb?  
Is it there, my child, my womb?

2

You have lost your way in my heart

It is not so big here, my child  
Just a couple of roads  
Some people, some dogs  
A canal  
A bridge

Some memories  
Blackouts some

I don't see any waters dark as yet  
Don't lose your way in my heart, dear one  
It is just a petty human heart, dear one

How long does it take  
for a mother to decompose?

Does it depend on the eye water  
fresh or saline?  
On the Sun that blinds?  
On the chill that surrounds a blue heart?

How long does it take  
for the hair to come off?

When does her baby turn blue in her heart?  
Then White? Green? Black?  
Is there a sequence to degeneration?

Any symptoms to look out  
for a womb going dead?  
A breast curdling its milk?

If the dogs don't eat her  
If the maggots don't come to feast

If the Sun won't touch her  
Nor would the wind

If all the elements of the earth  
Leave her untouched

How long will it take  
To keep a mom mummy?

## Five Poems

*Translated by Gurdev Chauhan*

### My Being

I have doled out  
some parts of my being to the sea  
to seep in salty water

Some parts I have scattered  
in winds to bear  
the pain of hot  
and cold

Some parts I have  
strewn over wilderness  
And some measure of my being  
I have handed  
to the snow-clad cliffs

Whatever is left of me is ready  
to be painted on your canvas

Let the first stroke of your brush  
make the canvas believe  
painting cannot be captured  
in full on the canvas  
rather it dissipates  
in the vastness

## **O Mom**

One day I'll crush  
the hoods of snakes  
freeing myself from clutches

I'll come back to rebuild  
your rundown home

Believe me, mom!

One day I'll square up  
the accounts of your  
wretched nights  
to shower bliss  
from your window  
which I'll snatch from the Almighty

Believe me, mom!  
I'll come

One day  
I'll build a pyramid of  
your desecrated breaths  
entomb some holy secrets in the foundations  
for historians to search and decode  
burn Holika and bring  
Prahlad to fill your lap

Believe me mother!

One day I'll fight  
a battle for you  
with Dharamraja

One day I'll summon  
to the court  
the temples, mosques  
and churches.

One day I'll etch  
lines of fortune on your palms

One day I'll build mansions for you

Believe me

Just do make sure  
you'd keep intact  
your old bones  
won't die, mother!  
do keep on breathing  
until I come home

## **The Caress**

Don't touch me  
my love!  
Your caress  
freezes me

Every time  
a golden moment waltzes,  
electrifies me  
your touch earths,  
neutralizes  
empties my treasure

Don't touch me  
touch is a swindler  
plays mischief  
so artfully activates  
ego in love

Don't fondle me, my love!

## **Mother**

Mother!  
Bear the labor pangs  
once more

I want to be born again  
Mother!  
Once again  
swallow the pill of  
bitter relationships

Try to catch at the flying  
cotton *akk* wools

Deceptions are crutches  
do have faith  
faith is wine  
we'd distil it from deceptions  
and stay drunk for long.

Mother!  
Call me  
for girls' merrymaking just once  
let me meet my childhood *trinjan* friends  
let me drink the bitter juice of colocynth  
to ward off evil eyes  
let me express my love  
call me to stay with you  
I just wanna be your baby  
cuddle me once more

A relationship that  
couldn't be etched  
on the heart of time  
I have to present that  
in your hall of audience

Mother!  
Brave the labor pains  
once more

## Blotting Paper

I'll live the life of a paper  
until I turn into a blotting paper

I would slowly seep in  
the crazy passions of inks

Liquid of formations is now not so keen  
to paint a tale on my body  
Rather it's out to soak into me

the liquid of aeons,  
ages, species,  
deeds and bodies

Until I turn  
into a blotting paper

Rana Nayar

## Three Poems

### Why don't you dance inside me?

I have seen little atoms of dust dancing  
A dance of life  
They bob up and down  
Round and round  
As if caught in a chakravyuh  
They move in their own concentric circles  
Without disturbing each other's rhythm  
Dance through the haze of my vision  
Dance through the swirling waves of Time  
Dance as though life would never end  
Whirling dervishes  
Spinning around their axes  
Moving from axis to the rim  
And then back to the axis  
Their movement is a spiral of stillness  
Slowly winding down the dark stairs  
Edging closer to the heart of the matter  
The eternal *naad* resounding deep within  
The waking hours of *zikr* turning into songs of lament  
Oh! Why don't you dance inside me?

## **Why don't you become the ocean?**

Thoughts are like colorful fish  
Inside the aquarium of mind  
They float and dive  
Skirting around what looks somewhat like  
The green moss on wild hedges  
Resting on tiny, white pebbles  
Moving upstream, downstream  
Constantly  
Propelled by an inner urge  
Searching for scraps of food  
In eternal restlessness  
Their beady eyes darting all around  
Sometimes hitting against the glass frame  
Returning to self-limiting enclosures  
You be the spectator outside  
Perched on the shores of silence  
Watch them till the glass frame breaks  
And fishes leap out of the splashing waters  
To return to the ocean

## **Our garden is no paradise!**

Squirrels in our garden  
Scampered freely,  
Up and down a row of mango trees  
Appearing out of nowhere  
They'd rush around with rare alacrity,  
Their small, beady eyes darting everywhere

Emerging out of some unseen, black hole  
Hidden inside the thick foliage;  
Bending generously over our house  
Their habitat was a permanent honeycomb,  
In summers  
Shading off the skin-scorching heat,  
Scattering thousands of delicious mangoes  
Across our backyard  
That squirrels often refused to touch or eat,  
In winters  
The thick grove spread over our balcony,  
Giving a protective, green cover  
To an otherwise sullen-looking, red-brick structure  
Threatening to engulf all Nature.  
Our garden is no Paradise,  
Yet birds in flight often stopped over  
To splash and dive,  
To roll and jive,  
In little pools of water  
Our tap created,  
Every time, it's thoughtlessly left open  
Colourful beaks drinking drops of muddy elixir,  
Only sometimes,  
Surprise knocks on the window-panes  
Made us wonder,  
Why our guests have chosen not to press the door-bell?  
Curious to see the visitor's face,  
As we pushed the curtains away,  
An uplifted beak of a sparrow greeted us,  
Pecking into our woodchuck peace.  
Most of the time,  
The birds and squirrels left us alone  
Minding their own little shops,

Almost with a touching self-absorption;  
Never making any demands on our attention,  
Caught in their own circumambulations  
Almost with Ganesha's devotion.  
This completion is what we humans hate to see,  
It reminds us of our own inadequacy;  
Even if we have no will to control or destroy,  
We find it hard to resist the impulse to try,  
Dipping our brushes into rainbow palettes,  
Ready with our strokes to alter the design.  
For us,  
Nature's bounty and munificence are not enough,  
We love to pierce her ears, turning truth into fluff.  
Her strange, enigmatic ways set our teeth on edge,  
Driving between our needs and greed, a permanent wedge.  
So, unmindful of the birds, squirrels and their habitat,  
One day, the patriarch issued a thoughtless diktat:  
Now that winter is almost upon us, riding slow,  
With sunshine our garden must overflow;  
We thought it was a very human decision,  
Lopping off a few branches wasn't out of season;  
A few unruly branches won't make so much of a difference?  
They'll grow back in no time, we argued in self-defense.  
The same thick foliage that serves us well in summers  
Becomes a nuisance in winters, no fool readily suffers.  
When the first axe fell on the branches of a mango tree,  
Several squirrels jumped out, running frenziedly,  
Through a zigzag of broken shards on the wall,  
Unmindful of how it may rip off their fluffy fur  
Rendered homeless, they scurried for another cover.  
Now, our garden has plenty of sunshine  
But birds don't come calling, any more  
And squirrels, I'm told, have left for other shores.

## London Diary

1

Walking around  
To kill time  
With those known unknowns  
Milling the streets in several garbs  
Colourful and resplendent  
In their aura that be-dazzles  
Much like the city that once thought  
That their game of power  
Would never be up...

2

O Baby!  
Out in the Trafalgar Square  
While looking at monuments  
And fooling around...  
I wish I had my baby in my arms  
Like those lucky couples  
Who strolled by  
Posing on the giant lion head  
Pillion riding  
A block of stone

Finely chiselled into shape  
It's black surface shining even in the setting sun  
Intercut though with a baby face  
Popping up a pose here  
While on the other sturdy head  
Another young limb tried climbing up  
Quite monkey-like  
Hanging upside down  
While I tried figuring out  
A gathering loneliness  
That covered me in a cocoon of familiar warmth  
Of tender hands  
And tender feet  
Groping to strike out  
Perhaps  
For the world...  
Another reality...  
Quite in symphony with the spirit of the place  
That hardly bears any trace  
Of the history of resistance  
Against corridors of power  
That flaunt in empty foolishness.

**Ashutosh Dubey**

## Six Poems

*Translated from Hindi by Gurdev Chauhan*

### **Falling Down**

To fall down is quite easy  
when none is around watching.  
It's so easy to fall on your own self.  
Our sentences fall to exaggeration,  
our desires drop dead in our dreams  
like miscarriages.  
Wrinkles, in an unknown way,  
bear the brunt of time.  
In an old man's mind,  
the death of an old pal  
falls like a sand-heap.

Swaying its head  
to music of water  
beneath the ground  
the stones' shadow  
falls on the thirst collected  
in an empty pitcher.  
In your eyes, value falls  
like one falling from grace.

## **The Unsaid**

After a row  
we addressed  
the unsaid between us  
to the sky.  
We talked to the earth aloud  
to make the other partner hear.  
We turned into trees  
standing stiff  
face to face  
in confrontation

We came to know  
of each other's welfare  
from the birds.

Atop the wind's head  
the falling leaves  
flew to each other  
like torn letters.

We thought  
of ourselves as differently formed  
like weather.

With an ordinary glance  
we could know of each other's temperament  
like one season  
reacting to another.

We remembered  
the unsaid

but forgot its source.  
Then slowly we forgot  
our remembering of it too.  
Then, one day,  
we couldn't help laughing  
at the whole thing.

During all this, our fingers  
would stay entwined with each other's  
like roots in the ground.

## **Leaving**

If you have to leave  
leave without saying your farewell  
so that a little of your parting  
stays behind for times to come.

## **Suddenly at night**

You hear a heron suddenly at night.  
It's you who think it's saying something.  
Maybe it's not saying anything  
but just singing  
or crying  
or weeping  
or enjoying itself.  
You know nothing of it.  
You simply hear a sound  
in the silence of night,

a sound  
whose grammar is beyond your reach.

### **The Flower**

Not only the flower,  
the bough also flowers.  
If you look closely, you'll see  
the root also blooms.  
Not only the flower  
the whole plant blossoms.

### **The Sprinter**

The fast racer was not  
looking at something.  
He was simply running.  
Behind him ran other runners  
in their bid to outdo others.

Suddenly he slowed down,  
left the race,  
walked out and sat on the steps.  
Those who had fallen behind  
ran like gunshots,  
without looking at him  
in their bid to cross the others.

He saw the race for the first time.  
He saw the runners.

Saw those who watched them running  
for the first time.  
He saw the ground without him  
in the race,  
saw the reality of this all.

**Gurdev Chauhan**

**Five Poems**

**They come like this**

They, the laborers, come in the cold  
carrying bedding on their heads  
arms in each other's arms  
with scarves worn around necks.

They come  
like rivers in flood  
herding together  
carrying bundles of weight  
on their weary mind  
not lifting eyes too much  
from the ground  
like goats and sheep.

They come  
like a flock of mountain cows  
winding their way  
downhill at sundown.  
They come wiping  
coal dust from faces  
with the water of  
railway station hand sinks.  
They throng the railway lounge

all big or small  
brothers and nephews  
maternal uncles and sisters' sons  
as if all are suddenly  
the same age.

Spilling out the railway station  
they find themselves anyplace  
some empty space.  
They, then, become the anthills.  
Small bags get opened  
smaller bags and kettles are fished out  
wood fires start cooking lentils  
hungers get a lease  
mouths begin to eat.  
Food starts fueling the bodies  
the bodies the souls.

From the next morning on  
days turn into dailies  
nights become swollen dreams, aches  
medicines and unshorn beards.

At last the project gets completed.  
Hands and necks get inspected.  
Injured hands and sick faces  
are scrutinized and segregated  
like counterfeit notes  
for sacking or wage reduction.

Fresh hands get recruited.  
New heads begin lifting old weights.

The ritual is repeated each time  
like at the butcher's.  
The slaughter house system  
knows of only one difference  
between one headcount and another  
the difference of weak and strong necks

### **Twosome**

It was about to turn noon  
we met  
time squeezed itself to sit by us  
at our table

We said something  
We heard something

Our wanderings came closer  
and mingled  
Your loneliness hugged mine  
We gave a fling to our words  
You turned into a river  
I took dives  
some mind-dizzying spins  
Flowers showered upon us  
Some I took  
Some flew away in the wind,  
scattered for memories  
You were unaware of  
the fragrance about you

I became a bird  
Flew about in your orbit  
with the wings of your thought

Flying, I sat on a tree  
You were that tree

### **Wild flower**

I'll go to the village  
and ask the not so beautiful  
girl out there  
to tell me what's poetry.  
I'll ask the oxen and their master  
who like them not yet retired  
who stops in the midst of ploughing  
resting his hand on the plough-bar  
momentarily looking over  
the unploughed field.

I'll amble along  
making my way  
slowly  
through the *basti*  
where there is a muted hint  
of disease and misery  
so that I may plant my  
ear to that.  
If I'm still not able to find poetry  
I'll stroll along the canal

by harvested fields and look  
for my lost poem  
in the work-flushed faces  
of *bazigar* women returning home  
with bundles of grass.  
Doing this, I will, one day  
coax my stubborn poem  
to the big-eyed city-bred girl  
residing in a big bungalow  
whose dry and plump lips  
as she braids her hair  
and hooks a wild flower  
my poem will remember most

### **That girl of my childhood**

I look for that girl  
who had disappeared  
in the cocoons of  
my childhood days.

My childhood stood  
palpable and balanced  
like a bowl of milk.

From there, she had flown  
like a ribbon,  
lost among the multitudes.  
She could not be traced.

At the moment  
of her rape  
she had screamed  
with all her capacity.  
I heard her cry  
from the grain market.  
She had turned into  
a grain of wheat.  
The sky had forgotten its rainbow.  
She could not be found anywhere.  
I was in constant search of her.

Grief-stricken faces, angry heads  
said so much:  
Gratuitous, dubious, loud  
her spread out arms called me  
again and again.  
Now wherever I go  
I hear her shriek.  
Nights and days are clueless.  
I think I'll find out  
that shriek-girl somehow.  
She will surely emerge one day  
all of a sudden from some  
obscure flour mill  
or be seen falling down  
from the fifth floor  
of some office building  
trying to save herself  
as she plummets.  
Or be sighted in some lonely lane  
opening onto some bazaar

Or in a nondescript room  
with windows all shut.

I know she loved too much  
the sunlight.  
That girl waits for  
and looks towards the  
Hands which could scoop  
darkness out of her body  
and give back her sunlight

### Ants

Ants: Tiny-footed presence upon the world's log  
Ants: Unpretentious life insurance advertisement  
Ants: Collection of food for drought-hit Somalia  
Ants: Basic lesson in time and space management  
Ants: Little Gandhis out on Dandi March  
Ants: Save Food Campaign and National Flood Reserves  
Ants: Winged desire of feet  
Ants: Hard work, love and patience  
Ants: God, crumb by crumb

### Five Poems

*Translated by Gurdev Chauhan*

### Uproar

There is uproar  
Paper is there, the idea is there  
But no pen in the whole house!

Pen.  
The word 'pen' shakes  
the whole house up

The little son runs out of the house  
peers into the dark well.  
The grandma stops him  
Says, "You will kill yourself?"  
Says he, "I saw  
the pen falling into the well yesterday night."

Wife, palms henna-smeared, says,  
"Pen, pen, pen. What's this ruckus for?  
Right since you woke up  
instead of reciting the name of Ram  
you've been yelling *pen, pen, pen.*"

This man cries for pen no end  
as if he were to balance the whole world  
on its tip.

## Explosion

You must go  
Or run  
Or climb to the top  
Or go downstairs to the basement  
At once

Here fire will consume all just now  
Or a storm  
I'll lose my hair  
Or my blood

The book will fall  
From my hands  
Or fear run amuck in my veins

I'd like to catch the ghost  
By the neck  
But a howl will  
Stuck in my throat

I'll turn into a stone or iron  
This place will burn me out  
I must go from here  
Burst like an explosion

## Magic

What magic is in your eyes  
that I come dumbfounded from  
my hole in the black thick forest  
slithering speedily towards  
the star-studded *been*\*

I come crossing roads  
wiping fears off my head  
heeding not the beating sticks,  
sharp knives  
filling madness in teeth  
hood flowing with poison  
unmindful of daggers, spades, machetes  
mad with the magic of your voice  
mad to spit the inner venom  
of my hood out  
through you  
to receive the lashings of your  
anger, hatred, love

blood pulsating  
charmed with the sound  
of your *been*.

## Brand new

Whenever I am about  
to feel old  
I hear your voice

*\*Been, an Indian wind instrument usually played by snake charmers*

I turn brand new  
as if just off from  
potter's wheel.  
A new clay bowl  
damp, raw, decoratively lined  
an innocent form before going  
into the flames  
just off from  
the potter's wheel

### **Mother**

Mother endlessly  
blessing us  
tires herself  
goes to sleep

Father amid his breathing  
weaves dreams  
for sons and  
the work on the loom is done

Sister waits for brothers  
to fill the house  
but the house does not fill.

Brothers, right arms of each other,  
Dumbfounded, working very hard  
in their effort to save arms  
get their trunks lost

The family bets their  
lives on keeping alive

### **Three Poems**

*Translated by Gurdev Chauhan*

#### **Family Portrait of Mirth**

A labourer's family  
is stood in the studio

Husband, wife and three children  
each kid wearing  
black sunglasses, cheap ones

Says the labourer boy,  
"Make our group photo"  
His face lit up with  
the joy of their joint photo

Glee bought with  
thirty rupees

Shyness, the kind she felt  
at her wedding  
coming and leaving the girl's face

She is forgetting  
being mother of three

## **Nineteen Forty Seven**

When in a person's blood  
forty seven is born,  
all relationships suffer death  
Malki, the girl drawing water  
from the well, becomes flesh.  
She jumps into the well  
to kill herself.  
If dead, she becomes  
the fuel of history.  
If not, she becomes  
a living black page,  
reading which  
everyone becomes afraid  
mumbles at night.  
Why does forty seven  
not die?

## **Girls at the Book Publisher's**

In the publisher's office  
so many girls are sitting  
before computers  
composing and page-setting poems  
spreading and aesthetically  
laying them on each page  
  
I'm surprised, their faces  
do not show the spangle  
from reading poems

They are  
proofreading only  
I know they're not  
insensible

They want to read between  
the lines of poems  
they compose  
but they don't do this  
If they do, the publisher's  
books would get late,  
rations in their house would  
get late  
the school kids' uniforms  
would get late  
moreover,  
their kids' new books  
would get late.  
How sensitive they are  
they do not allow  
the publisher's books  
to get late

## Sandeep Dhanoa

### Two Poems

*Translated by Gurdev Chauhan*

#### **My Body**

When you meet me,  
we walk together.  
Walking together,  
we reach your house.  
Leaving me outside,  
you go in.

He meets me.  
We live together.  
Leaving me inside his house,  
he walks out silently.

Decorating  
the things in the house,  
setting cushions on chairs,  
leaving my body in the house,  
I walk out,  
a nowhere woman.

#### **Butterfly**

The poison of  
your separation  
running in my veins  
brimming in my eyes  
bouncing  
overflowing  
dissolving  
through eyelashes

sobbing  
clasping the shifting soil  
through my soles  
climbing mounds  
of hard breathing  
falling and collapsing  
disintegrating  
from within

You're here  
You're with me  
in all the circumstances

Mingled in the wind, blowing  
with the Sun's glint in the eyes  
covering my head with  
the linen of memories  
absorbed in dreams of  
meeting with you  
the butterfly fluttering  
with rainbow wings

Rajesh Sharma

## The Fortune-Teller's Widow *a nonfiction narrative*

Luvoozia wears carrot red robes and short hair. Those who have known her since she married into this refugee settlement across the railway lines in Chustpura recall her earlier name in whispers. They say she came from a family of *chhuri*-flashing<sup>1</sup> thugs. An astrologer's roving eye fell on her, and she stole her way into his heart and bed. Soon she had bullied him into matrimony.

He died in his forties, leaving his fortune and fortune-telling to her. Respectable people of the town attended the funeral. There were so many that a hack even noted the town had never before seen so much respectability in one place. They condoled to each other the man's passing away and pitied his small frame for having been home to so many afflictions. They praised his keenness for contracting the ailments he could not inherit. And they bowed in veneration before the great adventure of his life in which a spiritual quest had been complemented by no less ardent physical pursuits.

Panditji, Luvoozia's husband, had been a star fortune-teller. Many stars of the Hindi film firmament orbited around him. There were drifting rocks too, prosaically known as politicians and bureaucrats. And also judges and cricketers. They could be occasionally sighted outside Panditji's home – which doubled as a private temple for the clients' offerings. Most of the clients were businessmen who had bored, pious wives.

Any guess why he attracted so many businessmen and of what kind? They would not admit this but they were the kind who underrate their own cleverness and overrate their wives'. Besides, they liked to ascribe their prosperity to fortune's pleasure and the fortune-teller's charms.

When Luvoozia became a widow, she had two sweet kids, a boy and a girl. The boy resembled almost stroke for stroke his father's picture which was displayed for the visitors' last respects on the day the mourning rites ended. The picture showed a forehead trying to escape an ashen forest of thinning hair. The shoulders hung two notches above their usual place in the skeleton. The resulting slouch suggested evolutionary regression and a tendency to ambush. The eyes climbed towards each other and drooped on the outside. Very thick lips barely hid stained and slightly protruding large teeth.

As the boy grew up, the only resemblance that remained was physical. He neither had his father's vile arrogance, nor his crooked tongue, nor his overblown ambition. He hated to swindle people in the name of future. So he chose to become a professional business manager, and left home to breathe some air.

Two years later the young man returned in a white bundle on the night of diwali<sup>2</sup>. He had died in hospital after a brief illness whose name the family would never mention. Nemesis had struck rather soon, the rival fortune-tellers murmured. For their arrogance, cruelty and falsehoods, they said, the gods had blinded them to their own fate. The blame seemed well-aimed, for within a decade death's tongue had licked away almost every adult male of this large extended family. One died of hypertension; another fell to diabetes; a third was claimed by gangrene; syphilis consumed a fourth. The only man from Panditji's generation – who lived to be older than all his brothers and cousins – did not follow the vocation of fortune-telling. When he died years later, he was eating towels – a bizarre sanitary obsession, but not altogether inexplicable. He had been a man of charitable temperament and had hoped that the clean bread he earned would wipe off the entire family's sins.

Luvoozia's husband had a diabolical sense of fun. This was first revealed to me by a man of bovine physiognomy who lectured in a college run by the relics of this family of fortune-tellers with help

from a bunch of lawyers, commission agents and timps (they pimp for taxation officials). The professor told me, with the left eye peeping out from under his cowlick, that he had once seen the man discharge his anger rather interestingly: he had poured half a bucket of the adhesive Fevicol on a poor Sikh carpenter's head because the man had wrongly fixed a plywood sheet. Recounting the incident, the professor had smiled like a bull that is also a cow.

The carpenter was caught, months later, trying to steal into Luvoozia's bedroom at night. A tube of instant adhesive was recovered from his possession. He had reportedly intended to squeeze it into the nostrils of her snoring husband. Luvoozia got so frightened she took hold of the adhesive and instantly rubbed all of it on her husband's balding scalp in an attempt to cool the carpenter's flaming rage by showing that punishment had been meted out to his offender. Her big eyes were weeping all the time. The husband was in a shaking fit.

Another man who resembled a huge frog in spite of shirt and trousers once narrated to a friend – who told this to me – how he had got a peek into the famed piety of Luvoozia's husband. He had overheard him asking a household help to send away a visitor. 'Tell him to come another time. Say Panditji has retired to his meditation chamber and may not come out any soon.' The truth, the frog said, was he was resting on his throne in the loo, his favourite retreat necessitated by gustatory promiscuity of many years.

Luvoozia loved to publicly remember her dead husband. *Panditji* – she spoke the word the way a veteran teller of children's tales utters the name of a demon who eats people alive, without adding even the essential spices. The uttering, meant to awe the listener, tended to suspend the belief that husbands are human and animal. 'If Panditji were living today, he would...' The dead man thus got recycled into a placeholder for the unthinkable and received, too, some provisional immortality.

Did I tell you how Luvoozia picked up that fabulous name? I should have, at the beginning. After all, what I am writing is a humble tribute to her great spirit. No, I don't mean she is no more. She is very much there, in a way of being which is rather more, far more than it ever was before. She flourishes. And I am told, on authority of eye witnesses, that her flesh also prospers: she looks like a much bigger old almirah now than she did ten years ago. A rectangular, stuffed up thing, with many more silver fish in the hair, and very termite-ridden. Children, it is said, smell rotting timber in her presence. They are pure souls, you know. They can smell what old noses cannot.

So how did Luvoozia get to be called Luvoozia? A group of her clients from Mumbai – they like to be called *bhaktas*, devotees – put it into her head that she needed to use new management and communication techniques for the greater benefit of humankind. They begged her to organize her spiritual empire efficiently and productively so that it would embrace all waiting, hungering souls. 'Leave nuts and bolts to us, Ma. Nothing works without public relations these days. We'll hire the best corporate communicators,' the loudest mouth chanted in *Ma-bhakti*<sup>3</sup>.

A man who must have got a red-chilly taste for irony offered to undertake her image makeover. He knew she had nothing solid to offer in an increasingly cut-throat market of spiritual wares. She could not discourse on spiritual matters. She had acquired no use of enlightened reason. She possessed only one thing that could be put to some use – her flesh-and-bone womanhood. Since she was no longer young, this in her case would make business sense only as motherhood.

The man scripted a fine dream.

'You know, Ma, I saw you in a dream. You sat immovable, like a mountain. Your body shone, luminescent and crystalline. So deep was your trance you seemed to have left mortal breathing be-

hind. In place of hair, trees and creepers grew all over your Ma-body. And then what do I see? Your body that had become rock is erupting into pearls. Silver, chaste-white pearls, soft and semi-liquid like nascent stars, are oozing from every pore... Waking up from the vision, I found myself swimming in oceans of love. I knew the Divine Mother had revealed Herself to me. I knew She had pointed to Her incarnation... When feminism has lost its way and patriarchal *adharmā*<sup>4</sup> reached its zenith, God has chosen to self-manifest as Mother. As Ma Luvoozia. Let me go and proclaim to the world, Ma, that Ma Luvoozia brings motherly love to all thirsting seekers, to every human being, born or yet to be born. You, Ma, ooze love that drowns out all evil.'

Prompted by confidence in her divinely ordained destiny, Panditji's widow succumbed to the reported vision and began to actively connive in its elaboration. Vanity did not allow her to suspect for a moment that she had been tricked. She persuaded herself that she had relinquished her old self like a mask in a dream, that it was a total makeover, a transfiguration. That nothing of her old mortal self remained except as an illusion to be dimly remembered with the Ma's indulgent smile.

But the body has its own memories. Gestures and postures do not easily unlearn histories.

So in the course of a conversation Ma's lips would twitch and pout in a sudden flush of wickedness. The eyes would glint like a pick-pocket's blade. The arms would cross in the manner of a Bollywood don's female sidekick. And the voice would strain at the leash of hard-rehearsed saintly tones and abruptly rise to the old gravely register of her days as a street quarreller.

The harder she aspired to become the universal mother, the cosmic Ma, the bigger – and more fragile – grew her ego. Soon she picked on Tuesdays and Fridays to be the all-feeding Ma. After she had offered the *prasād*<sup>5</sup> to the metal deities in her home-temple, it was

fed, by a set of devotees elected for the day, to little girls. The girls, who were brought from a neighbouring slum, would be made to queue up and wait outside the gate. Very poor and unwashed girls were not qualified to receive the charity and would be chased away. The girls who came to be fed would often have skipped school for two spoonfuls of sweet charity.

Ma's pride ballooned with every inch of dignity she stole from the little girls.

'Don't forget, you eat our bread,' she sniped one day at a young woman who worked in a college managed by the relics of her family. Ma's festering ulcer of pride had come to a head. The young woman, who had come to report allergy to the principal's spidery hands and was already seething with rage, spat out, 'Huh! Bread-giver! You don't qualify to be even pissed on your white head.' She kicked open the door of Ma's office and walked out. Bamboozled Luvoozia, having been an early school dropout, called up devotee after devotee to find out what the angry young woman had meant.

She did not tell anybody where her quest for enlightenment had ended.

Ma liked to believe she was the bread-giver to all those over whom she has some sort of power. She liked to believe that nobody knew her entire family actually fed off the institutions run by them as trustees. The truth was even the kitchen taps, light bulbs and pencils in her home had been pilfered from schools and colleges. When, after her husband's death, she became the president of the governing body of a college, a charitably inclined man living in the United States offered to donate ten thousand dollars. He wanted a block of class rooms to be added to the college building in memory of his recently deceased father. The money arrived. Luvoozia promptly got an old block done up. In honour of the memory of the deceased, a sizeable marble plaque was quickly fixed on the façade. Pictures of the 'new block' were mailed to the grateful son of the departed NRI.

The son had a dream, which he later mentioned to Ma in an emotional letter. He wrote that his dear father had looked down and smiled at him from his abode above the clouds.

Listening to the contents of the letter being read out by a *bhakta*, Ma is said to have raised her pallid hands towards the heavens and gazed long at the ceiling. She was probably trying to judge the trajectory of the dead man's spittle streaming down from beyond in her direction.

Indeed, Ma claims a special relationship with the dead. Without that one cannot liaison with the gods. The gates of fortune open and shut at the pleasure of the ancestors as they have direct access to the gods and can intercede effectively for their posterity – this was the theoretical core of the business lore bequeathed by Panditji's father, who was the first to be initiated into the mysteries of the unknown after he famously had a Borgesian dream about a royal library in a Himalayan kingdom that housed the total database on every human being's fate – on the past, the present and the future of every person living, dead, or unborn.

Panditji's father must have been a genius born ahead of his times, the stuff Google legends are made of. And he not only dreamed and then proclaimed his dream but also put in place a workable strategy to translate his great fable into hard cash.

So every year Ma Luvoozia spends three fortnights, more or less equally spaced, on the *ghats* of Varanasi. 'She has gone on pilgrimage,' the clients are told by whoever the teller happens to be – a servant, a *bhakta*, or a tout. During this time she stays in luxury hotels and, assisted by her daughter and son-in-law, does considerable data collection. She confers with some trusted record-keepers of the dead, handpicked from the lot who swarm the banks of India's sacred rivers like immortal flies. The record-keepers are commissioned to dig out available data on the ancestry of those keen to have a view of their future. A script-writer's clerk – a faithful and re-

sourceful man from Kolkata – weaves little stories around the gathered data plus whatever else Luvoozia hands him from her Ram-Ram designer bag in which she carries several little notebooks with names, addresses and dates scribbled in Hindi and English in a rather unreadable hand.

The sojourns, described back home as pilgrimages, are workshops to stitch together fantastic fables that are the merchandise the fortune-tellers' family trades in. There has never been a scarcity of dim-eyed dreamers in the land of Bharat who will drop on their chins to lick your toes if you can blabber out something of their ancestral past – for if you know the past, they believe, you would know the future too.

But competition was taking its toll on the Luvoozia's fortunes. Already business had been going steadily down since death had wiped out so many not-so-able-bodied men of this family of seers. The rival fortune-tellers' murmurs had continued to spread and they undermined the potential clients' interest. Moreover, Ma, Ma's widowed sisters-in-law and their entire brood had found wealth so easily that they hated doing anything the hard way, much less learn Sanskrit. Without Sanskrit, their fortune-telling carried no style and little conviction. Hindustani, that too spoken with a Punjabi-Doabi accent, has never been a distinguished instrument of fortune-telling.

One night the inevitable happened. Regular medical checks of Ma's daughter had indicated a later time, but labour pains began unexpectedly sooner. The son-in-law was not in town. A new star of the family was lurking under the horizon, hesitant but ripe to burst on the scene any time.

In her desperation, Ma telephoned a boy from the neighbourhood. He arrived instantly, touched her swollen feet, and was instantaneously packed off to an astrologer's home in a mohalla in the old city. 'Wake him up and tell him I want him to find out the exact moment the child should make his entry into the world. They

have already taken my daughter into the operation theatre. But the operation does not begin until we know the auspicious time for birth.’ The boy was young and not very tight-lipped. Ma’s injunction to keep secret the night’s mission tickled him so much that his tongue began to wag uncontrollably. Before long, the whole town knew that Ma outsourced fortune-telling to lesser beings.

Ma’s turn to *ma-dom* had had its seed in the misplaced kick she had planted, without the least foresight, on her own fortune’s bottom. And since she had freshly sipped from the cup of that serendipitous dream which had left a *bhakta* swimming in love, she was inclined to believe, given the fervent believer she was, that a kick from behind might deliver a leap ahead - that she might graduate from a being a fortune-teller to Providence Incarnate.

But she never had a competitor’s equipment, which is necessary if you want a spot in the spiritual marketplace. Moreover, empty of other qualities, she was too full of herself – she just could not be a good actor. The leaking of the secret of outsourcing did her in – with a decisive finality.

#

She now lives a low-profile life. Of course, she still likes to be surrounded by strange things – including the frog who wears trousers and a shirt, a chameleon in his early sixties who has a buffalo’s lazy eyes and a flat-breasted woman’s figure under a man’s head, and the bull who will soon retire as a professor of many languages.

The frog and the chameleon have never understood why she often steals a curiosity-laden glance at the bull when he seems to be looking away. They do not know she is trying to figure out why Panditji was so fond of this docile Taurus.

Professor Bull visits her religiously. He spreads himself, like a meek cow, in folds on the carpet. When she gets up to go and turns away, he stares longingly in her direction as if hoping to see her long-dead husband drop suddenly like a nose-pin from the folds of her carrot red robes.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>*Chhuri* is a small knife.

<sup>2</sup>*Diwali* is a festival of the Hindus and Sikhs. People light oil lamps on the parapets of their homes and burst crackers and worship Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity.

<sup>3</sup>*Bhakti* is devotion.

<sup>4</sup>*Adharma* is impiety.

<sup>5</sup>*Prasad* is the offering of food to the deities. Consecrated by the deity’s lips, it is later offered to the people and is believed to transmit the deity’s grace to the person eating it.

## The Nicest Boy

Cyril Dabydeen

“You okay?” he asked, as I moaned to myself, lugubriously.

On the road to Agra I was, like something foreordained, though in pain. “You...really okay?” the boy asked again; and the bus was going full speed, then it lumbered along a bumpy patch with a special rhythm all its own; and would it break down...soon? Now this boy at the back of the bus with me with almost baleful eyes; and yes, it was my stomach pain.

But I was determined to go to Agra, where I wanted to be since I was a child; and seeing the Taj Mahal, the sheer marvel of it. Let the Mughals and whoever else stay with me, and Emperor Shah Jahan’s testimony to love and adoration for his wife Mumtaz. Invaders, wanderers, in all of India because I was here now, with my own sense of place.

*Really...here?*

I nodded back to him, as I also imagined being a Rajput wearing a saffron turban. Who was I becoming...if not remembering? The boy, about nine, smiled; and like a cherub he seemed as he patted my hand. My pain, you see. Yes, I’d boarded the bus in Delhi from the Oberoi Hotel. And the boy’s mother was in the middle of the bus, somewhere; and, no doubt she knew her son’s ways, he now with me at the back. Other passengers fussed, growled, as the bus yet lumbered on; then it moved slowly again. And the boy became more endearing, like all of India being endearing.

“You okay?” he asked again. *Leitmotiv?*

I grimaced.

“You sure?” he pressed.

“Yes.”

“But you’re in pain.” He kept being solicitous; and in the

vacant seat next to me he sat, like his ordained place. A deity, was he? *Ganesh?*

Images whirled; and I would indeed see the Taj Mahal before long.

The bus’s engine’s laboured noise grew louder. And Delhi’s pollution kept being with me; and, yes, the salad I might have eaten in a restaurant, which disagreed with me. “You’re in India,” Ganesh said, with a slight chuckle, eyes darting left and right, and maybe he looked into my spirit. *Did he really?*

Not asking where I came from? But it was my pain, as he patted my forehead, this boy. Gentle hands smoothing the skin; ah, Ganesh’s large eyes took me in with India’s past coming to me: from the time of Chandra Gupta to Emperor Akbar. And sufis muttering mantras, chants. An Ocean churning. More Hindu deities like Vishnu and Shiva being at it, with me.

Now the bus would stop; and I didn’t want to be in Agra anymore, not to hear about Mumtaz Mahal’s beauty and the monument—the Taj Mahal—Shah Jahan had built, though really just a glorified mausoleum.

More images: let all the Hindus be aware, not just Muslims.

Indeed, Ganesh and I being here now; as his mother kept muttering about her son’s incorrigible ways, I believed. And more deities I conceived: Ayodha, and the god Ram; and, no one must ever do damage to the majestic Taj Mahal I conjured. No threat of terrorism...nowhere, no matter what history foretold. But now, threats to the Bodh Gaya, too?

What would the Buddha say? Ganesh smiled. He knew what was on my mind, with the Ganges River in the background. “I understand your pain,” he hummed.

“You do?”

“You’re really in India.”

Other places: the equator. Not the Brahmaputra, too?

The temperate with myriad other places coming to me. In-

deed I'd come from Canada, see. But now...denial. Really that? Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and other surrounding regions coming closer. History being compelling. The Himalayas; and Genghis Khan and other marauders. The mighty Ottoman Empire, too. Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia. China next, yes. Eastern, everywhere? And the Philippines with an archipelago inexorably forming.

Being closer to Russia, also? And rivers like the Saraswati being real. What more did I imagine? The Yamuna appearing in a flash, with new currents. The Ganga—really that name—closer to Agra here in Uttar Pradesh as the bus lumbered on.

Ganesha raised his head and pulled up his neck...in a far-away gaze, as he looked into my eyes. My being in one place, one destiny. And forts, other monuments, in the skyline: Ganesha willed it all. What else would he let me know? His mother, genuinely Indian, was she?

Ganesha smiled. I forced my own smile in return. Oh, he cast another glance towards his mother, and maybe she knew. Didn't she?

Knew where I actually came from...Canada, with ice and cold winds; or maybe of another place called Guyana in South America: with the Amazon in me. *Really that?* Ganesha again patted my forehead, asking if I was okay. His eyes quickened.

"Your mother?" I asked, impulsively.

Indeed a mother who might have been a wanderer herself, but an engineer who worked on the railway in Kazakhstan. Did the boy actually tell me that? But Ganesha didn't travel with her. Now his mother's fortitude: railway lines in her eyebrows; and the training and experience she'd acquired during the time of the Raj, now close-up...with Empire in the background. How far back would I go with her?

Ganesha raised a finger, to warn me.

*Of...what?*

Not think about the present only because of my pain, what's

in my soul? And the other passengers seemed oblivious of us, as the bus kept moving. Ah, Ganesha and I being in a special time, what his mother thought about as she again turned to look at us.

At me? And who really was Mumtaz Mahal I wanted to know?

But the mother looked out of the window just then: new landscapes we kept passing. The other passengers also looked out, in a special rhythm their own. Nothing hurried...unhurried.

Ganesha, what would he say next as the Taj Mahal brought us closer? Yes, Agra, being here now. And more early rulers came to me: with forts, barricades; and spectacular designs the Mughals had built over the long years: such expert craftsmen they had—engineers, architects, ubiquitous you see.

Ganesha made a face. *He did.* Yes, we humoured each other. How his eyes lit up, with the Taj Mahal coming closer.

*His mother too?*

A monumental white marble edifice with new angles of light appearing splendiferous with inlaid gems brought from countries afar. This vista kept extending everywhere across the subcontinent, and beyond. Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, everything kept coming: more than an imagining. But instinctively I growled, because my stomach ached; I shouldn't be here? And Ganesha, this boy, had no father? He only travelled with his mother when he felt compelled to.

"You will be amazed," he said to me.

"Amazed?"

"Yes."

As I was still in pain.

"Think nothing of it."

I looked over at his mother once more, and Ganesha immediately knew my instinct. Yes, I must stay in one place, at the back of the bus.

*Must I?* Again I wondered about his father.

Ganesha simply nodded...towards his mother. Mothers being all, see.

But what if she wasn't his mother? *But...who?* He held my hand, Ganesha did, wanting to take me to her now, it seemed. And the woman—his mother—with short-cropped hair, with an almost stolid manner; but handsome she was as she smiled; and would I go and sit next to her as Ganesha wanted? *Should I?*

She who would soon return to Siberia, and I would come along with her...as her consort? Ganesha smiled. Everyone in the bus smiled too, as the bus moved faster: now going across the entire subcontinent, it seemed. Indeed the Taj loomed everywhere: the sheer marble of it with more edifices. My imagination gone haywire. And new temples everywhere, the deities having it their way. North...and south. Karnataka, Allahabad.

Rivers kept flowing from the Himalayas in another predictable or unpredictable monsoon, too. Emperor Shah Jahan's court now with a sudden busyness. And I kept being dazzled. The Shah greeting me.

Beckoning to me, and asking why I'd stayed away so long.  
*Yes, why?*

Ganesha again nodded: I must answer Shah Jahan. Mumtaz, who had borne so many children, looking on: such beauty she had, and loyalty she inspired, the ladies-in-waiting next to her.

Did I also hear the strains of Sufi poetry?

Ganesha was yet concerned about my pain with his sixth sense.

What else? His mother appeared, well, circumspect.

Then it came to me, that Ganesha had no mother; and what if this woman could have been legendary Mumtaz...an avatar?

I whirred inwardly, and felt more pain. Yes, Ganesha stood over me, here at the back of the bus. And I kept being a special guest only...at the remarkable Taj Mahal. Shah Jahan ushering me in...from a distance.

*Am I really here?* It was why I came to India, and I was being overwhelmed. Then she stood up, the boy's mother; and beautiful she was, she who would take me with her.

*To...where?* She nodded.

What Ganesha already knew. What everyone else in the bus also knew, though mostly peasants...but travellers all. Because I came from Canada, not, well...Guyana? The mother's coy smile. Her mindfulness, indeed. And maybe I wondered about my presence here as new railway lines formed in her sleeves. A new vista only; as Ganesha listened and patted my hand, my forehead. Other passengers looked back at us.

*Who was I...becoming?*

Shah Jahan and Mumtaz indeed being here. Not Emperor Aurangzeb to come, like a destroyer? The Yamuna River adjacent, waters glistening in moonlight. Quickly I rubbed my eyes. And Delhi, in the far background with its pollution and the mind-boggling traffic: the rickshaws' putt-putt noise everywhere.

But I was really here in Agra. And people kept appearing or disappearing, in crepuscular light. The white marble statue of the Taj Mahal ushered me in to it. I gasped. *Ooohs* and *aaahs*: from everyone. Yes, the boy's mother—skilled as she was—was at it too. With her son Ganesha, no? I was no longer at the back of the bus, I figured.

The mother kept up her coy smile. Oh, Mumtaz...again?

Did I now see myself as Shah Jahan, in an instant?

Ganesha laughed. I laughed, too.

The boy's mother also laughed. The other passengers: all laughed.

Yes, because I'd come from Canada...not a place called Guyana in the Amazon region. *Where...exactly?* Uttar Pradesh also, closer in a myriad time. As my stomach growled, then didn't.

I remained still, I couldn't help it. This was no *Arabian Night*, I knew. The boy's mother, being Mumtaz, more than play-acting,

kept laughing. The Mughal past all around. New marble buildings appeared in the embroidery of time and space, so dizzying.

But immediately I wanted to return to where I came from.

*But where actually?*

“Your pain,” Ganesha reminded me.

“Yes, my pain.”

The mother came and patted my hand, asking me if I was okay.

Yes, I answered: mute-sounding. Mumtaz indeed smiled. She also looked out of the window towards the east. How far east? A prayerful moment...in the north or west in my line of vision. Minarets of a traditional mosque, as the muezzin called out to the faithful to pray.

Did I also detect a trident shape, not unlike a Hindu symbol of Shiva? More illusory time...but everything being palpably in the mind's eye. I remained still. The bus no longer moved, or might have not moved at all. Then it lumbered along once more over more bumpy road.

I kept looking out of the window, looking out from the Red Fort in Agra. And really magnificent the Taj Mahal appeared. And dynasties appearing and disappearing at will. Asoka, other kingdoms. Sultans and their principalities. Maharajahs with their own special sense of place, as I was yet in an ancient land. And words I began writing with Shah Jahan's pen, only: in my own compelling vision, being who I am in the unheralded time, like the present, speaking:

*Should guilty seek asylum here....*

*The sight of this mansion creates sorrowing sighs;*

*And the sun and the moon shed tears from their eyes.*

*In this world this edifice has been made;*

*To display thereby the creator's glory.*

## Cinnamon Jungles

*Translated from Hindi by Nida Sajid*

Whenever he saw the opportunity, he went and sat inside the morgue. People had often seen him sitting or wandering in the hospital. No one ever questioned him... after all, who gets curious about those who hang around hospitals and stations. Who asks them— what is your name... where are you from? We rarely ask patients and travelers their business in these places.

Undisturbed, he was sitting among the dead again. Not that there was space for him... dead bodies were already stacked on top of each other. It was hardly a morgue... more like a warehouse with endless sacks of goods. Nevertheless, he was consoled by the fact that the dead did not speak. Human voices made his head hurt... they echoed and crackled within him... as if giant wheels of fire were spinning inside his skull and sparks flying out of his ears...

This happened whenever someone came with the morgue attendant to identify a dead body. Hearing human voices, his head started to spin again.

Most of them had died of suffocation... they were now lying quietly holding their breath. He had known many of these corpses well, but he could not recall their names. The cadavers had also forgotten him... he had tried many times to remember his name, but it was always a futile exercise. Whenever he forced his brain to think, the endless visions of blood and fire soon exhausted him. Tired and listless, he found solace in the silent presence of death. The streams of blood slowly dried out in his brain, and the wheels of fire also stopped spinning... almost immediately, another sensation fired up inside him... a tempest of hot, dark air began to blow in his lungs and his eyes turned into fire crackers... burning and spewing sparkles.

Sometimes the dead talked with each other and gossiped about a corpse among them... “Whatever happens, happens for our good...

see, how peacefully he can sleep here... otherwise, the moneylender would be harassing him right now. Poor man! When he was alive, all he did was play hide and seek with debt... five daughters and a lame son..."

"Three of his daughters are free from all worries now... they are in the morgue of Sultania Hospital these days... two are still missing," one corpse informed the other. Overhearing their conversation, a third corpse could not help asking, "Does he know what happened?"

"Of course, he knows. That's why he looks so content. He can finally sleep without a care in the world!"

"How come there are no women in this morgue?" someone asked.

"They were all taken to Sultania Hospital."

"Very sensible decision! After all, it is a matter of their honor... they would have died of shame among us men here!"

When the dead started to talk about women, he thought about his wife... her face started to swim in front of his eyes, but he could not remember her name. How did he call out to her? What was her name? On the night of the gas explosion, she was cooking mutton for him. It was a winter's night and the stove was radiating warmth – both from the rising flames and the smell of cooked meat. His wife looked up from the pot and smiled at him... it was a happy day... they were going to eat mutton after a long time... his wife had saved some money without telling him and bought the meat.

"If I had not bought this mutton today, you would have made a curry out of me!" His wife teased him lovingly with a playful smile. A friend had gifted a small bottle of Kanauj attar to her at the time of our wedding. She used to dip a grain-sized piece of cotton in the perfume and keep it in her navel. This ritual made her smell like a musk deer throughout the day. His wife often missed the Terai jungles and its herds of deer... forests where cinnamon trees perfumed the air after getting drenched in the monsoon rain... the northern winds carried their fragrance far and wide... his wife longed for the scent of those wet trees in Bhopal.

... His wife's body and soul also smelled like the wet jungles of cinnamon trees.

The morgue reeked with the smell of acid... just like day of the explosion... but he was now used to the stench of acid and gas. Their stink merged with the savory smell of the mutton his wife cooked and slowly reached his eyes to turn them into a pair of scorching brimstones. Suddenly, there was smoke everywhere... even after the air cleared, he could not see his wife.

It has been four years now... even that morgue of Hamidia Hospital – where he used to go and hide for a few moments of peace – was in the past. It was very hot in the morgue one day. The contractor did not send the full supply of ice slabs and the ones that did arrive were melting away. The water from the ice had turned murky and rancid with the smell of acid and was crawling in the gutters like a sickly snake. Had it not become unbearably hot, he would have never stepped out. Not only was it boiling inside, the guard had also spotted him. He had no option but to leave.

Whenever the blood stopped racing inside his brain and the firecrackers in his eyes ceased to burn, he remembered a few fragments of his past life. He would promptly forget them... he could not even recall his own name... leaving the morgue, he walked silently towards Jahangirabad... then from Gola Road to the station... Green Park... wandered from Shahjahanabad to Loha Bazaar... and when the whiff of cool breeze pulled him, he walked towards Shyamala Hills.

None of these places gave him peace, but the guard at the morgue had suddenly become very alert. He was no longer allowed to visit... if somehow he managed to sneak in, the guard would immediately throw him out. It was his good fortune that a few decent souls were handing out free food around the city. Thanks to them, he got something to eat. They distributed medicines too, but his ailment was beyond any cure...

But he could not remember anything... every now and then, fragments of the past floated in front of his eyes... and disappeared

each time.

Spotting a crowd once, he had also joined in. Thousands had gathered together—shouting and asking for compensation. There were flags, people, slogans... he probably got some money, but he did not recollect anything beyond that... he had forgotten everything since then... there were cameras clicking photos of those participating in the protest... people had filmed him too... he had also seen his picture in one of the newspapers, but it was a nameless face. Had the reporter bothered to enquire about his identity, he would have at least got back his name.

The absence of a name bothered him immensely. In this nameless state, he was forced to leave the morgue and roam the streets. The guard had thrown him out with abuses and curses. Anyway, there were fewer corpses now and the old ones were long gone... that macabre colony of cadavers was also deserted, making the conundrum of his name and identity even more baffling. Maybe the dead could have recognized him... called out to him by his name.

Outside the gate of Hamidia Hospital, someone saw him and shouted in surprise, “Hey, you!”

For a second, he thought that he had finally found somebody who could at least recognize him and tell him who he was – that’s why he had agitatedly approached that man, screaming, “Please, tell me my name!”

But the person who had called out to him got so scared that he began to run. He ran after that man as far as Chowk Bazaar but failed to catch him. He was left without a name again.

After that long chase, blood gushed through his brain and the same wheels of fire began to circle his eyes. He was breathless and soon collapsed near a lake in exhaustion. These lakes had saved the lives of people in southern Bhopal that night... otherwise, the entire city would have been knocked out cold, or blinded, or perhaps everyone’s lungs would have exploded. An entire city would have been wiped clean.

Some people were talking near him— “It is a very big Ameri-

can company. For them, we are nothing more than flies and insects. Even thirty or forty years back, they could afford to throw tons of wheat in the ocean. That was when people were dying of hunger in India... they had set up this company in India deliberately... they wanted to experiment with different gases on us.” He heard this conversation while returning back to his senses, but he was still very dizzy. He was terribly disturbed by the fact that he had failed to catch the man who could have identified him. What if he never found anyone who could recognize him?

He knew the city well... he even remembered its name, but neither the city nor its denizens knew who he was or where he came from.

To end this confusion about his identity and name for good, he decided to go to his in-laws’ house... in that Terai region, where the air carried the fragrance of cinnamon trees and musk deer... but he did not even remember his wife’s name... nor her village... who would recognize him? Even if people did recognize him, will they tell him his name... or his wife’s?

He was strangely suspended between sense and senselessness.

He remembered holding a banner in a protest march against some big convention in Bharat Bhavan... “Bhopal Gas Tragedy! Stop the Celebrations, Grieve for us!” But no one in the gathering knew him... either inside or outside the building. He heard that a poet had managed to get one lakh rupees from the Bhavan for the relief of the ill-fated ones, but neither did the poet know his name nor did he get to meet the poet.

Anyways, he did not need money. Sometimes the government distributed money, sometimes Americans would send charity. It was those blood-filled explosions in his head and smouldering circles around his eyes that did not let him live or die.

And no one bothered to give him medicine anymore. Doctors had already declared him mad. But not a single doctor had given him the reason for his insanity. Bewildered and perplexed, he looked

at these doctors... within seconds, blazing fireworks exploded in front of his eyes. His life had splintered into thousand pieces since then...

That day he had also met a very senior doctor who lived behind the morgue under a peepul tree. This doctor used to pick up discarded injection bottles from the hospital's junkyard and treat his patients with them. The day the doctors in the hospital declared him insane, this senior doctor was standing outside the window and laughing at their diagnosis. And when he was pushed out of the queue of patients suffering from gas-related ailments, it was this very doctor who had caught him by the arm and rested him on a pile of garbage. The doctor leaned against the window and mumbled, "Trouble comes running like a horse and crawls away like a tortoise. With the speed of a horse... understand!"

The senior doctor took him under the peepul tree to treat his illness. He had hundreds of bottles of injections... also a pen and paper that he grabbed out of thin air to write, "Name... Age... Address...!"

Before he could speak, the doctor said, "Forget it...!" Without a warning the doctor slapped him hard and started making strange noises, "Gudum gudum jham jham... jham jham! Hey, you fool, follow the beat!" Both of them kept playing their invisible band for a long time. The doctor finally got tired and collapsed, saying, "Do good deeds and throw them in the well!... Idiot, if you want to live, live like an animal. Eat garbage and die like a dog!" The doctor started laughing at his own words and ordered, "Cry!... louder... louder..."

He could not bring himself to cry, but somehow his eyes filled with tears. The doctor kept an empty injection bottle under his eyes and squeezed out the water from his eyes.

"I have collected your tears. After testing them, I'll decide your medicine!... The diagnosis will take place in the court... the judge will decide the medicine for burnt lungs... the court will treat blinded eyes... the big court in Jabalpur!... Trouble arrives at the speed of a horse... tell me the price of your pain! How many rupees a kilo... why don't you speak, idiot!" As soon as the doctor lifted his

hand again to hit him, he ran away. He had run as far as the bazaar to escape another slap from the doctor.

The newspaper-walla was screaming in the street, "Court's verdict on Bhopal Gas Disaster... the Supreme court settled seven hundred and fifty crores in compensation..."

Rolling a plastic bag into a ball, another man was mumbling elsewhere, "This bloody mutton is forty rupees a kilo these days!"

All of a sudden, the faint smell of mutton curry enveloped him... mutton cooking on the stove and his wife bending over it... both surrounded by the fragrance of damp cinnamon trees... his Bhopal, too, used to smell like those forests after the rain... everything was alive – the jungles, his wife, and he...

He ran again. That senior doctor was still shaking the injection bottle to test his tears. The diagnosis was still incomplete.

From there, he ran to Sophia College and finally reached Jahangirabad. It had taken him four years to cover this short distance. When he reached the slum of Jahangirabad, he could not find the way to his shack... it seemed that he had lost the address of his house too. Thankfully, while he was scurrying from one house to another in utter confusion, someone caught his arm and said, "Where were you all this time?"

The moment he heard these words, he grabbed the man tightly to stop him from running away. The person repeated his question, "Where were you all this time?"

"Do you know my name?"

"Name! Is this some sort of a joke, Mushtaq?"

"Mushtaq! Mushtaq! Mushtaq..." The name started to echo from all directions... he heard the noise of rickshaws and tongas in the street, as if for the first time. It seemed everything was back in its place with the return of his name. All of a sudden, the sewing machines in Mushtaq tailor's shop were stitching clothes... and his wife was fighting with him affectionately, "Don't talk about other women in front of me... I don't like it."

"You have done me a great favor, yaar! Can you please do

one more? Show me the way to my house.” Mushtaq asked the same man.

“Your house! Your house is no longer here, Mushtaq!” The man replied.

“Why? My wife...” Even after trying very hard, Mushtaq could not recall his wife’s name. With great embarrassment, he asked the man in a low voice, “Yaar, what was my wife’s name?”

“Why? You have even forgotten her name? Well, good you did... sometimes, forgetfulness is better for us.”

“Why? Why is it better?... Anyway, forget it, just tell me her name for now.”

“Shabnam!”

“Yes! Yes! Shabnam, Shabbo... Shabbo...” Again, the names began to echo everywhere, “Shabbo! Mushtaq! Shabbo! Mushtaq!”

With the return of past happiness, he started to recollect everything. This man, whose name he now remembered, was called Dullan. Embracing him tightly, he said, “My friend... yaar... you have given me back my entire life! Come to my place, Dullan... Shabbo will make tea for us...”

“Shabbo does not live here anymore!” Dullan told him with a long face.

“Why? Where did she go? To her parent’s house?” Mushtaq asked.

“No... You see that balcony, Mushtaq!” The one with the TV aerial... no not the one with pigeons... that one, over there...” Dullan started telling him, “Shabbo has been sitting there every day for three years. Somehow she managed for a year and waited for you. Then she began to sit in the balcony of that brothel... What could she do? You had vanished, and she had no other means...”

A heavy silence descended on Mushtaq, numbing his brain. All of a sudden, the cinnamon trees in the forest caught fire like nylon saris... the smoke enveloped him and the blood gushed through his head... firecrackers burst inside his skull, and his eyes turned into burning pieces of coal... his lungs were sizzling in the slow fire and

the smoke bellowed from his ears...

Mushtaq looked around him, smiled surreptitiously, and started to run.

He stopped now and again to yell, “Full plate four thousand... half plate fifty thousand... quarter plate four lakhs! How much mutton? Can you guess? How much mutton...?”

And he began to run again. Where to? He did not know. He stopped again to scream, “Calculate! Add, subtract... multiply... seven hundred and fifty crores! A mountain of money! Not Shyamala Hills... A mountain of American money. Full plate four thousand... half plate fifty thousand... quarter plate four lakhs! How much mutton? Calculate... add, subtract...”

By the time he reached the gate of Hamidia Hospital, Mustaq’s mutterings had become louder and sounded almost like a public speech—

“The court will examine everything... Methyl Isocyanate gas... MIC is floating in the air... the court will cure exploded lungs. Trouble arrives at the speed of a horse! The verdict on Bhopal gas disaster... A mountain of American money... the cinnamon jungles are on fire, do you know? Mutton forty rupees a kilo! Did you buy some?... Have fun, people! Mutton forty rupees a kilo... just try it! A mountain of seven hundred and fifty crores... the full plate for four thousand is broken... the half plate of fifty thousand is cracked, the quarter plate of four lakhs is lying somewhere covered with smoke... add, subtract, multiply, and decide... tell me the result... have you seen that statue... the one which reads ‘No more Hiroshima, No more Bhopal... Let us Live’ ... this is a memorial for those who were killed by the gas on a night in December... full plate four thousand... half plate fifty thousand... quarter plate four lakhs! Ha! Ha! Ha! The marvel of Union Carbide company!... These muttonheads were testing the poison of their gas on us...”

“Someone is cutting the jungles... humans are turning into corpses and falling like trees... there is mutton everywhere... live flesh, dead flesh... dying flesh! The flesh market is open now, my

friends... mutton is everywhere... in the bazaar of live flesh, in the storehouse of dead flesh... one statue is standing there and telling us its story... another one is lying in a bed somewhere... have you ever seen cinnamon jungles! Human flesh twenty rupees a night... did you calculate... add, subtract, divide... what did you get in the end? Tell me, you know the math well, don't you... scoundrels ... a woman's body twenty rupees a night... mutton forty rupees a kilo... and the price of human flesh... eleven rupees a kilo..."

In the middle of this speech, Mushtaq received a tight slap across his face. The onlookers started to laugh—the senior doctor had caught hold of Mushtaq again. The doctor dragged him to the same peepul tree where he ran his medical practice with empty injection bottles. Mushtaq sat among these bottles, laughing. The doctor asked, "What were you jabbering about over there?"

Mushtaq began to babble again, "A mountain of money! A woman's body twenty rupees a night... mutton forty rupees a kilo! Human flesh eleven rupees a kilo..."

"What is the price of your misery? Why don't you tell me, scoundrel!" The doctor yelled at him. Shaking an old injection bottle, he said, "I'll decide your medicine after these tests! Gudum gudum jham jham! Gudum gudum jham jham..."

And together, they began to play their invisible band again.

## A Porcine Tale

All eyes fell on him as he walked into the room. They reminded him of vultures waiting for their prey and they had been waiting for quite some time. He figured that was the least he could do under the circumstances. The silence that greeted him spoke volumes and the sardonic smiles on some said even more. Unspoken words of animosity reverberated across the room. Professor Limen had not come hoping for garlands but he had expected a bit more civility from these grown men who were considered the wielders of culture and tradition. He looked around for a chair to sit but there was none and none was offered. He recalled his wife telling him not to go and he momentarily wished he had listened. But he was here and he shrugged off whatever suspicions he had that this was going to be anything but a friendly meeting. It had all started with the book...

Five years had passed since Professor Limen had published the book which gave a detailed historical account of the genesis of his tribe. He had always been a history junkie and a master's degree in the same subject had secured him a job as the head of the history department in the local university where he was revered by students and peers alike. For almost a decade, he had taught students the history of almost every nation; from the Greeks to the English. It had often occurred to him that despite being aware of the history of other nations, they were clueless when it came to their own. There was no book to learn from, just stories passed from one generation to another which also would soon become a thing of the past. Recognizing this need and also the recognition that would inevitably follow any pioneering work had led him to pursue a doctorate degree which focused on the history of his tribe. It had taken him ten long years of juggling a job, a big family, one life-threatening surgery, constant

travelling, hundreds of interviews, a bank loan plus a considerable amount of debt for his dream to finally materialise in the shape of his degree and a published thesis. He was finally the author of a history book and a pioneering one at that!

Initially, only a few people seemed to share his enthusiasm about the book and its significance. The rest did not seem to care much about such books and even if they did, most were unwilling to shell out money for it and hence Professor Limen ended up giving away more books for free than selling them. Since the only way of promoting the book was via word of mouth at that time, it took a while for people to realize that this history book was meant for bigger things than the sedentary life of a dusty shelf. Maybe it was the book, maybe it was the water but suddenly this interest in one's past was ignited. Everyone was looking back, trying to find meaning in their present existence through the past. Everybody was raving about Professor Limen's book and amazed by the depth and detail of his research. Of course, when you dig into the past and put out old skeletons on display, it is only natural that some might want to put them right back in the past or better still crush every bone until all traces are wiped out and it is as if that skeleton never existed in the first place.

The letter was duly signed by the chairman and four other executive members of the Akpok village council. The letter kindly requested that Professor Limen delete a certain chapter from his book as some facts mentioned were distorted and its accuracy questionable. The letter also added that they would provide him with the accurate details which must be added to the book in the future. Professor Limen snorted in derision. He knew what the letter really meant. For many generations, it was a universally accepted truth that the first ancestor of the Akpok village had sprung out from the belly of the Sus Scrofa Domesticus, also more commonly known as the pig. The story of how the first Akpok progenitor sprung out from the

underbelly of the Sus Scrofa and was fathered by that same creature was a tale that had been oft repeated over the centuries. Over the years, this piggy association had also made them the butt of many a joke and they had seethed inwardly at such puns. Though his ancestors had regarded the origin story with such veneration, Tongpang found it extremely degrading that he was part of a lineage that came from a pig. *How dare that swine publicise such things which needed to be kept a secret!* He regretted that he was five years late in reading the book but now that he was the village council chairman; he was going to do everything in his power to make sure that story did not get into the pages of another book again.

Professor Limen was doing no such thing. Everyone knew where they originated from. *It couldn't be more obvious that the name itself! Ak stood for pig and Pok meant belly, so together the name Akpok gave away pretty much everything! They would have to change the name first!* Every word in that book was backed up by years of meticulous research and hard work and there was no way he was going to compromise the truth by kowtowing to some high handed village council. So he sent a polite reply with a firm negative. The next letter that came summoned him to the village for meeting and he left determined and hopeful that they would see things his way. Next thing he knew, he was slapped with accusations of distorting history and fabricating lies with regard to the origins of Akpok village in his book.

For once, his flair for words left him as he listened in amazement to the accusations. Different synonyms of liar and traitor were hurled at him by the members of the esteemed council. Trying his best to put a lid on his rage, he asked, *On what grounds are you accusing me of fabricating the history of your village? Look at the bibliography, the number of raconteurs from your village that I consulted and they all confirmed the same thing. Are you then accusing your own elders of lying? What about those ritual songs that your*

villagers sing, the ones that clearly mention that your ancestor sprang from the abdomen of a giant pig! Did I make that up too? Tongpang sneered at him: *You know how we found out you lied? We asked all those raconteurs and they all agreed to one thing. They never told you these stories, I don't know what you have against us but we are not going to allow your personal vendetta to disgrace the history of our village! In fact, in this letter, all the four raconteurs have stated that what you wrote in the book is completely false and contrary to what they actually narrated!* Limen looked at the treacherous signatures scrawled on the letter and he regretted not recording those interviews. It was his word against four and all the odds were stacked against him. He was shocked and seeing that one of the four raconteurs was present, he asked: *Merang! You are a man of honour and integrity! You know what you told me! I wrote the exact story that you and the others told me! Please tell me you are not a part of this farce!* In answer, Merang just looked down and coughed out something barely audible. Tongpang interrupted Merang from making any more awkward replies. He gave a speech about how the village council was deeply angered and saddened that such an esteemed citizen like Limen would resort to fabricating lies and misleading the public. In fact, distorting history and spreading false propaganda was such a serious crime that it would warrant Limen a good amount of jail time. But as they had decided to resolve this issue the traditional way and not in the courts, they would be kind enough to let him off the hook if he simply apologized and signed on the papers which said everything he wrote about the Akpok village was false and also publish a corrigendum in all the leading papers stating the same. They would also give him the real history of the village which he could add in the second edition if he wished. Professor Limen asked in frustration: *If what I wrote is not true, please explain to me how your village got the name Akpok? I am not the one distorting history here, you are the ones trying to do that all because you are ashamed to say that you came from a pig!*

*And everyone knows that is the plain truth! I am not signing on that lie of a paper!*

*Enough!* Tongpang boomed. *How dare you speak to us like this, the esteemed council? We come from a lineage of pedigree, not from the stock of filthy pigs! Sign the papers when we are being civil to you.* Another elder chimed in menacingly: *Speak no more or we will pull your filthy tongue and twist it round your neck!* More elders joined in and Limen saw a group of beefy young men come in and join the agitation. It dawned on him that if he did not sign those papers, the chances of him getting out in one piece were pretty slim. He thought about his wife and five children that solely depended on him. He thought about his blood pressure and he decided it was not worth it. So he signed the papers.

He signed on the papers where he claimed what he wrote about the Akpok village was false, distorted and nonsensical. He agreed to put out the corrigendum and the apologies but he swore to himself that if there ever was a second edition, that fictitious version was never going to make it there. As per traditional law, a fine of one pig was slapped on the professor as the guilty party. The irony of the situation was not lost on him. The village folks chose the biggest pig for the fine and a feast was declared the next day at the chairman's house in honour of their victory. On his way out, Limen felt someone's gaze on him. Turning around, he saw Merang, the old raconteur whose signature had helped seal the case against him. His eyes were filled with remorse and he looked as if he wanted to say something. But Professor Limen had no time to listen to apologies. He realized that they had been bullied just like him but his desire to get away from that place was bigger.

That night Tongpang had a strange dream. He was in a beautiful forest when he suddenly heard the cry of an animal. He looked around and saw a pig of monstrous proportion writhing in pain. The shrieks of the injured pig filled the whole forest with such gloom that

somehow Tongpang felt he was responsible for the injury. As the cries grew dimmer and dimmer and the convulsions of the pig came to a haunting silence, a violent storm whirled out of nowhere and blew everything away. Tongpang watched dumbstruck as he watched the storm uproot all the trees, animals, houses, men, women and children away with such force and violence until nothing but the barren earth remained. As he tried to make sense of what had just happened, he heard a voice calling his name. He turned around and saw that it was the same pig. How he was alive and able to speak was a mystery. But he was standing there and he looked really furious.... Tongpang woke up quite shaken but he managed to shake off that eerie feeling with the feast and the greater task that lay ahead.

Some months after Professor Limen issued a corrigendum stating that the chapter on the history of Akpok village in his book had false and distorted details; the village council published an article in the papers citing that this version told the real truth about their origins. It narrated some tale about their first ancestor coming out from the belly of an unnamed fierce mythical creature whose description bore an uncanny resemblance to the tiger. The article also warned the readers not to spread distorted stories about their village and that if any individual was found guilty of the same, a penalty of one pig or more would be slapped on that person. Of course, no one believed this real version any more than the villagers themselves. Behind closed doors, they sniggered about some pigs facing identity crisis of sorts. If the grapevine was to be believed, there was also a rumour about a certain village council chairman who had gone off the rails. According to the story, this demented chairman claimed that a monstrous pig tried to kill him every night.

## The Predicament

I had forgotten how to eat.

The food was there in front of me in a battered aluminum saucer – a stale, fungus-ridden piece of bread and an already sucked dry chunk of mango pickle. I also had water in a soiled paper cup which I had foraged from the garbage heap nearby early this morning. I had no qualms in leaving my spot and hobbling to the heap because I had no house to live in and slept on a mud-spattered slab of footpath by the road that runs to the granary. The heap was filthy and mongrels got into a scrap with me but I managed to snatch a piece of bread discarded by an unwilling child perhaps, or maybe some housewife had thrown it there out of carelessness, nevertheless, there was bread for me this morning. It was my sheer good luck that right next to it, in a small cardboard box, was ensconced this sucked chunk of mango pickle. If I wetted it with the water, probably I could still get the taste of the oil and the spices and the remnant of the tangy taste for which I hear pickles are famous. But now the biggest problem before me was how to have this splendid meal because I had forgotten how to eat!

Generally, eating should pose no big problem to any Indian. What you have to do is to simply flex your fingers and thumb in such a way as to make a pincer of them, and then you hold the bread and tear out a small portion from it. If the bread is fresh, you need not exert much for the texture is still soft enough not to offer much resistance. Yes, if it is stale like the piece I had found, it would be difficult because some kinds of bread go leathery with time. Then it is hard to decide how much pressure you should put on it as the result of your labour may not be to your liking. Sometimes a very small piece is split and sometimes the broken piece is so large that you have

to repeat the ordeal of plucking a portion from it once again. And after you have broken a size of your choice, you dip it in the broth if there is any, or wrap it around a vegetable piece. Taking care that it does not slip out of your hand, you carry your pincer fingers and thumb and the food held in it to your mouth. When it is within two inches of your mouth, you open your lips wide, draw back the tongue a little and put the morsel in. After this you can do either of the two things. If you are very hungry, you will gobble down the food without taking respite to chewing it into cud. But if you have not been hungry for many days, you can savour the taste, tossing the food from the incisors to the canines and then from the lower palate to the upper palate, then from the back of your tongue to its front, you can find greater flavour in it if you press it against each cheek in turn for three seconds. Believe me, you can get much more taste out of your food if you rotate it in your mouth first anticlockwise and then from the front to the back. Eating with spoons does not bring this pleasure of involving your fingers and the thumb in the taste of the food, also, the spoon knocks the teeth in the front a little loose that is why the whites have to visit dentists so frequently. (Let me tell you a secret, when there is a certain amount of sweat and grime on your hand, it adds to the taste of food!)

I moved my right hand and put it on the piece of bread. Then I bent my fingers to make a pincer. As an afterthought, I also moved my thumb towards the fingers that had by now converged together but as soon as I tried to pinch the bread, I found that my index finger had slipped out of the huddle and while slipping out, it had pushed the bread away. Perplexed, I decided to do the chore with greater concentration and forced it back to form the conical shape that my palm should have acquired by now, the apex of which should have converged on the bread but as soon as the index finger came into contact with the thumb, the middle finger slipped out as if it had a mind of its own. I was still not worried since I had not realized the fact that I had

forgotten how to eat. Maybe I was weak from days of hunger and that is why it was happening. With a little bit of extra attentiveness I would be able to do it. In my third attempt, it was the little finger that gave way and this made me a little worried – there was bread in my battered saucer, it did not matter that there was green fungus on it, also the sucked out piece of the mango pickle, I could see clearly what I was doing because the sun had risen over the still sleeping figures of my colleagues – beggars, tramps, drifters, hobos, dogs, pigs and clucking hens and darting sparrows. One of the birds came close to my plate to find out if any crumbs had pinged off onto the curb. But I was very cautious with my food, only that I was feeling awkward and woozy. I shook my head and tried to stand up to see how the food looked from a height but I was feeling pretty dizzy from hunger so I did not take the risk. I tried again, this time first of all I brought my thumb to the tip of my middle finger and then slowly, very slowly, brought the index, the ring and the little finger together. When I was sure I had finished making a tweezers, I extended it towards the bread and I was able to grasp the not so fungus-infected corner of it. Very slowly I manipulated the pincer of my palm to break a portion. I was pleased I had finally succeeded in tearing away the bit. I unhurriedly made an effort to dunk it in the cup of water but no sooner had I lifted my hand than the bread slipped out of my grasp and fell on the farther edge of the plate. I considered myself awfully lucky it had not fallen on the muddy footpath.

Exasperated, the next time I thought of using the left hand. I caught hold of the plate with the right hand and moved my left hand towards the bread which had got warm in the morning sun. It was giving off a smell but my hunger was so terrible that the reek wafted up to me like the fragrance of pulao and buttered naan. But with the left hand too I found that when I tried to lift the morsel, it would not get into my mouth but would hit my nose or my left eye. With some effort I lifted my head upwards and bent it a tad on the third try but

my hand brushed my left cheek and the brittle morsel disintegrated in the blowing wind. Exhausted, I sat back and started wondering how I could put the bread into my mouth.

You see, it is easy to laugh at my silly situation. And no, I am not suffering from any illness of the nerves. It is only that I had seen food after such a long time that by now I had really forgotten the simple act of how to put it into the mouth. Maybe it had been days or months or years or centuries, I am not sure how long, but no, howsoever hard I struggled, I was unable to do it.

But eat I must. Okay, I was going to use a new strategy. I lay prone with my face down. My legs were spread behind me, a little apart so that I could maintain my balance. Now I lifted my head and with both the hands, pulled the plate towards me. The tip of the bread came level with my lips. I opened my mouth and extremely slowly, drew the plate nearer. When it was right under my mouth, I lowered my head and pushed out my tongue. A drop of saliva fell on it, I couldn't see clearly because the bridge of my nose came in my line of sight. The bread I could make out only as a greenish, uneven, irregular sheet of baked dough. I couldn't focus also because it was too close to my eyes. I opened my mouth wide and brought the upper and the lower teeth together to catch the bread but at the last moment I missed because my unkempt beard and moustache came in between and my teeth clicked into emptiness. Utterly desperate, I tried to grab hastily whatever was there below my mouth but the plate skidded away and danced crazily on its rim. I might have got luckier if the bread had fallen out of it. Then I could repeat the whole thing and it would not be able to slip away from me. But no. The bread and the pickle remained steadfast in the saucer.

Suddenly, I realized my mistake. It was all wrong from the beginning. I should have made an attempt with the pickle first instead of the bread. I smiled to myself. This was the root of all my problems. The bread was brittle but the pickle was one whole thing. If I

could get hold of it, I might carry it to my mouth and recollect how to eat. Then all my troubles would be over. I slowly got up from the footpath and sat on my painful haunches. Some mud was sticking to my beard and on my ribs but that was fine by me. My neighbours were awake by now but they did not look much surprised for each one of us on the footpath faces such a poser once in a while. Once, a fellow, third from the marble steps of the swanky eatery, had suddenly forgotten how to breathe. They came and took him away after a long time and even then he had not recalled how to do it. Another one, the fifth person in the tenth row from the ritzy cafe, had forgotten how to blink all at once. He too was carried away by them. I was afraid if I didn't remember quickly how to eat, they would cart off me too.

So, I lay supine on the flagstones and extended my hand towards the platter by feel, groping for it by my side. Once my hand brushed against it, I held it tightly and then to my utter surprise, successfully picked up the piece of pickle. Not once did it slip from my grasp and I began inching it up in an arc cautiously, really cautiously, till it hovered just above my open mouth. The sun was shining directly in my eyes and I squinted to ascertain that it was poised right over my open lips and then lowering the hand, when it was hardly six inches away, let it drop plum. You see, I was afraid if I tried to put it into my mouth without letting it go, I would have hit my nostril or the eye once again. But to my intense chagrin, it tumbled on my right cheek and without lodging in my beard, slithered down to the muddy ground. It appears I must have moved my face in an attempt to snap it with my teeth but the sum total was that I still was without any kind of food, even if it was a trivial, sucked out piece of mango marinate. I was disappointed terribly but without losing heart I thought I would make one last attempt.

Since my hands were not doing exactly what they were supposed to do, I decided I would use my feet to hold the bread. I

stretched my right foot first and pinned the bread to the ground so it would not budge. Next, I moved my left foot and when the two big toes were next to each other, I bent them low although it was damn difficult as it meant bringing them almost into a horizontal stance which is quite painful, so I bent my knees and slid ahead on the threadbare bottoms of my trousers that were held up with a piece of hemp. Finally, I bent down to my feet that had lifted up the piece of bread by now. Tears welled up in my eyes, the posture was so agonizing but I knew I had to eat anyhow. I bent double and almost cried out in joy, I was now holding the bread in my mouth. I was beside myself with delight, it appeared I still could command my body. Then I bent backward but I was so weak that instead of lying back slowly, I fell down with a thud and the piece lodged in my throat. I tried to extricate it with my tongue but it did not budge and it is stuck there even now. But I cannot move my jaws now, or the tongue, or inflate my chest and blow it out.

I am still lying, waiting for the bread to move but it has been days, perhaps months, years, centuries, God knows how long!

Well, if you, with your slick, gelled hair and a well-fed body, espy me anywhere, please draw near with a little kindness, just the littlest bit of kindness and instruct us again how to eat.

**Subhash Chandra**

## Revenge of the Meek

“How many are these?” asked the bully, raising his two fingers and bending the third, when Dr. Vijay Arora entered the staff room. “If you’re right, I’ll treat you and everyone present here to a Pepsi.” Arora was myopic.

The cluster of cronies, surrounding him, let out a strident laughter. They were always ready with one, whenever Dr. Ranjit Chibber heckled anybody, which he did most of the time.

“Come on man, the AC is not working and it’s very hot today. Get us a cold drink,” a crony piped. Chibber’s cohorts were not terribly fond of him but were keen to steer clear of his sharp jibes. So, they humoured him and kept on his right side by dutifully producing spurts of laughter even at his P.Js. Their performance was just like the taped laughter in the reality shows, erupting every time the anchor opens his mouth. In order to keep the focus deflected, often they would point to someone to get him in the line of Chibber’s mocking fire.

Arora did not respond, walked up to a chair in the diagonally opposite corner of the staff room and started revising his lecture.

One of Chibber’s retinue fuelled the fire, “See, Arora is trying to ignore us.” The next moment Chibber went full blast.

“Arora sahib, why don’t you do your income tax calculations at home?”

Laughter.

“By the way, if the S.O. Accounts gets to know, you doubt his competence, he’ll deduct huge excess tax and you’ll have to butt your head against the Income Tax department for refund.”

More laughter.

“Here you may condescend to spend a few minutes of your

precious time with your friends.”

A guffaw!

In fact, Arora was absolutely unbothered about his salary details. He was so bad at arithmetic that figures terrified and confused him. He seldom picked up his salary slip from the file kept in the staff room. And when occasionally he did, he would never even look at it. He did not respond to Chibber and went on reading his book.

Another crony who did not want the jeering to stop quipped, “Don’t you know, Chibber Sahib, he is preparing his lecture?”

“Oh, sorry, sorry,” Chibber shammed ignorance. And then raising his volume higher, he said, “Why are you reading a cheap guide book, Arora sahib? Once in a while, you should take the trouble of looking up the standard critics, as well.”

It was rather ironical. Between the two of them, Chibber had hardly ever read a critical theory book or made a serious effort to grapple with the nuances of a theoretical concept,

He skimmed the net or guide books to collect the froth and put together a paper for seminars. But his style of presentation was energetic: his mobile face, lively eyes, modulated voice and smiles concealed the lack of scholarly depth. But he was clever enough never to send his papers for the anthologies the organizers of the seminars and conferences published. “Oh, I don’t bother. I never know where I have chucked the paper in my study, once I’ve presented it,” he would brag. He knew very well, an oral presentation is like a whiff of breeze and has hardly any chance of being detected as a copy-paste job. He was smart: of medium height, broad forehead and a sharp nose. His body language was alert and he had an immaculate dress sense, wearing matching clothes and shoes, always. He looked more of a marketing man in an MNC.

Whereas Arora had spent twenty years doing literary theory and could authoritatively intervene in theoretical debates on Post-struc-

turalism, Minority Studies, Cultural studies etc. He had specialized in Queer theory and focused on the representation of the Queer in Literature and Cinema. He had published six critical books, one of which was recommended reading for the Masters students, and several research papers in foreign and refereed Indian journals. He had earned accolades for the papers presented at seminars and conferences in India and abroad. When he presented a paper at a conference in a foreign university, it was invariably included in the anthology of select papers. In fact, the organizers asked for it. He was regularly invited by various universities to deliver lectures at Refresher Courses. But he was lanky, prematurely bald; the two tufts of hair on either side of his head rose and lovingly embraced in the centre on top. He was loose limbed; his movements ungainly and he dressed sloppily.

And he could not match Chibber’s wisecracks, volubility or wit. Chibber made Arora’s life miserable even at the foreign conferences, as he manipulated to attend them through the political route. There was hardly a literary association in India – some of which were affiliated to the International literary bodies — he was not active in either as president, secretary, treasurer or an executive member.

#

So, in the face of the blitzkrieg from Chibber, Arora got up and quietly went out, in search of a vacant tutorial room where he could prepare his lecture undisturbed. But Wadehra from the Commerce department, who had come to the staff room and sat by Arora’s side, could not stand this harassment of the gentlest colleague. Wadehra was one of the few who could take on Chibber and match him hit for a hit. Generally, Chibber avoided Wadehra, as he could not afford to get a short shrift from him, especially in the presence of his cronies. In his booming voice Wadehra shouted derisively, “Don’t know how so many jokers have managed to get into this profession and converge on this college. The whole lot of you, led by your Chief Joker, should have been in a circus!”

Before this bolt from the blue could fully sink into Chibber and his *chamchas*, Wadhwa hurled another missile. “Chibber, have you vowed not to enter your classrooms, ever? You’ve been in the staff room for so long, and your students have been creating ruckus in the canteen!”

“Which class?”

“English Honours III year.” It was a wild guess, but it hit the bull’s eye.

Chibber lost a shade of colour, but did not give up his bluster, “You’re the best actor around, Wadhwa. Telling lies with a straight face!”

“Fine. It doesn’t affect me. But as a friend, I thought I must tell all of you, the Princi is out on a round.”

This had an electric effect on the gathering. There was restlessness amongst the *chamchas*. A couple of them got up to ostensibly visit the wash room which was near the exit door, and sneaked out. Chibber, too, could not keep up his bravado, rose leisurely, ambled out of the staff room with a nonchalant air and once out of the staff room, sprinted to his class room. He mostly left his class ten-fifteen minutes before the bell rang. Since he would never prepare his lecture, he found it difficult to engage the students for more than half an hour, whenever he decided to step into the class room under the threat of rounds by the Principal.

#

Bullying was a digestive for Chibber. He needed it regularly and every day, just as he did his food. But apart from this, he had a weakness for women and he liked flirting. Most of them gloated in the compliments he showered on them and enjoyed his silken tone which he reserved for the fair sex. The moment he saw a damsel, not in distress, in the staff room, or the canteen, or anywhere, he would swiftly jump to join her and broach a topic in which he knew the lady would be interested. Thanks to his information gathering network, he

was in the know of the smallest details of each and every female lecturer: the area of her interest, the issues that animated her, the positions she took on ideological questions. Not only that, he knew the family details, too: the number of children, their gender, and the classes in which they studied. Soon enough one would see him engaged in an animated discussion with the lady. He had a fund of veg. and non-veg jokes with which he regaled people. He had also painstakingly memorised a large number of *shers* (Urdu couplets) and would come out with one suiting every occasion. The younger and prettier the woman, the more time and attention she commanded from him; but to be fair to him, no woman was beyond the pale of his overflowing libido.

While Chibber succeeded in beguiling the ladies, he was the universal *bête noire* of his male colleagues. In a secret poll, he would have had the distinction of being voted the most hated person. But to his face, most people kowtowed to him, paid him compliments ranging from his wit, to clothes, to shoes, and did everything possible to remain in his good books.

He had two more weaknesses – food and fawning before anyone who could even remotely help him in getting plum positions in various academic bodies or invitations to seminars and conferences. The first was the outcome of his gluttonous greed and the second was a compulsion to make up for his inferior scholarship. At seminars and conferences, he would demand double breakfast from the man behind the counter with an air of authority, guzzle several fruit juices and at buffet lunches and dinners, he simply went berserk. And if he noticed an academic bigwig, he invariably crawled his way to him and struck a conversation. His glibness often proved an asset.

Chibber was the topic of discussion at a wedding reception of a common friend – the son of a wealthy father — who had served traditional Indian, Mexican, and Western cuisine in plentiful quantities. A group of people from different colleges were savouring the

delicacies. Chibber was sprinting from one section to the other, and loading his plate with more than it could hold.

“Attention friends. Here is a question the answer to which even I don’t know,” said one. “Suppose, Chibber is heading for the table, laden with delectable dishes, and he espies a pretty girl on the way. What will he do?”

“A good question,” remarked another

“Thanks. Will he pounce on the food? Or run after the damsel? Or will he get torn between the two and become immobile?”

There was a pregnant silence and then one of them said, “It’s simple.”

Everyone looked at him, expectantly.

“Yes, it is quite simple. He would fill the plate, while keeping an eye on the girl, and then rush to her balancing the food.”

“A terrific answer!” Everyone raised his thumb to pay a compliment.

“Yes, an intelligent one,” said another.

And as they were profusely complimenting the sagacious one, he said, “Please, I don’t deserve the accolades. I confess I’ve cheated. Just turn around and you can see the source of my plagiarism.”

Everyone saw the scene and there was a stomach rippling guffaw, the echoes of which travelled to Chibber, loud and clear. He knew it was at his expense, but ignored it and went on efficiently transferring the food from the plate to his mouth and at the same time chatting up the girl, substituting words with rolling eyes, raising eyebrows, nodding or shaking his head, or vigorously making signs with his hand.

“Well, to give the devil his due, he’s an expert at multitasking.”

“Also at charming women.”

“That’s true. On the second day of any seminar anywhere, you can see him with a wench, and taking her around the city in the

evenings.”

“But it is equally true that some of the ladies spurn him, when he tries to get fresh with them.”

“He’s a shameless guy.”

“Oh, you’re jealous. All said and done, he appropriates a woman at each seminar and has a good time.”

“But there’s no doubt he’s a shameless bastard. I witnessed an incident which I can’t forget.”

Everyone looked at the interlocutor expectantly.

I had gone for a Parent Teacher Meeting at Don Bosco School with my son, where his two daughters also study. I was talking to a family friend, Mrs. Jaishree Pendyala, a Kuchipudi dancer with a seductive dusky complexion and svelte figure, when suddenly Chibber popped up from nowhere, and interrupting us, said hello to me, and extended his hand towards the lady. “Hi, how’re you doing?”

Jaishree stiffened, looked at him strangely and hid her hand behind her back, as if she was scared, he would grab it. “Sorry, couldn’t place you,” she said while his hand remained suspended in the air.

“Oh, don’t you remember, we met at a PTM a couple of months back and I told you we also lived in Lajpat Nagar?”

The lady remained uncertain, but asked politely, “How’s your daughter doing,” looking at the little girl?

He smiled sheepishly, “We’ve two daughters. Both of them study here.”

“Where’s the other one, then?”

“She’s with her mother.”

“At home?”

“No, in the canteen. Here they make tasty *chole bhature*. So, whenever we come here, we pick up our lunch.”

“Oh.”

The prices in the canteen were highly subsidized.

Mrs. Reghunathan then turned to me and picked up the thread of our conversation. Chibber grinned by to both of us and slunk away, his tail between his legs.

“Well, well, well. You’ve made your point. All of us agree with you, but the fact is: the shameless takes all.”

Chibber’s companion had left him and he was walking towards the group with his plate. Suddenly, someone whispered plague and the group dispersed in a jiffy. Even Arora walked away, pretending to get dessert.

#

“I hate queues. I don’t have the patience,” Chibber often bragged. And he had perfected the art of wedging into queues at will. Once at a conference at Jaipur, arrangements for serving food had not been well thought out. The organisers had placed food only on one table and there was a long queue. Chibber saw Arora who was behind about ten people, waved to him effusively, and then tiptoed to him. “Arora sahib, what do you think of the paper of that American? I think he was being pretentious.”

“On the contrary, I thought it was a good paper; reflected deep research and scholarship.”

Chibber talked for a couple of minutes desultorily and when the queue moved, he slipped in front of Arora. Both of them moved away after getting food and stood, talking and eating. Since there was no VIP around, nor a woman, Chibber stuck to Arora. The conversation veered to the creams and unguents for fairing the complexion, which were selling like hot cake. “Do you think Arora sahib, this Fair and Lovely and what have you really work?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never used them.”

“No, no, I thought, you might have heard reports about them.”

An idea began to ripple in Arora’s mind. It was basically funny, but got entangled with other feelings. However, he was not sure, if he should play this practical prank on Chibber. In fact, he was

a little scared. He had never spoken a hurtful word to anyone all his life. But somehow all the humiliations Chibber had inflicted and all the mockery he had heaped on him on myriad occasions rose up like phantoms in front of him, clamouring for retribution. The idea instantly bloated to monstrous proportions, taking hold of Arora’s mind and acquiring a will of its own. He said with the usual bland expression on his face, “Chibber sahib, I haven’t heard any reports about these creams, but I know of a home-made herbal paste which my mother used to suggest to the young girls in the neighbourhood.

Chibber perked up, instantly. He had a wheatish complexion, whereas Arora was quite fair. Chibber thought, Arora’s mother might have applied that paste on him during his childhood. “Arora sahib, do you remember the ingredients?”

“Of course, I do.”

“Yes, what’re they?”

“Boil four or five potatoes, and mash them. Mix one spoonful of turmeric powder. Then add a cupful of milk of a she-camel and prepare the paste. Finally, add about ten grams of pigeon droppings, and half a spoon of Sodium Bicarbonate — *meetha soda*, in lay language, you know.”

“Must write it. Hold on Arora sahib.” He kept his plate on an empty chair and whipped out a pen and paper. At great expense and labour, Chibber, procured the camel milk and carried it to Delhi in a small bottle.

#

After the autumn break Chibber was not to be seen in college. Three, four days and then a week passed but no trace of Chibber. When the week stretched into a month, everyone was talking about him. He had hardly any friends in the college. Even his *chamchas* were happy inwardly at his absence from the staff room which was quieter and friendlier. They did not have to fake admiration for his crass humour. His regular victims were the happiest. Still, there was

an undercurrent of curiosity among the faculty. A colleague from Political Science department who lived in Lajpat Nagar visited the Chibbers.

“Chibber is not well,” he announced in the staff room.” He has some strange skin disease. His face has turned mauve and scaly.”

“What’s the problem?” three, four people chorused.

“All kinds of pathological tests are being conducted. But the doctors are baffled.”

Few noticed Arora’s fleeting smile.

## Rosalia Scalia

### Love Chakri

Rasbir “Razzy” Singh didn’t like her. Something about her that he couldn’t name unsettled him, got under his skin. She was known as “The Ball Hawker” in the business for the number of contracts she snagged, contracts favored for competitors. In sports, the ball hawker is the athlete most skilled at stealing or catching the ball. The Ball Hawker, Naveen Kaur, often the only woman in a room full of men—builders and contractors, architects and engineers, construction tradesmen—now pounded her small hand on the table, her silver kara dancing on her right wrist, her thick, chestnut hair cascading over her black business suit jacket, past the creamy silk blouse that exposed just tip of her cleavage and nothing more. As she emphasized her point, her sheet of hair reminded him of the gentle waterfall at Frank Lloyd Wright’s Pennsylvania house Falling Waters, a thought he banished from his mind.

His company, Architecturals, Inc. wanted this project—The Nail Factory—built in 1938 as a long-functioning nail factory during the city’s manufacturing heyday but abandoned in the early 1970s and defunct ever since. Obviously, Naveen Kaur wanted it, too, and she had a good chance of walking away with it. He already presented Architecturals’ designs and proposal for the property: raze the defunct, long-abandoned nail factory structure, keep some of feeling and tone of the original three-story façade—but construct a new, eight-story, high-end glass condo building with balconies that would capitalized the property owner’s investment. Naveen’s arched eyebrows rose and fell in her oval face, her expression serious, her long, thin fingers elegant as they moved the red laser pointer and her smile, even he had to admit, lit the room with its stunning exuberance. “Keeping the existing three-story structure, transforming it into retail and

restaurants, a veritable mini mall could transform the area from a death valley and become a destination shopping place for locals,” she said with passion, her earrings winking from behind her hair. Razzy wondered if she became The Ball Hawker, simply because of her beauty or because she was a minority-business owner, one that spoke to the legally-mandated set-asides. He failed to consider her level of excellence.

“I recommend keeping the name ‘The Nail Factory.’ Its 44,560-square-footage means this area here could be a hair salon, dry cleaner store or some other service type business. A hip bowling alley restaurant would be located on the second level, and a bakery in this space on Bank St. Newly constructed rental units here and there and the three new condo buildings located down in the Inner Harbor East neighborhood south of The Nail Factory would support retail and services. The third floor would be rehabbed into artists’ studios and offices. Keeping its three-story height works well for the surrounding neighborhood and because of the businesses, it could become the energy epicenter of Central Avenue, characterized by residential housing stock,” she said, moving the red laser pointed across the presentation. “Retail spaces translate into monthly income from business rents,” she said, nodding, and flashing Richard Sterling, the novice property owner, an exuberant smile. Even Razzy had to concede the plans reflected a great deal of research, creativity and thought, but he wasn’t about to allow it to derail Architecturals’ game plan, or his own to rise up the corporate ladder. He worked hard to have a good financial profile now at age 30, and he imagined himself marrying soon. Maybe an arrangement. Maybe not.

“None of your plans address costs to abate any toxic materials used in construction prior to the 1970s,” he said. “A defunct manufacturing plant might be too cost prohibitive to abate,” he added, working hard to keep his voice neutral, but wanting to throw doubt on Naveen’s proposal. Architecturals could sub the interior design

part to her. Or not. Preferably not. “What’s the abatement cost of your rehab again?” he asked.

“Great question,” Naveen said, shooting him a pointed look and one that hid her annoyance, he was certain. “We can either abate the asbestos, or implement a cheaper operation and maintenance plan, based on its condition. Chances are that some things will need abatement, but not much. As you know, Rasbir, the environmental assessment will identify what must be abated and what can be managed, and once a design for the building is in place, Naveen Kaur DESIGns is fully capable of moving the project seamlessly from abatement to renovation, especially since yours truly is licensed as both an architect and an interior designer.”

Razzy scoffed. “Razing it and starting fresh eliminates abatement costs,” he said, hoping to gain points in the meeting. Richard Sterling, the property owner and a dentist who had no business getting involved in real estate development, nodded appreciation in Razzy’s direction. Game on, Naveen Kaur, he thought.

Naveen threw her head back in laughter. “Oh, Rasbir, the easy road is not always the best road! Any monkey and can raze and begin again. The real creativity is in repurposing the structure so that it serves the community while keeping Mr. Sterling’s bottom line robust. Each business pays him a monthly rent.”

His face burned. He wanted to mock her. He refrained. Richard Sterling fixed his watery blue eyes on Naveen as if she were a rare Tahitian pearl, nodding up and down like a bubblehead, and he knew The Ball Hawker would intercept this contract on her looks alone if he didn’t intervene. “We all know how capricious architects can be, adding, moving, enlarging windows without ever sharing those details with anyone else, and interior designers select and change finishes, appliances and appointments as often as runway models change dresses, spiking construction costs and leaving us engineers to determine if their design whims are structurally sound. Also, the

area's lack of foot traffic can turn it into a death valley for businesses." "Upscale salons usually rely on appointments. It could be a destination retail area. Your point?" Naveen asked. Razy admired her coolness and wondered what drove her to become The Ball Hawker.

"Plain and simple. Architecturals offers the best proposal for this site." Now he tapped the table, emphasizing his point.

Naveen stared at him, darts in her eyes. "Enough with the commercial interruption during my presentation," she said, clicking the red laser pen on and off, then focusing the light in the center of his forehead on his black fifty like a bullseye. The meeting ended with no decision, but after Richard Sterling left the room, Naveen Kaur stomped toward him. "I don't appreciate your cheekiness, Rasbir," she said, wagging her index finger in face. "If I were a man, you'd showed more respect and you wouldn't have floated that cheap and stupid 'look at me trick' during my presentation. Bad enough this stupid meeting was held in your company's conference room and not mine. My plans are better, and better always wins."

Razy humphed. "That's a matter of opinion. Yours." He couldn't help smiling.

"And wipe that sardonic smile off your smug face. How old are you? Twelve? I've been in this business when you were still waiting for your beard to grow," she said, picking up her worn satchel and heading for the door, her hair swaying behind her, her pointy-toed black ankle boots click-clacking as she left the room. He had to admit she looked hip and stylish. Razy inhaled the aroma of the perfume trailing behind her: sage and geranium rose, and jasmine, spicy, sweet and different at the same time, but even with the whiff of the astonishing perfume in his nostrils, something about her knocked him off kilter.

Later at the gurdwara (temple), in the multipurpose room, he laid out the weapons for the Gatka martial arts class he taught once a week. His students were babies, between ages 8 and 11. He taught

them the weapons-based martial arts class so they could learn discipline, confidence and how to become a Sikh warrior-saint. First, he arranged the *talwars*, (curved one-sided swords), on the blue-cloth covered table. Then he placed the small *kirpans*, (daggers,) that baptized Sikhs were required to carry, and the full-length *kirpans*. Next to the *kirpans*, he placed the *khukris*, (bent swords) that broadened toward the point, the bows and arrows, both steel re-curved ones and other made of wood, horn, and sinew. He admired the beauty of the blades and of the fletched reed arrows and the *barchas*, (spears). Touching the etched steel, he arranged the *bothatis*, lances used on horseback, the *nagni barchas*, javelins, along the table, and he leaned the *lathis*—the bamboo sticks that varied in length and used for training—against the table. He arranged the (*khandas*,) double-edge swords, the fierce looking *bagh nakhs*, a spiked weapon worn on the hand and known as the leopard claw, and his favorite, the *chakram*, circular-edge weapon that can be thrown or used in-close, the *kataar*, the dagger that can pierce armor. Historical accounts recount tales of Sikh saint-warriors singlehandedly vanquishing hundreds of men with these weapons and training. Although his students were limited to the *lathis* for training, he wanted them all to see the weapons and understand the glorious history of Gatka when great Sikh warriors defended themselves and brought down the Mughal empire before the practice was relegated to a sport. He wanted them to be familiar with and respect the power of the weapons before they handled them. Before setting the *gurj*, a flanged or spiked steel mace on the table, he twirled it, like a baton. He wanted his students—boys and girls—to be able to handle these weapons with the same proficiency as the baton twirlers in Independence Day parades. He dreamed of having his Gatka Sikh kid warriors march in their royal blue tunics and orange turbans in the next Independence Day parade, dazzling the spectators with their performance with these traditional and beautifully-wrought steel blades. But for now, the kiddos could only practice

with the bamboo sticks. Just as he started the jumping exercises to warm up, his text alert sounded. He leaped and jumped toward his backpack and retrieved the phone and read the text from his supervisor: "Great Job. Razy. Nail Factory nailed!" Ha! He and Architecturals bested the Ball Hawker after all! He dropped the phone into his bag just before his students filed in, each wearing their blue tunics and white pajamas, the girls with their hair braided and the boys with their orange *patkas* covering their top knots. In his own blue tunic and orange turban, he looked like a taller version of them. He leaped and jumped toward the center of the room, his heart leaping higher at the news. Razy, One, Ball Hawker, Zero, he thought.

"Heello!" he said, drawing out the word. "Are we ready? Are we ready to become warriors? Soldier-saints?" He counted heads. He searched the room for his best student, a 10-year-old girl named Manreet. "Where's Manreet? Anyone know?"

They shrugged. The Gatka weapons always captured their attention, and his students crowded around the table. How could he emphasize spiritual discipline when his best student missed without notice? Pursing his lips, he instructed the children to begin the Aardas, those prayers chanted in ancient times before Sikh warriors went off to battle and now in modern times, before each gatka class. They began reciting, "Oh holy sword of God, cutting and slashing Cutting down the armies of the wicked, So beautiful in battle, giver of strength, Unstoppable arm, terribly fast, Your light is dazzling. . . ." until they recited all three stanzas.

Afterward, they jogged four times around the room before starting stretching exercises followed by strengthening exercises including squats, sarab dundes and hand-to-hand partner exercises. He remembered doing these exact exertions when he was their same age, marveling how times have changed since Gatka was first practiced, but not the human body and not human nature. It required a great deal of training and focus for the sword to become an extension

of the arm, but without good footwork, a warrior was doomed. "It's all in the footwork. Your foot work is the most important thing because when you are using a blade you must be able to maneuver to protect yourself," he reminded them. It pleased him to see his students sweating from the exercises. Forty-five minutes into the class, little Manreet rushed in, her braid half undone, her sneakers untied.

"I'm sorry to be late, Veer-ji. My mom had to work late," she said, breathless from running.

"That you're here is most important, Manreet," he said, careful to hide his irritation and made a mental note to talk to the child's mother after class.

"Veer-ji, please call me Mini."

"We're learning to become Sikh warriors. Mini is not a warrior name. It like Mini Mouse," he said.

Manreet giggled, revealing her dimples. "Call me MiniMouse, then!"

"First, tie your shoes please and then begin your stretches and squats before you start doing the 4-step pantra leaps. You need to warm up and catch up, MiniMouse," he said, winking at her. Razy focused the next 30 minutes on the pantra, leaps, on jumping on their tippy toes, and spars, shoulder to shoulder and freestyle using the lathis, activities that he allowed Manreet to do despite having missed the first forty-five minutes of class. His best student, she possessed a natural ability, executing with ease what his other students struggled to achieve, twirling the lathis while doing the panthas, jumping and squatting to the floor with grace and uncommon dexterity. At the end of the class he signaled Manreet. "I would like you to help me wrap the weapons so we can put them away," he said, giving her the task so that he could speak to her mother about her tardiness as she frequently arrived late. "I'll walk out with you after we're finished."

She looked pained. "We have to hurry. My mom doesn't like waiting long for me."

Considering he waited 45 minutes for Manreet to arrive, it affronted him that this mother couldn't wait an extra five minutes. "It won't take too long," he said, pursing his lips hidden behind his beard. He'd have a thing or three to say to this mother.

Together, they inserted the weapons into their rightful sheathes. They wrapped the ones without sheathes first in a thin cloth and then rolled them in a pile in a soft blanket. A Gatka master, Razy owned many of the blades and collected antique ones along with their stories, which he kept at home. For the Gatka class, he locked the blades in a special closet in the multipurpose room so he wouldn't have to haul them to and from the gurdwara for each class. He set the blankets and the sheathed blades, the mace, the lathis and bows in their special corner, next to the dohl drums.

"I have to go, Veer-ji," Manreet said. He could see the urgency in her eyes.

"We're done," he said, grabbing his backpack. "Let's go get your Mom."

Outside, no car with Manreet's mom was waiting, and the child appeared alarmed. "Don't worry, MiniMouse. She'll come. Something must have detained her. I'll wait with you," he said, checking his watch. Since you were late, we can practice the panta till she comes."

Manreet nodded but he could tell the child was distracted by her mom's lateness. "Would you be able to drive me home if she doesn't come?" Manreet asked. He pulled his cell phone from his backpack and handed it to the child. "Call your mom," he said. She did, but no one answered, and her expression sank.

"Don't worry," he said, trying to hide his irritation and his own fear that Mini's mother may have forgotten her. Late to to class. Late to pick her up. "Do you have a brother or sister? Maybe your mom got delayed with a sibling?"

Manreet shook her head no. "Just the two of us," she said.

"No one else to call? Dad? Aunt? Uncle? Grandmother?" She shook her head no. "Aunti lives in another state."

Razy shut his eyes and rubbed his temples. Glancing at his watch, he saw that Manreet's mother was already more than 15 minutes late. He wanted to be home where he hoped his sister's best friend Josephine would be visiting for one of their megamedschool study jam sessions. Josephine and his sister Noor often piled their books on the kitchen table, studying, ingesting copious amounts of coffee, and compelling each other to stay at the top of the class. He admired their perseverance, but admired Josephine's other attributes a lot more, her open smile, her earnest gray-green eyes, her golden hair that spiraled in all directions from her face like a starburst. He planned to ask Josephine on a dinner date.

"She's here!" Manreet yelled, relief in her voice.

A black Toyota Rav with darkened windows sped up the driveway toward them. When the car came to a stop, he couldn't see the driver through the darkened windows, but he heard the doors unlock. He walked around to the driver's side and knocked on the window, which slowly descended, and there with her long hair fashioned into a haphazard pony tail atop her head and cascading like a long pompom sat Naveen Kaur talking into her cell phone and holding up her index finger at him to wait without looking at him.

Still not facing him, she said, "Apologies.. Had to work late tonight and got here as fast as I could." She was focused on something in her lap, yessiring into the phone. Manreet climbed into the back of the car, shut the door, and strapped herself in. Naveen handed the child a pink and black cloth lunch bag.

"Naveen Kaur!" Razy said, unable to keep the shock out of his voice. "You're Manreet's mother?"

She looked up at him then, said hasty goodbyes to whoever was on the other end of the phone. "Rasbir! What are you doing here? And yes, I'm Mini's mother." She smiled. "I just was signing

the contract with Richard Sterling.”

“No way! Architecturals got that contract!”

“Oh don’t go getting your panties in a twist. Sterling loved my rehab proposal but he also loved your aggressive questions about abatements and retail death valleys. Win-win. Every one wins. Architecturals gets some. I get some. Richard Sterling is happy. Looks as if we’re going to be working together on a project,” she said, offering a pained smile. “What’re you doing here again?”

“Manreet’s Gatka instructor! This is not a joke. Your tardiness is disrupting my class and now picking her up late, too! What if I had left?”

“Then she would have waited.”

“By herself?”

Naveen Kaur glared at him, but said nothing.

“It’s a challenge teaching children self-discipline when my best student is often late,” Razy said, clipping his words.

“Mini’s your best student? Mini, you’re his best student! That’s awesome,” she said to the child, dismissing Razy, raising the window. Razy knocked furiously on the window.

“What now?” she asked, lowering the window two inches so he could only see her enormous almond-shaped eyes.

“You owe me an apology for tardiness,” he said.

“O. M. G. Get over yourself already!” she said, her eyes flashing. Raising the dark opaque window, she said, “Later, Rasbir,” and drove away as if they were done.

Razy had not finished his conversation with her, but she dismissed him. Razy’s heart thumped, adrenaline coursed through his body. Gawd, how infuriating and rude she was! He noticed how her eyes flashed and her eyebrows knit together when she was angry, and she didn’t back down. She owed him an apology! He couldn’t erase the image of her oval face, her flashing black diamond eyes, her expression dismissing him. The more he thought about the exchange,

the more irked he grew at her regal attitude, as if he didn’t exist. At home Josephine and Noor were studying in the kitchen, his parents were out, and his mom left dinner for him in the ‘fridge. His thoughts of Naveen and her rudeness consumed him, as he cleaned up from Gatka class, as he combed and retwisted his topknot. He microwaved his dinner. He failed to hear either his sister or Josephine address him as he stomped to his room, carrying his plate. He remembered Mini had called her mother with his phone. Knowing it was Naveen’s cell phone number, he saved it. Then dialed it.

“Naveen Kaur,” she answered with her name.

“You know what, Naveen, I waited with Mini until you arrived, and you didn’t even say ‘thank you.’”

“Rasbir? What the hell?” She sounded half asleep. “Thank you for waiting with Mini. You feel better now?” She hung up the phone.

Rude again. Razy stared at his silent phone, and that night his irritation prevented him from sleeping. He instead argued with Naveen Kaur in his head, practicing all kinds of things he wanted to say to her at the first chance.

At work the next day, he learned the Ball Hawker got the best of the contract. Razy’s engineering expertise represented the sole participation of Architecturals. “That woman gets under my skin in the worst possible way,” he told his boss.

“Richard Sterling thinks she is the bee’s knees, so better keep that sentiment to yourself when you are around the property owner,” his boss said. “No question, she’s talented and a formidable opponent. But Richard Sterling also identified you as the Architecturals person he wanted on the contract. He said, ‘the guy in the turban who asked about the abatement costs.’ If Sterling hadn’t fixated on the abatement issues, Kaur would have the entire contract and Architecturals wouldn’t have any of it. So You’re the Man, Razy!” His boss tossed Naveen’s artsy looking business card onto Razy’s

desk. “She has 15 days to come up with a schematic,” he said. Razy slipped the card into his wallet.

Two days later, a courier delivered the schematic, all the project’s details precisely delineated. The quality of Naveen’s work impressed him. She must have had this thing in the works before she got that contract to submit the plans within two days, he thought. Now he had to get to work, making sure changes proved structurally sound. Determined to find serious flaws, he examined every detail, but by the end of the week, the effort proved futile, and he signed off. Razy learned that Naveen moved ahead with the demolition phase of the project’s interior, this from a series of emails with photos she sent to his supervisor, leaving Razy peeved that she omitted him from communication. By the week’s end, he was sick of Naveen Kaur, her precision, skills, and overachieving ways, and he wanted her out of his mind for the weekend.

Saturday night at the Latin Palace, the upscale restaurant nightclub in Fells Point where Razy took Josephine on their first date, couples and foursomes occupied the round tables near the dance floor and in the areas surrounding it. Even more couples packed the dance floor, some newbies watching their feet and some long-together couples in simpatico. A musical group—four men and a woman wearing a tight cocktail dress with a thigh-high slit that accentuated her hour-glass figure—performed predominately salsa music with other Latin dance numbers like the rumba and mambo and Latino pop hits tossed in for good measure. Razy, who had never been to the Latin Palace before, had accepted Josephine’s suggestion. They participated in the dance class Latin Palace regularly offered around 8ish, before the club became too busy so that they could dance a few numbers, and Razy would know the moves. Now they were finally seated at their table waiting for dinner and watching the graceful couples already chacha-ing on the dance floor. He spotted her: Naveen Kaur in a black evening dress with an open back, her hair in some

kind of updo with corkscrew strands falling strategically, and small white roses inserted in the back. She wore gold and pearl earrings, a pearl necklace, her steel *kara*, and beneath her dress, which fell just to her knees, she wore strappy, high-heeled black sandals and her tiny feet danced with confidence. Razy couldn’t believe how stunning she looked with crystal chandelier earrings, more shocking, her date looked like no body’s uncle. She danced with a dude whose surfer-blond spiked hair looked as if it required an entire tube of gel to remain standing. His body builder biceps strained against his shirt sleeves, and he moved around the dance floor as if he were a dance show contestant wanting to win. Razy stared at them, his adrenaline intensifying. What was she doing at Latin Palace and with Muscle-Man Extraordinaire? he wondered. And who’s watching Mini?

“What is it?” Josephine asked. Because didn’t want to take his eyes off Naveen, he glanced at Josephine with displeasure before returning his gaze toward Naveen, so lithe on the dance floor. His stare proved so naked Josephine could only follow his line of vision.

“Wow! There’s Dr. Lewis! You know Dr. Lewis?” she asked. “We call him Beach Boy. You’d never think of him as expert herpetologist, but he’s at the top,” Josephine said. “Look at him dance! Who knew?”

“Hepatologist?” Razy asked. “He’s a snake expert?”

Josephine laughed. “Livers. He’s among the top ten liver specialists on the east coast. He’s one of the faculty members at the medical school.”

“No kidding!” Razy said. “I know the woman with him. Mini’s mother. Mini’s my best Gatka student. I just never expected to see her mother here,” he said, careful not to mention Naveen’s name.

“You think a woman’s life ends after she has a child?” Josephine asked.

“No, no no, nothing like that. Made me wonder who’s home with Mini,” Razy said, considering how Naveen hadn’t spotted him,

the sole man in the place wearing a turban. It irked him that she failed to acknowledge him if she did.

“Babysitter. Wait ‘til I tell my classmates I saw the dishy Beach Boy here with a gorgeous woman. Such a cute couple! Don’t you think?” Josephine’s tone proved too enthusiastic for Razy. Shaking his head, he agreed with her, but in truth, he did not think they made a cute couple.

“Let’s try out our new dance moves,” he said, pulling Josephine toward the floor. In her floral dress and tan low-heeled, sensible pumps, her delicate pearl earrings, Josephine’s charms, her dimpled smile, paled in comparison to Naveen’s glamour.

“Your new dance moves. This is old hat for me.”

On the dance floor, Razy tried adroitly maneuvering them within Naveen’s sight line, but another dancer, or an unexpected turn, or something random interfered with his efforts, not realizing that his maneuvering appeared frantic.

“I’m not stupid,” Josephine said, frowning. She dropped his hand, left the dance floor, and Razy could only follow her back to their table. “Why are you being an ass?” Why are you so interested in your student’s mother anyway? Are you the fun police or something? Discombobulated because your student’s mother is out dancing on a Saturday night?”

Razy laughed, masking his irritation over Josephine’s astute observation. “We argued on Wednesday about her tardiness in dropping off and picking up Mini. Her rudeness stung, and it just shocked me to see her here tonight.”

The waiter delivered their dinners, and Josephine ordered a glass of red wine. Razy ordered an iced tea and serendipitously attempted to track Naveen and her date around the club. Josephine said nothing, waited for him to speak. After she finished several bits of her *ropa veija* and black beans, she set down her fork and sipped her wine. “I’m not buying it,” she said finally. “No doubt, you argued

with her on Wednesday. That would explain why you stomped around the kitchen and didn’t answer Noor and me when we spoke to you. It’s pretty obvious that you’re so attracted to her, you can’t keep your eyes off her.”

Razy nearly choked on his yucca. “I thoroughly dislike that woman,” he said. “Plus, she has a 10-year-old kid.” Razy couldn’t stop himself from gazing at Naveen, hoping she’d catch his eye, and Razy began feeling piqued and annoyed that she purposefully avoided looking in his direction.

Josephine raised her eyebrows and scoffed. “What does her having a kid have to do with it? Me thinks thou dost protest too much,” Josephine said, offering a tight, knowing smile that this evening would represent their first and last date.

Later, at home, unable to sleep, Razy tortured himself, wondering if Naveen invited Beach Boy home with her, wondering if Beach Boy forced himself on her, or worse yet, if Naveen welcomed Beach Boy into her realm. He recalled the contrast of the white roses against her hair. He imagined the alluring open-backed, sophisticated cocktail dress and Naveen’s hour-glass figure that did not look as if she carried and birthed any child. The more he attempted to think of other things, the more he couldn’t shake the image of Naveen Kaur dancing the mambo and the chachacha and the samba with the buff Dr. Lewis until he was reduced to the misery of watching the red digital clock click down the hours, minutes, and seconds of the night.

Sunday, if anyone phoned, Razy let voice mail pick up. He ignored his text messages, including one from Josephine, clipped monosyllabic words thanking him for the previous evening. His appetite failed him at breakfast and again at lunch, much to his mother’s consternation. At the gurdwara, although he looked for Naveen and Mini, he found them nowhere, and he retreated to the now empty multipurpose room where his brain refused to focus on the pre-Gatka Aardas. How can someone with his family history like his—a de-

scendent of the great Gatka warriors, the great Shaheedan Da Misl, who rose up and protected the Golden Temple in the 17<sup>th</sup> century— with Gatka in his blood, passed down from his forefathers to grandfather to his father, someone trained to battle with limitless courage be knocked off kilter by a mere woman, older than he, even! His years of practice turned into jelly hands and clumsy feet as he dropped the *lathis* and tripped while doing the panths, his legs, his hands, his fingers, fumbling like a child'; he returned the *lathis* to the closet and set out for a drive, unable to erase the image of Naveen looking splendid in her evening dress, flashing her dazzling smile at Beach Boy. The Ball Hawker definitely got under his skin. A half hour later, he found himself at Nail Factory Project, shocked to see the front door of structure propped open, and he circled the block for a parking space.

The construction boards covering the doorway to what Naveen designated in her schematic as the salon entrance leaned against the building. Razy feared someone may have broken into the structure and was perhaps robbing the site of expensive construction tools and maybe even valuable metals. He stepped inside, shouting "Hello? Who's here?" In the dusty, dark interior, a yellow light shone in the back of the structure, zigzagging in a haphazard fashion. He stepped gingerly, fearful of rats inside the long-defunct factory. Using the flashlight on his phone, he approached the yellow light, wondering how to proceed first if he happened upon a thief. Instead, he found Naveen wearing the yellow light on her pink hard hat.

"Rasbir, what're **you** doing here and where's your hard hat? You can't be in here without it."

"I'm wearing a hard turban," he said, pointing to his head, his heart quickening, pushing a flush up his spine, coloring his neck and face as his joke died. Naveen disappeared inside a dark room on the other side of the courtyard and returned with a pink hard hat.

"Pink is not my best color," he said, setting it atop his *dastar*,

smiling.

"You'll survive. What brings you to my project on Sunday afternoon?" she asked.

"You mean to, 'our' project," he said, emphasizing the word "our." "I can ask you the same thing."

Naveen rolled her eyes. "Dude, nothing 'our' about this project."

Razy shuffled, tongue-tied, knowing that his role in the work would gradually diminish. "What brings YOU here on a Sunday afternoon?" he asked, turning the question back to her.

Naveen didn't answer right away. "What does it look like? Work."

"Do you always work on Sundays?" he asked. Her hair, still in the updo from the night before but the white roses removed, was tucked under the hard hat, corkscrew curls hanging like tendrils beneath the pink edges. Even in her jeans and red converse sneakers, she looked ravishingly fresh, her beauty misplaced in a construction site.

"You can leave now," she said, searching in an opened, scuffed tool box for something.

"I prefer not to," he said, and she finally fixed her large, obsidian eyes on him. "You looked beautiful last night," he said, meaning it.

"Why, thank you, Rasbir. Flattery will get you nowhere. Why are you here again?"

Razy stuffed his hands into his pockets. "Saw the door open. Thought someone was stealing tools." In truth, he didn't know why he came there, but was glad he did.

"Thanks for stopping by," she said, dismissing him, her attention on her clipboard and measuring tape. Razy refused to move.

"What now, Rasbir?" she asked.

"I . . . I . . . Why did you ignore me last night?" he stammered.

“What? Are you fucking kidding me? You didn’t exactly go out of your way to say hello. Why don’t you call up your girlfriend to entertain you on a Sunday afternoon so you won’t be tramping through my job site for no good reason?”

“Are you always so difficult?” he asked.

“Later, Rasbir.”

“I’m not leaving, Naveen.”

“Are you always so difficult?” she asked, imitating him in a mocking tone, and Razzy laughed. “As long as you’re insisting, you might as well make yourself useful. We have only 20 minutes before I need to pick up Mini from her gymnastics class. Make these 20 minutes count.” Naveen tossed him a clipboard and automatic tape measure. “I’m working off this checklist.”

Working quickly but precisely, Razzy experienced great pleasure ticking more items off the check list than Naveen did.

“Why do you work on Sundays?” he asked.

“Somebody’s gotta pay the bills.”

“What about your husband? Aren’t you married to Dr.Lewis?”

Naveen glared at him “You writing a book or something? My Ex—Mini’s father. An arrangement, a miserable arrangement. Let’s just say he was less than honorable, and I walked away. Divorced and liking it. William is just a friend, though I last I checked, who I date is certainly none of your business.”

“What about child support from your ex?” he pushed.

“Look, what’s it to you anyway? Why are you showing up on my turf making a nuisance of yourself?”

“Just curious,” he said.

“Don’t be curious. It’s none of your concern, and I’m not playing 50 questions with you,” she said, ending Razzy’s attempt to learn more about her. She signaled her indifference by not asking him a single thing about himself. Although they worked in silence, it shocked him how fast 20 minutes evaporated. Naveen flashed him

her exuberant smile as she gathered her things. “Time to go. Ha! Your clothes are filthy! Bet you didn’t expect to be getting dirty on a job site,” she said, laughing, herding him out the door.

“How far do you need to go to pick up Mini?” Razzy said, drawn to her in a way he couldn’t explain or articulate. She plucked the pink hard out off his dastar and tossed it and hers in the back of the Rav, parked outside the Nail Factory. She looked regal with the updo still in place, despite the casual pants and sneakers. “Thanks for your help today,” she said, reinstalling the protective construction boards with a battery-powered screwdriver. “Even if you are a nosey somebody.” She replaced the screwdriver in toolbox and slammed the back door shut.

“Has Mini eaten dinner? Let me get you both a pizza!!”

“Another time, Rasbir.” Naveen said, climbing into her SUV.

“Why not now?” Razzy asked, wanting to tag along.

“It’s late,” she said, turning over the engine, then pulling out of the parking spot without so much as a glance behind her.

#

Weeks of work on the Nail Factory flew by with Razzy making a point of stopping by the job site as the renovations progressed. He admired Naveen’s work in the overall industrial motif of the whole project. In the salon area, he noticed a concrete wall divider that featured a mosaic of different colored stones, the wall separating the two areas without comprising the airiness of the space, only to later discover the wall was not concrete but just a series of tiles giving the illusion of heft. The bakery’s industrial designs proved more subtle, with garage style glass doors that had to be custom- built to accommodate the size and to open in the opposite direction so that the door itself became a roof over the outdoor area. Genius! The wall of glass enabled sunlight to bathe the bakery’s interior, giving it an inviting, open appeal. No wonder Naveen won so many contracts, he thought, appreciating her extraordinary use of design elements. All of the retail

spaces in the Nail Factory shared the industrial style in motif, but each space also held an individual look through color and unique design elements that required customized creativity to solve problems. He could see how Naveen's architectural background enhanced her design abilities and the Nail Factory looked fresh, a retail destination that he knew the architects and designers at Architecturals couldn't match. No wonder she's the Ball Hawker, he marveled. He began waiting outside after Gatka class to see her when she picked up Mini, but Naveen swooped in and out, as elusive as the Himalayan Yeti, and he missed seeing her for a month of Wednesdays. Then after the last Wednesday night Gatka class in the month, as he was stuffing the Gatka gear into the closet, Mini pulled at his tunic and handed him a small envelope. He opened it, her childish scrawl in an invitation card to her 11<sup>th</sup> birthday party on Saturday. Her smiling face peered at him. "Mama said I can invite any friends I want, so I'm giving one to you, Veer-ji. I hope you'll come!"

Razzy lifted the child to him and hugged her. "MiniMouse, I wouldn't miss it for the world! My best student! What do you want for your birthday?"

In his arms, she shrugged. "I don't know," she said. "I didn't think about that part. I was just happy Mama said I could have a party at our house. It's Saturday. Sorry for the short notice. I'm afraid some of my friends won't come because it's such short notice."

Razzy set her down and squatted so that he was eye level with her. "I'll be there. You can count on it!"

#

Naveen's house sat on tree-lined street just north of Johns Hopkins University in a section of town unfamiliar to him. As he drove through the area looking for a parking space, Razzy couldn't help notice the mixture of architectural styles, mainly Tudor but with a uniformity of four-foot tall hedges, the brick exteriors, slate roofs, and shutters, giving the area a decidedly serene European feel. He

parked on Canterbury Road, the same street Mini scrawled in the invitation. Invitation and birthday gift bag in hand, he walked slowly up the street searching for Naveen's house number before realizing that the house with a bunch of helium-filled pink and silver Mylar balloons marked the spot. He rang the doorbell, and within seconds an exuberant Mini opened the door.

"Veer-ji! You came! You came!" she shouted, hopping up and down like a coil. "Maaaaaa, Veer-ji came, too!" she called. "I was so afraid no one would come because of the short notice so I gave out all the invitations in two packages and everyone came! Everyone!" she shouted.

Razzy stepped into the house where chaos ruled. More than two dozen children, many of whom were his Gatka students, and others he didn't know, raced around the entire first floor of the house. The boys jumped from the middle of the stairs onto the sofa to the love seat to the chairs, chasing the girls. The doorbell rang again before Mini shut the door and she squealed as she ushered at least three more children behind him. In the kitchen, Naveen was wrestling a pizza out of the oven, pushing a second one into it, her lips compressed, tightened and inrolled into a thin line. Her hair hung half in and half out of a haphazard bun. "Damn!" Naveen said. She burned her hand on the oven rack, running to the sink and thrusting it under cold water.

"Miiiiiiiiiiii," she called, but the child did not come. "Manreet Kaur. In here now!" she shouted, but perhaps not loud enough for Manreet to hear through all the shrieking and yelling in the living room.

"Looks like you can use a hand!" Razzy said, smiling broadly. She looked up from the sink, her eyes filled with surprise. "Rasbir! What are you doing here?"

Razzy held up his invitation and gift bag. "Mini invited me!" Naveen rubbed her eyes and temples. "Who DIDN'T Mini

invite? I bought extra invitations in case she made errors writing 10 and would have to redo them. I think she distributed all 30 invitations. Parents are dropping their kids off and leaving. Look at them running all over the house like little monkeys.” She pushed a tendril of hair away from her face. “You and I are the only adults here!”

Razzy’s heart skipped and he roared a big belly laugh. “My entire Gatka class is here! How many pizzas you have there?”

“Four large ones. I told Mini she could invite whomever she wanted up to 10 children, so I have extra for 10, but not enough to feed this mob.”

Razzy had never seen her frazzled, so not-in-control and wareguru, he was grateful for the gift dropped into his lap in the form of a kid’s birthday invitation. “Let me handle the kids. You have a back yard?”

“Not a big one,” Naveen said, gesturing out the kitchen window.

Razzy peered through the window at the green, lush, cozy yard. “Big enough!” he said. “Perhaps you can order pizzas to be delivered. What about ice cream?”

“One of the grocery stores delivers, too. I’ll call for the ice cream and for every cupcake they have. I do have a birthday cake, but not enough for all these kids!”

“Don’t worry Naveen-Jio, we got this!”

In the living room, Razzy positioned himself in the room’s center and crossed his arms, stood silent as a statue. Understanding this gesture signaling that their Veer-ji wasn’t playing, the children in his Gatka class immediately quieted, and shushed the others into silence. “Ah, so much better!” he told them after silence fell. “MiniMouse, who are your friends? Let’s have some introductions here,” he said, and children he didn’t know began calling out their names. Max, Brenda, Dolly, Robert, Jimmy, Rose, Erin, Sophia, Kelly and so on, Razzy made an effort to identify each name with an item

of clothing so he could remember them.

Manreet introduced all shy children who did not call their names, some of whom were from her gymnastics class and others from her middle school, and then once he had their attention and names, he herded them all out into the yard where he shouted, “Spin the lathis!” The kids from his Gatka class immediately knew to find twigs and sticks and started spinning them, mesmerizing the other children. He suggested that Gatka students demonstrate how to spin the lathis and teach the technique to the kids unfamiliar with their training. Within no time, his Gatka students were performing all their training feats and teaching the others, who wanted to learn how to do the panths. “The most important thing to do is footwork,” he told them and soon, all 30 kids were practicing the panths. Naveen covered the round table in the yard with a plastic table cloth decorated with red lady bugs. She carried a stack of red plastic cups and an ice bucket to the table and also set three, clear plastic decorative drink dispensers filled with water, lemonade, and red punch. Razzy called for a break so that the kids could hydrate themselves and using his Gatka students as mini-teachers, he managed to occupy them for another hour after which they played other games such as freeze tag, red rover and Dodge ball; he aimed to tire them. A smiling Manreet radiated happiness as she played the games with her friends.

“Pizza’s here,” Naveen called from the window. Razzy asked the children to line up “like in school,” and they entered the kitchen in an orderly fashion. “What do we do before we eat after we’ve been playing?” he asked them.

“Wash up, wash up!” they shouted.

He and Naveen each took a group of kids to separate bathrooms to make sure they washed their hands. In the kitchen, Naveen arranged the boxes into three piles on the counter, vegetarian, cheese and pepperoni, and stacked lady bug plates and napkins next to them. He saw that she also created and arranged 30 party bags for the

children to take home with them and wondered how she managed to get them together. The pizza disappeared, and it was time to sing Happy Birthday. Naveen and Razy managed to get the candles lit, and after Manreet blew them out, the cake cut in tiny slices, cupcakes and ice cream served. With just hand and eye signals, he and Naveen managed to communicate about what the children needed and made sure they got to the restroom in time. Juice spilled, cake dropped, ice cream melted and ran. The children helped Manreet open her presents, stripes of wrapping paper and bunches of ribboned bows flew in various directions and Naveen gave up her efforts to keep the cards and gifts paired. Razy led the children in an endless game of pass the potato, until finally, by the fifth hour, parents began arriving to collect their children from the party.

The house looked like a combat zone. Naveen ushered an exhausted Manreet up the stairs to get cleaned up and into her bed clothes, lest she fall asleep in her party clothes, and Razy collapsed in fatigue on the sofa, his energy spent by the effort of keeping the kids entertained.

Moments later, Naveen returned and surveyed the house, littered with gift wrappings, ribbons, cupcake papers, empty lady bug plates, cake crumbs, and she collapsed on the sofa, her hair a dark, a haphazard mess around her face. They peered at each other, and suddenly they burst into spontaneous laughter like silly giggling idiots, laughter born of fatigue.

“We survived an invasion,” she said, still laughing. “But look at the house! I should be crying! My poor house!”

“Mini was so happy! I’ll help you clean up,” he said, still amused, looking around at the debris.

“It’s my fault. I should have looked more closely at what she was doing.” Naveen said. She leaned toward him and held his hand. “Singh-saab, thank you! I couldn’t have survived this party without your help. I can’t thank you enough.”

Razy squeezed her hand. “Naveen-Jio, I can’t imagine being anywhere else. I’ve been trying to tell you for weeks now. ... that—”

Naveen shook her head. “It can’t work between us. I’m 12 years your senior, and I don’t want to ruin your life—”

Razy held up his hand, palm toward her. “Stop. I’d rather be fighting with you than kissing someone else.”

“What happens when your mother is asking you why you want to attach yourself to someone who’s divorced, older and has a child. You know how restrictive things are. Our relatives and families will never accept this,” Naveen said.

Razy placed his finger over her lips and pulled her toward him, which felt right inside him. He didn’t care what his mother or anyone else thought about his feelings for Naveen. He didn’t care she was older. He didn’t care about the future when he knew life offered no guarantees. He realized that he loved her, and he also loved Mini and wanted to matter to them both. He didn’t care about any of the social implications because the only thing he cared about was being with Naveen. “I’m not going anywhere, Naveen-Jio. So you’d better get used to this face,” he whispered. “And you’d better get used to watching Mini perform,” he added. She smiled, stroked his beard and outlined his eyebrows with her finger.

“I’ve admired your beautiful face, Singh-saab,” she said.

There on the sofa, surrounded by the party detritus intermingled with the all Mini’s gifts scattered across the room, in the aftermath of the kid invasion, Razy, with confident courage of a saint-warrior and claiming his victory, finally did what he wanted to do for weeks: kissed her.

## The Night She Slept

Ever since she landed in Canada with her husband of twenty days, Simran had trouble sleeping. Every night, she lay in bed for hours, waiting for Raj to sneak in beside her, give her a peck on her forehead and sleep really close to her, adding endless warmth to this extremely cold country. But the wait only seemed to grow longer every night.

Right from the time she gained consciousness of her existence, Simran had been conditioned to suppress her identity. There were so many voices between her and her identity that she had completely lost touch with. She knew that deep within someone lived inside her, who was way different from what she had been made to become. But she hadn't got the chance to meet her yet. "Don't do this", "Don't do that", "What are you reading", "Why aren't you in the kitchen helping your mother", were the only words resounding in her ears day and night. Aditya Chopra's *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jaayenge* was the first film she had been allowed to watch with her cousins, without adult supervision. The film left her truly inspired. And dreaming... Every time her father asked her to do something, she would imagine him saying "*Ja Simran, jee le apni zindagi*" [Go Simran, live your life to the fullest] and smile. She felt happy and rejuvenated after watching the film, positive that it was her story being told on screen. She was almost upset with the director for not showing what happened after Raj and Simran got married as she would now have to imagine it on her own.

When the invitation to her cousin's wedding in Canada arrived just when her parents had started discussing her marriage, Simran viewed it as a sign from God. Destiny had after all conspired to make her dream come true. She went there fully convinced that she would meet the man of her dreams there. That she would meet her Raj

there. Two days after reaching Canada, she saw him. He was a friend of the groom's. He had a charming personality and looked much more handsome to Simran than Shah Rukh Khan in *DDLJ*. Needless to say, the moment she looked at him, Simran knew there was no looking back. She could feel warmth inside her heart whenever she looked at him, and for that moment, her very existence got wrapped in a bubble where nothing else existed but Simran and her infinite love for Raj. Unlike the film, however, their parents approved of the match instantly and their wedding date was fixed just two months later.

Every night she lay in bed here in Canada, all alone, shaking out of fear each time the winds whispered something ominous through her bedroom window, she was taken back to the frozen memories of the time before her wedding. Right from the time she returned to India after her cousin's wedding, Simran was treated like a star. Her mother stopped asking her to help with the daily chores, her father didn't wake her up early in the morning while going to work, her neighbours always smiled when they crossed her, and her younger cousins (all thousands of them) teased her cheerfully, asking her the minutest of details related to her 'love' story. All this was followed by the wedding preparations that were stereotypically lavish and made her feel pampered like a princess, perhaps for the first time since she was born. She was even more enamoured by this highly realistic illusion of freedom felt by her after a very long time, than she was by Raj, and her bubble grew bigger with every dress or piece of jewellery she chose to buy for her grand trousseau.

When all her relatives came from different parts of the world for her wedding to the celebrated (even coveted) Canadian citizen, Simran felt convinced that her life was going to change forever. Already, she could imagine the scenario of her visits to Punjab post-marriage – the taxis full of family and friends stationed to pick her up at the airport, the anticipation of 'imported' gifts purchased from duty-free shops at the airport, the hours of gossip with her sisters

before her mother would force her to sleep, and the rivers full of tears when it was time for her to depart, bidding farewell to more taxis full of relatives who would go to drop her at the airport.

She had a lot of fun at her wedding. The shimmer of her bridal dress (which weighed 17 kgs), the colour and fragrance of her *mehendi*, the unlimited food stalls, the divine ambience of the *gurudwara* during the ceremony, and the love she saw in Raj's eyes; made these the best days of her life. She had never felt better in the twenty long years of her life, and doubted if she ever would. In the days that followed the wedding, her bubble grew bigger than ever, with the continued attention that she received from her new family. She was almost sure she would have received it tenfold from her husband, had his brutish friends left him alone.

Sadly, the moment she boarded the flight to Canada with Raj, her bubble burst, like all others do. As soon as they sat in the plane, Simran could feel the coldness in Raj's attitude which she had the privilege of ignoring till now. He was not gentle like she had imagined, and his replies to anything she said failed to be longer than two words. She felt extremely disappointed, but consoled herself with excuses of exhaustion or stress, on his behalf. After two weeks of living with him in Canada, her disappointment turned into disillusionment and she realised and was forced to accept two hard truths of her life. First, things that *seemed* too good to be true, *were* in fact so; and second, her life had indeed changed forever, although not in the way she had expected. Now she knew why *DDLJ* ended in that train. Why she was not shown what their marriage would be like...

Tonight was the fifteenth night she couldn't sleep. She lay in bed, a quiet tear or two streaming down her dry cheeks, waiting for the distant sound of Raj entering the house way into the night, and the loud shriek of the study door closing behind him, shouting out to her that her husband had returned from work and was not going to sleep next to her again tonight. Struggling with the myriad ideas popping in

her head at the same time, Simran was startled by the turn of the key at the front door. Tonight, however, it wasn't immediately followed by the sound of the study door. She was quite amazed to hear Raj talking to someone in the living room instead, accompanied by an occasional tinkling of ice in the whiskey glasses that usually ornamented the antique cupboard in their dining room. Her heart skipped a beat when she heard the flirty laugh of a woman succeeded by a long silence that pierced through her lonely heart and soul.

Surprisingly, Simran felt relieved after the instant panic in her mind had settled. At that moment, she could finally hear the voice inside her that had been stifled all these years, telling her that she was not alone. That it was okay for her to cry if she wanted to. That it was also okay if she didn't. She knew enough English to survive in this country, didn't she? And last year she had completed B.Com too. She had even made good friends here with the women who owned the Indian grocery store she bought all her daily supplies from...

As she was discussing all these ideas with the voice inside her, she was suddenly distracted by the buzz of a fly dancing around her in the darkness of the still night. This was the first time she had seen a fly in this country. She stared blankly for a while at the tiny creature getting comfortable in a spot on the wall right next to her bed. She heard a suppressed laughter again in the background, and suddenly, prompted by a nameless feeling she raised her hand and squashed the fly. That night she squashed the fly was the night she finally slept.

## Critique de la Raison Dialectique

1. In *Critique de la Raison Dialectique* Jean-Paul Sartre wants to found a soft of existential anthropology incorporating the methods of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. He tries to situate man in his environment conditioned by material factors of class struggle and the means of production. And, throughout his work he takes for example, the various aspects of the French revolutionary process. The problematic moves around the notion of «group» and that of '“individual”'. He believes that this extended theoretical framework enriches Marxist thought and gives man his due place in the scheme of things. The obvious contradiction of this human mechanism is with the so-called Marxists who have dehumanised Marxism, and thus, deviated from the path and the “project» outlined by Marx himself. The whole polemic is about historical interaction that is responsible for social change. What is the motive force of internal structuration? What triggers change? And, what are the factors which determine a given conditioning?

2. As far as contemporary Marxism is concerned, Sartre has his own misgivings. He believes that historical materialism has a paradoxal character. It is the only verity of history, and at the same time, a total indetermination of verity. This totalising thought, asserts Sartre, has founded everything except its own existence. A devastating attack on the basic hypothesis of historical materialism, if there ever was one. He continues with his argument: Marxism presents itself as a demasking of a being, and at the same time, as an interrogation that stays at the level of exigent, that does not tell us enough about its significance.

3. As far as dialectics is concerned, it is a method and a movement within an object. It is founded on an affirmation of the base which is an affair of both the real structure and our praxis.

There is no doubt that the process of our understanding is of dialectical order. The movement of the object is itself dialectical, and, these two dialectics form a single whole. This ensemble of propositions has a material content which defines the rationality of the world. However, the dialectical reason is neither a constituting reason, nor a constituted reason. It is the reason which is being constituted in the world, and, by means of this reason, dissolves in it all the reasons constituted to constitute others, which it continuously surpasses and dissolves as it moves along. It is thus both a type of rationality, and, the surpassing of the rational types. It affords the possibility of ever unifying its objects of study, and, becomes a permanent necessity for man to totalise and be totalised.

4. Sartre thus accepts the concept of totality and the totalising process, common to both Marxism and structuralism. His main problem is to secure a proper place for the individual, who is a product of his socio-political structuration, but whose individual reaction of praxis must inflect the course of history. The human conscience, maintains Sartre, is the conscience of the Other, and the Other is the being-other of the conscience. There is a basic contradiction between the knowledge of the being, and, the being of knowledge. Marx defined his ontological monism by affirming the irreducibility of being to thought, and, by reintegrating thought in the real as a certain type of human activity, says Sartre. In a word, materialist monism suppressed the dualism of thought and being in favour of the total being. But, this re-establishes the dualism of Being and Verity. Sartre asserts that contemporary Marxists have not been able to overcome this paradoxal difficulty. And, they have preferred a simple solution. They simply refuse to consider thinking as a dialectical activity, and, dissolve it in the universal dialectics. They suppress man by disintegrating him in the universe. Thus, they hope to substitute Being for Verity. There is no such thing as knowledge. Being does not exist. They posit a Nature without men. They do not need certitude or criterion, for knowledge,

in whatever form it appears, is based on a certain rapport of man with the world that envelops him. If man does not exist any more, this rapport obviously disappears.

5. The object of our analysis is Nature, and, the study of History is its specification. We have to follow the movement that generates life from matter, man from the elementary forms of life, and, social history from the earliest human communities. But, this external materialism, argues Sartre, imposes dialectic as an exteriority. In this process, man is kept

out, and, the analysis follows the course of things to comprehend idea as a thing signified by others, and, not as a signifying act. But, to think and to suffer is to act, and, this signifying act cannot be ignored. The materialist idealism is nothing but a discourse on the idea of matter. Its opposite is the realist materialism; to think of man as situated in the world, traversed by all cosmic forces. This reflection presents the world as it is revealed across a “praxis in situation”. Sartre continues: dialectical materialism makes sense only if it establishes, within the human history, the primacy of material conditions, such as are discovered by the praxis of the situated men. In other words, if there is such a thing as a dialectical materialism, it must be “historical” materialism i.e. a materialism from within. According to Marx, men make History on the basis of internal conditions. The dialectical rationality of this affirmation is presented as a unity of necessity and liberty that is both dialectical and permanent. In a sense, man is subjected to the dialectical process, almost as the force of enemy, but at the same time, it is also true that he “makes” it. If the dialectical Reason is to be the Reason of History, continues Sartre, this contradiction must be dialectically engaged. If we do not want that this dialectic becomes a divine law, a metaphysical fatality, as most of the contemporary Marxists would like us to have it, it must be derived from the individuals. Dialectic is the law of totalisation that evolves into collectives, societies, history, i.e. realities which are

imposed on the individuals, but at the same time, it must be projected by millions of individual acts. Sartre concludes his arguments with the final affirmation that it is not the dialectic which obliges men to live their history across terrible contradictions, but it is the men under the empire of want and necessity, who confront each other under the circumstances that History of economy can enumerate, but dialectical rationality alone can render them intelligible.

6. As far as the problematic of the “situated” man is concerned, Sartre admits that his position in, what he calls, series (syntagmatic relations), can give rise only to immediate praxis or immediate reactions, which can be quite deceptive. The paradigmatic or associational relations are necessary to understand the dialectical movement of any human confrontation. At the former level, the human praxis and its immediate ends can appear only in “subordination”: they are subordinated to the direct and dead exigence of a material ensemble. In a series, each becomes his self inasmuch as he is other than the Others i.e. just as Others are other than him. No “concept” can be formed of this series, because each member is serialised by his place in the order. Each is the Reason of the Being-Other, just as the Other is his reason of being. We come back to the material exteriority, which is not surprising, for the unorganised materiality decides the nature of the series. On the other hand, as the order was produced by a given practice, and, this practice included reciprocity, it has a “real interiority”. It is in its “real being”, and, as an integral part of a totality, which is totalised outside it, that each is dependent on the Other in its reality. As such, the pratico-inert objects must first produce, following their “own” structures and their passive action, the direct or indirect relations, and groupings of the members of this multiplicity. Such a group is defined by the co-presence of its members, not as the relations of “reciprocity”, or a practice that is common and organised, but as a “possibility” of this praxis, and reciprocity, which are responsible for it. Sartre continues to insist on the dichotomy of the group and the

individual, which is the basis of his *Critique* and his analysis of the “situations” of the French Revolution.

7. He believes that in reality there are two distinct dialectical undercurrents: that of the individual practice, and that of the group as praxis. The moment of the practico-inert field is in fact that of anti-dialectics. This structure of alterity is constituted of the action of the “common lot” as totality. In threatening to destroy the seriality by the negative order of massacre, the troupes as practical unities, present this subordinated totality as a negative force of each of the possible negations of seriality. Thus, with the coexistence of two structures, “the one being the possible or future negation of the other, each continues to see in the other, but it sees, in it, itself i.e. as a totalisation of the Parisian population. It does so by means of the sword or the gun which will exterminate it. In this situation, each sees in the Other, his own future, and, discovers his present immediate action in the action of the Other. In such a group, obviously, there is no unity of action. It is elsewhere, in the past or in the future : the group has acted and the collective realises it with surprise as a moment of its passive activity. It was, once a group. This group is defined by a revolutionary act, which is an irreversible act. As far as the future is concerned, the arms by themselves, have in their very materiality, the possibility of a concerned resistance.

8. The conflict between the individual and the group is responsible for the introduction of the element of terror. It gives the individual the chance of his unfettered dialectic, and, a sense of sovereignty. It is also his solitude and his exile. But, he must act to realise his being, and his identity, which is possible only through an intimate interaction with the Other. The micro-structure is within the macro structure. The counterpart of terror is the sentiment of fear. None is certain of his place within. It must be won, and violence obviously is the surest means to achieve this goal. Sartre believes that the experience of terror is a circular experience. He asserts that the

Girondins are totally responsible for the violence of the conflict: earlier for forcing the revolution to wage war, and later, for producing terror as the only means of government. The homogeneity of the Convention was false. The majority of the members were not willing to pardon Montagnards for the humiliation of the second June. There were a number of Girondins still in the Assembly. The antagonist groups presented their heterogeneity in the irreducibility of their political actions. The conflicts of interests were becoming more and more violent. The Girondins were there to represent the interest of the conservative bourgeoisie and those of aristocrats; the difference of groups and individuals developed across a slow complex matrix. Neither federalism, nor the hostility of Paris, nor the social and political conceptions were responsible in the initial period. All this was constituted during the struggle through irreversible episodes. Terror, asserts Sartre, is never a system that is established by the will of a majority. It is due to a fundamental rapport within a group as inter-human relations. The study of these relations is the study of the two dialectics mentioned above.

9. Sartre criticizes the *a priorism* of the Marxists. It is not only in the domain of linguistics that such a malaise exists. Andre Martinet has often pointed out this basic fallacy of the binarist approach of Roman Jakobson and his followers. A considerable number of descriptivists and transformationalists fall in this category. Once a certain language, often English, was described with a number of stress and intonational patterns, we found the same conclusions for languages as far apart as Korean and Hindi. There are not only pseudo Marxists, there are pseudo-structuralists all over, who find it convenient to analyse their objects in pre-fabricated moulds. Sartre calls them lazy Marxists, who do not take the trouble to study the various aspects of a given socio-political structure, who do not weigh all the possible factors which constitute a given situation. They try to fix events and persons in a framework that is already there. These socio-political

situations, where the individuals and the group interact, are much more complex than what the contemporary Marxists are used to. It is not possible to accept the analysis of the Marxist Guerin that the revolutionary war of 1789 is another episode of commercial rivalry between the English and the French. This Girondin assertion is basically “political” though one cannot deny that this act, at the same time, serves the interests of their class. When Brissot forces France to enter into this war, it is primarily to “save” the Revolution, and, to reveal the treason of the King. This is the key to the Girondin’s attitude in this affair. An internal crisis is more often than not, averted by creating an external crisis.

10. The simplistic formalism of the Marxists is primarily an essay in elimination. This method, argues Sartre, is identical with terror, with its inflexible refusal to differentiate one situation from another. Its aim seems to be a total assimilation at the cost of least effort. It does not integrate the various elements of a structure by according to them a relative autonomy. It simply suppresses them. What cannot be handled or understood should be swept under the rug. This is the usual techniques of the descriptivists/transformationalists who believed in the homogeneity of structures, and, whatever did not fit in their a *priori* formulation was simply thrown out of the recorded data. It is interesting to see that such things have been happening in other domains of scientific enquiry. The specific determinations, according to Sartre, evoke the same misgivings that the individuals have in reality. To think, for most of the Marxists, is to pretend to totalise, and, under this pretext, the particular is replaced by the universal. Sartre believes that Marx never accepted this false universality, his method proceeded progressively from the larger determinations to the most precise. In a letter to Lassale, Marx maintains that he proceeds from the abstract to the concrete. And, concrete, for him, are the hierarchical determinations and the hierarchised realities. For example, the word, class, is a word without

any significance if we do not know the various elements of salary, capital etc., which constitute it. For Sartre, in any determination, the human relations are the most concrete elements which situate a given interaction of the individual within his environment.

11. There is no doubt that Marxism enables us to “situate” a discourse of Robespierre or a poem of Baudelaire. But what does this situating imply? According to the writings of the contemporary Marxists, this means determination of a definite place of the object of study in the total process of material conditions, the class that produces it, the form of struggle with other classes etc. Every discourse and every move will be defined in these terms. This would amount to considering Montagnards as the representatives of a recent bourgeoisie. The discourse of Robespierre will also be considered to be conditioned by an economic contradiction. But an analysis in depth of inter-human relationships and group rivalries would reveal a more profound contradiction of authoritarian parliamentarianism. As such, the introduction of the arm of terror was also primarily a “political” act, to eradicate the voice of opposition. How many times do we hear the false cries of the deteriorating situation of law and order, or a conflict on the frontiers of our countries, when it is simply a question of an internal political disequilibrium?

12. This “concrete reality” discussed by Marx is ignored by contemporary Marxists. For them, an individual, a group or a book is a “chaotic representation of the ensemble”. Every act of an individual or a writer is reduced to certain generalisations of his class determinations.

The concrete relations which this class produces, and, the internal structuration that is due to the uneven distribution of various social and cultural factors, are not taken into account. Wild, Proust or Gide present as many different names, and the relations of the subjective with the concrete. The ideology of Valery is a concrete and unique product of a being that is characterised “in part” by his relations

with idealism, but it should be deciphered in its specificity from the concrete group to whom he belongs. This does not mean that his reactions do not represent those of his group, his milieu, or 'his class. Valery is a petit-bourgeois intellectual, this is certain. But, every petit-bourgeois intellectual is not Valery. Contemporary Marxism lacks the "hierarchy of mediations" which is indispensable to comprehend the individual and his work within a given class and a given society at a given time and place. Marxist critics establish the realism of Flaubert on the basis of the rapport of reciprocal symbolism with the social and political evolution of the petite-bourgeoisie of the Second Empire. But, they never show the genesis of this reciprocity or of his perspective. We are not told why Flaubert preferred literature at all, why he lived as he did as an ascetic, why he wrote "these" books instead of those of Durand or of Goncourt. Flaubert was a petit-bourgeois but his family had its own specific characteristics: his mother belonged to the nobility, his father was the son of a veterinary doctor of a village, the elder brother of Gustave who was apparently more gifted became an object of his hatred, and so on. It is thus in the specificity of a given history, across specific contradictions of this family that Gustave realised his being. A child becomes what he is because he has lived a specific life within the conflicts of the religious zeal with the monarchical regime and the irreligion of his father, a petit-bourgeois intellectual and a son of the French Revolution. It is not only in the Flaubert family that the two brothers had different dispositions and "talents", it is a familiar situation in the so-called middle class families all over the world. It is not uncommon in India to have one brother a militant of the extreme left, and another, of the extreme right. The economic conditions and the class structure do not explain all. It is only a point of departure. The activists of the numerous communist parties whose ideological and political interests radically differ from each other come from the same class. This is true of the Sorbonne also where the militants of the right and the left

who throw plastic bombs at each other are generally the kids of the same Parisian bourgeoisie. At the time of the revolutionary conventions, the situation was quite identical. Most of the militants were young fellows from the "economic" middle class of all the French divisions of nobility, bourgeoisie and aristocracy. Their economic condition helped them acquire the necessary intellectual culture, but being young and carefree, they were primarily guided by their ideological leanings. They were possessed by the absolutism of Rousseau. Most of the leaders of the French Revolution were bachelors. Besides, the precursors of the Revolution, Descartes, Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot, the high priests of the movement, Robespierre, Volney, Garat and a number of others were all foot loose and fancy free. Their political engagements and personal reactions in any given situation have to be comprehended in terms of their intellectual development and specific personal interrelationships since their childhood. But as Sartre remarks, contemporary Marxist critics deal only with "ready-made adults" and pay no attention to individual psychic developments. They leave this vast domain of scientific enquiry to the psycho-analysts. They do not realise that there are structures within a Structure, which are responsible for revolutions within a Revolution.

13. The historical rationality cannot be acquired without the principles of the conflicts of classes and various other factors of economic determination, but this "economism" does not explain all. Without the living men, there is no living history. To understand a totality and the ensemble of the historical complex, one has to follow the unique adventure of the individuals who are involved in any diachronic structuration. The Marxist method is "progressive" from the abstract to the concrete. But the "lazy" Marxists do not take the trouble to follow all its series and orders, its syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations; they constitute the real a priori. They already "know" what they are going to find. The method proposed by Sartre is both progressive and regressive. Initially, it places man in his general

context, in the conflicts of his class and society, in the contradictions of the movement of the ensemble. This gives us a totalising understanding of the given movement, but with reference to our object this understanding remains an abstract affair. It begins with the material production of the immediate life, and ends with society, State and ideology. However, within this movement, “figures already” our object. For a Marxist, the object is in the historical process and the historical process is in the object. Both are “abstract” considerations. The existentialist method of Sartre is “euristic”: it follows progressively the biographical details with the help of the conflicts of the period, and, traces the contradictions of the epoch with reference to biography.

**Gurupdes Singh**

## Two Readings

### **Gurdial Singh’s *Night of the Half Moon* and *Adh Chanani Raat***

In an essay ‘Shakespeare in the Bush’, Laura Bohannon presents an interesting situation. When at Oxford, she, being an American, was accused of having difficulties with Shakespeare as, according to the British, “he was, after all, a very English poet, and one can easily misinterpret the universal by misunderstanding the particular.” She was not much convinced, but realises its gravity, on a later day, when confronted with the prospect of telling the tale of Hamlet to a cluster of Tiv, a tribe in West Africa. Having primed herself to the tribal order, she tries to modify her tale appropriately to make it compatible with their culture, only to discover that the tale slid fast off the track and fell apart in a manner that no attempt could rescue its meaning. The primary anchor of the plot, that of Uncle making an incestuous marriage with his sister-in-law, was outrightly thrown out of the consideration, as it was, for them, the most natural and legitimate custom. They had no problem with the urgency with which the marriage was arranged as a chief’s widow needs a husband to take care of the land. In fact they found it so strange that the king had only one wife.

Narratives may be a universal phenomenon, but their meanings are not. Individuals make the narratives as much as the narratives make them (Nair). Each one of us has grown up with the cultural narratives that constitute our universe and determine our subjectivity. In return, when we receive narratives, we unconsciously reconstruct them after our own subjective orientation. This process both reinforces our bond with our culture and at the same time alters and transforms it. Meanings and interpretations, therefore, are highly

fluid entities that reside neither in the representations nor in the real world. They belong to the realm of mind and its associations with the varied means of representation. Verbal representations, particularly narratives, are constitutionally in conspiracy with the readers as they trigger these associations with their inherent structures of gaps, silences and distortions. No narrative can match its spatial and temporal scale with the physical world. As such the hiatus caused by narrational exigency is filled either with the implicit plan of the narrative or with external sources.

Speaking about making sense of narratives, Rimmon-Keenan refers to several models that readers employ to integrate various elements of the discourse to make it coherent and intelligible. The basic thread that connects all models is the principle that readers impose the familiar on the unfamiliar parts of the discourse to make it natural and legible. The familiar elements generally come from readers' cultural, intellectual and aesthetic orientation. The narratives may thus invoke reference to readers' understanding of the textual world – language, genres, rhetoric; the real world – objects, events, customs, ; the intellectual world - ideology, world-view, values etc. The reader is constantly hopping in and out of narrative events and matching them with the customary world that he inhabits and finds most natural. His reconstruction of narrative logic, his belief or disbelief in narrated events, his encounter with the implicit ethos of the tale are all governed by his linguistic and cultural points of reference.

What follows here is my personal encounter with the two versions of Gurdial Singh's novel *Adh Chanani Raat* in Punjabi and *Night of the Half Moon* in English. Unlike many I am in a happier position that I can read both versions, translated and original with equal ease. Being a regular reader of English prose, with academic background, the English version provoked readings that were in distinct contrast to the Punjabi version which I read as a native language speaker. The readings therefore besides being determined by the

subjectivity of a professional 'other' also problematise issues with respect to translation.

Reading the translated version, I didn't come across any major problem except those that the intrusion or sprinkling of Indian expressions usually cause to the flow of the narrative. In fact, being a Punjabi I was able to manoeuvre them reasonably well. Moreover being sympathetic to the translator's dilemma, I was willing to overlook those parts that show signs of English syntax or diction getting badly bruised by a harsh contact with an alien language.

The real problem came up when the reading was over. As a reader of literary texts, I could not resist asking what the book was all about or what I should make of the story. Where could I find its ontological situs? Three different possibilities emerged.

Is it a revenge drama? Modan loses his father, he knows who to blame for it, plans and kills him and gets the imprisonment due to him. After some respite he again gets embroiled in another conflict with the same family and challenges them for a duel and the result this time is that he gets fatally wounded which brings his end and the end of the story. The story has palpable signs of a tragedy. I am reminded of Hamlet. Hamlet's heightened consciousness, his contemplative attitude, his self-doubt, his ethical debate about heavenly death vs sinful death, his vacillation between emotion and reason, his torment between love and treachery make him noble in his revenge and death. Here in the *Night of the Half Moon*, Modan seems determined and executes the plan without any delay, without any remorse, without any mental conflict, without considering the consequences. Is murder so easy? Or is it that Modan is so efficient or heartless at it that he couldn't care less and do it without blinking an eye. No!, we know that he was tense and quiet and aloof for a few days before he commits the crime. So what was going on in his mind? This is where the tale goes blank or silent. All those opportunities

that could make him noble in his revenge or a rebel child of his tortured times (whose hints are aplenty) are lost. What is the difference between him and the killers of his father – both seem aggressive and criminal in their attitude. The free indirect speech which Gurdial Singh has so liberally used in his narrative goes silent here and Modan turns out to be as impulsive and mindless as any ordinary revenge seeker. In fact, we know so little about the motives of both killers that the text projects killing as the natural outcome of any conflict.

The second possibility: is it a novel of alienation and existential perils. Modan was moved out of the village, he lives a solitary, loveless life. He shuns contact with others in the village. The village seems to be full of people who are spectators to the ongoing events and make their voices heard, but Modan ruminates by himself – silent and secluded, struggling for life and coping with its daily heartbreaks. Is he an outsider to the village? Probably, yes. Camus' *Merseult* comes to mind. Like him our Modan too murders in a rush of emotions and seem little bothered about it. But is he truly an outsider and does his alienation and extreme act evoke philosophical questions about hypocrisy and truth, tradition and individualism, ethical right and wrong, belief and atheism, rationality and absurdity, human self-control and helplessness, demonstrative love and indifference etc. that *the Stranger* provokes? Our text seems to be happily oblivious of all this. Is it an opportunity lost by the author? Modan's alienation does not grow out of larger issues, nor does it metaphorise into an existential dilemma. It is simply a circumstance of an angry young man who attempts to manage his anger and use it for counteraction at the opportune time. The narrative does not clutter itself with any other issues except the compulsions of a murder tale. Our Modan, despite having the potential of becoming a phenomenal hero turns out to be an average brooding outsider, whose impulses and actions are no better than of an angry insider. A harsh critic would also go to the extent of saying that Modan's tale of alienation has been wasted as it

leads the narrative nowhere.

The third possibility: is it a novel of social representation with the portrayal of a society steeped in conflicts of power, pride and patriarchal practices? Modan and his family seem to be victim of greed and reprisal at the hands of a much richer and powerful landlord. We can see the narrator's sympathy with Modan, the poor tiller. Am I reading a Dickensian tale with the clear identification of the oppressor and the oppressed? Perhaps, not! The oppressor and his misdeeds are clearly not the business of our narrator. Instead of directly informing the reader or enacting them in the body of the narrative, he prefers to route it through the rambling discourse of Lallu, whose credibility is doubtful. As we know, if there was one immediate motive for Modan's killer action, it is his chance sitting with Lallu, who along with his cronies inflamed his revenge psyche in the name of a Jat's pride.

On the other hand, even if we extend the simple property disputes of the story to the level of social and ideological conflicts, then where does the story take us? Are there any social rebels in the story to heighten the effect of social oppression or even to highlight its range and extent? The answer is no. Is it then a story of faceless or helpless people – Modan being one of them- whose struggle defies any definition and who have little hope of ever getting justice? Does the novel portray a hopeless situation as it ends without any semblance of poetic justice? If it is truly so, in the name of social realism, then ideologically the narrator will turn out to be on the side of the oppressor, despite his empathetic, close proximity with the protagonist Modan.

Perhaps I am being unfair to the narrator/ author duo. But social realism, as we know, inevitably turns into a moral tale. So where is the moral voice in the story, besides the too apparent tone of sympathy towards Modan? The narrator does not directly intervene and attach any moral addendum to the story. Fairly so, in the name of objectivity. However, towards the end, he brings in an elderly woman

Nihalo to sum up things. She refuses to name the good, the bad and the ugly – her gospel is acceptance, resignation, submission to the will of god, destiny, fortune, the cosmic calendar - in short, the typical survival kit that women had adopted in the face of relentless patriarchy. Has the story led me into a morally vacuous space where there is no clear distinction between the good and the evil, where there is no resistance to the social oppression? Does it tell me to simply accept, and not act, and if act I must, then should it be in the retaliatory manner of Modan? I guess the story has all the signs of a regressive tale.

That was my reading of the English version. But when I read the original in Punjabi, many of these doubts and questions start falling into place. The moment I get into the opening of the narrative, I get intimations that the story is set in an old, rural, close-knit world. The way Modan was hailed by a stranger and made an offer to stay for the night, you know that it is a world far away from the anonymity of urban life. Two things emerge immediately: one, that the characters belong to a small, remote world, living almost like on an island, away from the civilised world, speaking a language that is a subset of Punjabi and least affected by the world outside this barbed circle. To me this state of exclusion is symbolic and the language speaks not only of a regional variety of Punjabi, but of a community that is completely bereft of the economic and social developments of those times. Nowhere in the novel, have I found a mention of a school, a bicycle or postal system. The community still lives in the oral times, communicates only face to face and moves slowly with little or no means of transportation. The economic means available to them are again extremely limited. There is almost exclusive dependence on land and agriculture, with its incumbent perils of nature's inclemency. No wonder they are possessive about their land and are god-fearing. Not only this, their ostracised living in direct contact with nature determines their worldview in far subtler ways than their external

bonhomie or proximity shows. These are people who live an elemental life with impulse, directness and savagery; and their language and discourse shows little signs of displacement. The orality of the discourse confirms their complete disconnect from self-reflexive control and judgment that is the hallmark of literate societies (Ong). This may also stand for a reason why the text lacks depth and references to all those psychological, existential and ideological issues that could make it a multi-dimensional text.

Second important feature of the narrative is that the narrator clearly refrains from distancing himself from his characters. The narrator could use standard Punjabi for his interventions to make it distinct from the discourses of his characters, but he chose to continue with the same dialect. This not only brings him closer to his characters, but also confirms that he is one of them, who not only understands their world, but also shares their worldview. Being close to his characters, the narrator shies away from judgment. That is why there is little reference to their acts of omission and commission. Being one with their value and belief system, he finds it scarcely important to present an alternative view.

So now I know why there is no resistance built into the novel, or why no one condemns murder, why alienation does not have any third dimension or revenge is so quick and self-destructive. And all this comes alive through the linguistic code of the text. *The Night of the Half Moon* is a tale half told because in translation it lost this unifying worldview that only the dialect of a region could build. I can see the compulsions of a translator, but a text written in the standard language lying alongside any other metropolitan text shall hardly evoke the intertextual references to attitude, values, knowledge or system of belief that a text written in the remote dialect of a region can do. The loss here is greater than the one that translators usually lament. In *Adh Chanani Raat*, the story does not determine the narrative discourse, it is the narrative discourse that determines the story.

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**Lakhvinder Singh Bedi**

## Pash's Theory of Poetry *A Reading of His Letters*

The letters of Pash provide a view of his understanding of the nature and function of poetry. Though Pash is not a theorist in the strict sense of the word, he clearly had a theory of poetry which he meticulously followed in practice and often expounded. In addition to his letters, his theory of poetry can be glimpsed also in his several poems. Pash considers poetry to be a weapon in the war against injustice, exploitation and oppression. He says that poetry makes the impossible possible. According to him, poetry brings about in "the moonlit night" what is prohibited in the "darkness of the daylight" (Ghai 100). Pash rejects the poetic language which "tries to please kings", which "measures the area of the beloved's navel", which "rolls like tennis ball", and which "grows like weeds in the barren soil of the stage" (100).

The only published collection of Pash's letters is available in the form of an anthology titled *Pash Dian Chitthian (Letters of Pash)* edited by his friend and comrade Amarjit Chandan. The letters are written in Punjabi language. No English translation of these letters has been undertaken yet. These are addressed to friends, fellow writers and relations. There are eighty two letters in this anthology (including one which does not bear the name of the addressee) and these are addressed to twenty four persons. Among the writers, poets and critics to whom he has addressed his letters are Surjit Patar, Darshan Bulandvi, Shamsher Sandhu, Tejwant Gill, Harbhajan Halvarvi, S. S. Dosanjh and Amarjit Chandan. A large number of these letters were written from his native village Talwandi Salem (Jalandhar); a few letters were written when he was in jail; others were written from the USA. The letters reveal Pash's extensive reading which

included poetry, philosophy, religion, history and erotica. He specifically refers to a religious book of the Radha Soami sect titled *In Search of the Way*, some erotic novels, and a history of philosophy (*Pash Dian Chithian* 33). He mentions that he thoroughly read and enjoyed Shakespeare.

A variety of comments have been made on the contents of these letters by critics. Amarjit Chandan observes that the author of these letters does not write from the position of an authoritative figure. Moreover, Pash comes out as a fearless commentator in these letters. Chandan adds that Pash's purpose is to expose and caution those whose writings confine "the soul in a literature of escapism" and those who would "make omelettes of egg-shells" (18). Tejwant Singh Gill, underlining the range of Pash's creative powers with evidence from his letters, observes, "On the whole, it was cultural immanence that impelled him to grasp life.... No wonder, his interest got directed towards the practice of hegemony that he defined as 'human mastery over nature, a great invention for personal and collective justice'" (*Pash* 26). He further notes that Pash emphasised in his letters the distinction between the conscious and the unconscious because of a glaring lack of the same in the Punjabi literature of his day. Referring to Pash's observation that his withdrawal from political activism had the obvious consequence of his turning within as a poet, Attar Singh observes that this awareness was the basis of Pash's self-understanding. Pash's letters again and again demonstrate his ability to reflect critically on himself and his work (*Pash Chintan* 14).

The letters broadly deal with three issues: the nature and function of poetry, the relation of poetry with politics, and Pash's own practice of poetry. The first part of this paper deals with Pash's observations on the nature and function of poetry and includes observations on the power of poetry. The second part examines Pash's view of the relation between poetry and politics, including his remarks on propaganda literature. Pash makes significant observations

about the bourgeois and the Marxian aesthetics. The third part deals with Pash's reflections on his own practice of poetry.

A large number of Pash's letters deal with the nature and function of poetry. In his letter to Shamsheer Sandhu (dated July 17, 1974), Pash admires Sandhu's decision to write about simple happenings and ordinary experiences of life (35). Pash asserts that poetry must reject falsehood and vanity. He condemns any portrayal of life which is artificial or caters only to the elitist taste. Pash likes the literature which is written with the intention of "confessing" and is also aimed at "condemning" the decadent social values. He holds that this kind of literature has an important role to play. Pash finds this element in the poetry of Surjit Patar and Amitoj. He compares the writing of poetry with the act of giving birth. He says both are processes that begin once the conception occurs (36). In the act of writing poetry, the conception of an idea is not a conscious act; it depends on the totality of what we experience and observe around us in our day to day life. Later, the poet has to do conscious work, which is like cutting the umbilical cord and giving bath to the newly born. Pash suggests that a writer must be sensitive to everyday experiences. A writer must not be corrupt, weak and compromising. Art and personal integrity go together and a poet has to take a position in order to make judgements. He must see and record incidents in the right context and perspective (36).

In a letter to his father Sohan Singh Sandhu (dated December 24, 1973), Pash assigns a specific purpose to the writer. While comparing the role of a writer and a social scientist, he observes that both endeavour to understand reality. A social scientist tries to reach certain conclusions with the help of existing theories and principles of social development; an author delves deep into life to discover its meaning. Pash believes that the approach of an author is similar to what we all aspire to follow in our life: all of us make efforts to discover the devil and the angel in our souls for the sake of

realising the purpose of life. A social scientist can be termed as a spectator whereas an author cannot afford to become that. On the vast stage of this life, an author has to play some self-defined role. All the same, social scientists and authors are both honest. Politicians, on the other hand, are usually dishonest (43). Pash contends that an author would be unfaithful to his times if he does not portray life as he sees it (129).

In a letter to Darshan Bulandvi (dated August 1, 1982), Pash remarks that only a fine artist can take note of sensitive nuances like the sounds emanating from trees, clouds, and a burning pyre; these are not appreciated by the insensitive (190). Similarly, every artist does not seek the beauty lying beyond the closed windows or in the darkness of melancholy; this is the forte of only great poets like Kamla Das. For Pash, a poem should look both forward and back. It should have originality, novelty and strangeness (190). Poetry does not mean issuing statements or declarations. It is an articulation of life, marked by simplicity. It is an expression of infinite beauty sung for entire humanity. Pash argues that the worth of poetry can be truly judged neither by critics nor academics. He observes:

Anyone who lives intensely cannot be insensitive or reactionary. Whatever he says can only be, from this larger perspective, positive. Whether one's poetry is good or bad cannot be decided by petty minded and small parties of traditional academic critics who cannot see beyond syllabuses. ("Letter to Darshan Bulandavi", published in *Shabad*) The appropriate test of poetry lies with readers and with time (191).

In another letter, Pash writes to Shamsheer Sandhu (dated July 19, 1974) that he was impressed by the writings of both Trotsky and Lenin. However, the poet who inspired and impressed him the most was Pablo Neruda. Pash admires Neruda's *Twenty Love Poems*

and mentions that he discovered the true definition of poetry and its effects only upon reading Neruda's poetry. Neruda's poetry helped him affirm his faith in life. He enabled him to confront death, darkness, silence and beauty. Pash adds that he has tried to follow in Neruda's footsteps. He notes that he does not find these elements in the writings of most Punjabi writers (40). Pash points out that Pablo Neruda held that poetry must deal with diverse feelings and experiences; a balanced approach does not indicate that the writer is weak or not committed to anything. Pash further writes that sad happenings in our life enrich us. Writing "passive" poems was a deliberate act for Pash; he uses them, he says to break the ice frozen in the souls of readers of the so-called "revolutionary" literature. Pash admits that the cause of revolution has restricted and confined many writers and thus limited the scope of their work. He considers such approach to literature as an insult to the dignity of revolution itself (165). Commenting further on the orthodox Communist approach to literature, he expresses his preference for the portrayal of tragic happenings and personal loss in poetry. Such events, Pash asserts, should not become reasons for disappointment and disillusionment for the poet; he quotes Lenin who loved music but avoided it as it disturbed him because he wanted to devote himself to 'greater' pursuits. For Pash, good literature is a mixture of the comic and the tragic; any effort to separate the two can ruin a work.

In an undated letter to the poet Surjit Patar written from jail, Pash voices his thoughts on the power of poetry. Pash says that powerful poetry gives both pain and pleasure to a reader. This experience is similar to that in nature: a virgin prefers to endure pain and pleasure during copulation. The reading of Patar's poetry sometimes excites and exhilarates Pash to the point of madness. He says that the experience is such that he feels as if he is going to explode in a mixture of anxiety, elation and fear (177). But Pash also adds that a reader may admire the merit of a poet's work even when he is of the oppo-

site camp. Taking a dig at Patar, Pash remarks that good poetry can take bad ideology to great heights; similarly, bad poetry can debase even good ideology (178).

Pash, like Pablo Neruda, recommends the writing of “impure poetry” to undo the conventional principles of aesthetics (181). He writes that the bourgeois aesthetics are destined to shortly fade away. However, the Marxists are also not wise enough in the sense that they do not welcome dialogue. Pash’s hard-hitting comments on the Marxian approach are as follows:

Our Marxists are not very wise. This is not the time to initiate a dialogue with them. They can ruin any one’s reputation, but cannot enter into dialogue. They do not have a ground of their own to stand upon (182).

Coming to the practice of imitation in poetry, Pash condemns the mere imitation of an experience or expression through the use of similar metaphors or similes (179). He rejects the argument that a writer may be ignorant of a particular source. He says it is imperative for a competent writer to devote himself/herself to extensive study. No writer can be forgiven for such negligence. Pash, however, contends that imitation is acceptable if skills are imitated. An able writer can learn skills from another writer and then imitate those skills in his own creative endeavour. This practice would enrich and replenish one’s poetry (179).

In the earlier quoted letter to Shamsheer Sandhu (dated July 19, 1974), Pash voices his opinion about popular literature and its prospects. He quotes popular writers like Mann Mararan Wala, Hardev Tharikian Wala and Deedar Sandhu who composed such literature in his days. Pash believes that their work leaves no lasting impression because of their presentation; it is, in fact, the medium which makes them so popular. This kind of literature does not demand intensive reading or an attentive listener as it only titillates the senses. Pash

observes that these writers are not out of touch with real life but they wish to see only the colourful part of life. They do not have any serious purpose or vocation to pursue as poets. Their only pursuits are fame and money. They are satisfied that they have a large audience. Beyond this, they have no serious engagement with writing. He asserts that time will test the worth of such writers (38). Pash reasons that audience like to “howl like dogs” these days. As a consequence, there are writers who produce similar “howling” in their writings. Those who are manipulating a rise in the popularity graph would forsake them ultimately. According to Pash, life goes clockwise only. The writing aimed at vulgar appeal would vanish sooner or later (38).

In a letter to Surinder Dhanjal (dated April 18, 1987), Pash relates his experience of enlightenment which he describes as somewhat “like Buddha’s”: he understood then the various dimensions and characteristics of language in literature. Pash thinks that the limitations of language can betray its function. Words fail to express desired emotions in a work many times; they produce only a distorted shadow of the actual emotions. In the course of his own experience on such occasions, Pash would destroy a work that failed to convey the desired meaning (171). Pash accepts the contention of Lao Tse Tung about the capacity of a language; it is supposed to absorb the experience first and then convey it. Writing is not the whole truth of what a writer wants to say. In fact, the wrong use of language is even more dangerous than pure lies. Language also evolved as a useful medium to facilitate business. The same language cannot be considered to be capable of expression of all emotions. Pash is of the opinion that the language of poetry has to be free of avoidable grammatical complexities. It must be capable of employing symbols and metaphors to communicate intense emotions even without the conventional use of grammar (172).

Pash deals at length also with the relationship between po-

etry and politics in a number of his letters. He expresses in his letter (dated July 19, 1974) his views to Shamsheer Sandhu on the literature of propaganda. According to him, thought, policy and manipulation are the guiding forces of propaganda literature. Further, this kind of literature is always composed consciously, so it is not creative (36). Pash terms such literature as “escapist” since it does not confront complex social realities. Its only strength lies in its sheer appeal. But it sounds shallow as it is based on absurd appeals. The purpose of propaganda literature is often to cause hatred, anger and humiliation. The writers of such literature often become the promoters of division, unrest and useless sacrifices in a nation. They have no significant place in history (37).

Commenting on the attitude of writers in Punjab in his day, Pash writes in a letter to Mushtaq Singh (dated 1973) that these writers are “raping” literature; dishonesty is showing its ugly face in literature also (61). According to Pash, the poetry of his time has to engage with the actual conflicts and contradictions of life. The prevailing bourgeois aesthetics, however, are trying to evade these conflicts and contradictions by treating them as the end of literature. On the other hand, the Marxian aesthetics treat the contradictions as a flaw in the bourgeois social organisation and use clarity, uniformity and simplicity as instruments. According to Pash, the poets in Latin America, Africa and Europe are making experiments and are leaving the bourgeois aesthetics behind. The Indian poets are still writing under the influence of the bourgeois aesthetics and are afraid to make bold experiments. Pash defines his objective as the destruction of the bourgeois aesthetics in Punjabi poetry (67).

In his letter to S.S. Dosanjh (dated January, 1972), Pash discusses “revolutionary poetry” (168). In his opinion, revolutionary poetry is aimed at conventional bourgeois poetry. Its contribution is that it has sensitised the Punjabi reader to the existence of a wider sphere of human suffering and pain. Revolutionary poetry has made

us realise that pain is not always negative; it can be positive too. This realisation has played a great role in the history of poetry. Pash tells Dosanjh that critics like him have not taken their expected role seriously, honestly and with the necessary breadth of vision. He warns that poetry and criticism would be “intellectual masturbation” if these did not respond to the historical movement which is fit for revolutionary poetry. Pash asserts that literature ought to be meant for the common person. He regrets that much of revolutionary poetry has been reduced to a tool of entertainment for a handful of people from the literate and wealthy class. There is no real relation between poetry and the people about whom it is being written. Such poetry has not been able to tackle the existing terror but has itself become a terror. He further notes that the element of protest in contemporary poetry could also be an expression of blind anger. Pash contends that it would be wrong to think that revolutionary poetry lacks aesthetics. Poetry always has certain aesthetics. Pash remarks that a revolutionary poet does not write with the intention to create great literature, but aspires to write with purpose (169). In an undated letter to Mushtaq, Pash comments on the effect of politics on literature (70). He argues that it is only a genuine revolutionary party which can influence the nature of literature. A mere group or individual is not in a position to achieve this. Further, Pash adds that even the revolutionary Communist writers would feel helpless without a genuine revolutionary party (70).

In his letter to his father Sohan Singh Sandhu (mentioned already), Pash reflects on his own practice of poetry. He says he has been accepted by the readers because he avoids hypocrisy and the unnecessary use of sentiments. He attributes his success to his attitude (44). He says he has carried out difficult experiments as a poet. His sincere quest has been to experience life as an ordinary person only. His poetry has been widely accepted because it expresses the ordinary people’s practical experience and understanding. As a poet,

he has been committed to poetry; he says he has not bothered about how others view him. He says he has honestly embraced life, whether the experience has been good or bad (44). Moreover, he has never avoided taking positions. Comparing his own poetic achievement with Shiv Kumar Batalvi's he writes that his poetry will outlive Batalvi's because it comes out of an engagement with the totality of life. Batalvi, on the other hand, does not go beyond love for women. According to him, the "intensity of feeling" and the comprehensiveness of passionate engagement with life are the reasons his readers have accepted him (45).

In a letter to Surjit Patar (mentioned already), Pash talks about Punjabi readership. In his opinion, there are very few serious readers for Punjabi literature (184). However, this is an advantage as well as a disadvantage for the poet. Pash is convinced that a good poet can be ruined by his/her fans. The desire to earn popularity can kill a poet: it is "a noose around the poet's neck". Popularity can block a poet's growth because a poet may be tempted to continue writing the things his/her readers have come to expect of him/her. A good poet must continually extend the area of experience and expression. Critical self-evaluation is valued very highly by Pash. In a letter to Sherjung Jangli (n.d.), Pash remarks that self-reflection is indispensable for both a poet and a political activist (166). He admits that some of his poems are not good; they are marked by unnecessary sentiment. But they do not reflect any frustration. Melancholy and pessimism also weaken some of his poems, he observes.

In a letter to Darshan Bulandvi (dated August 1, 1982), Pash shows his concern for the Punjabi poetry of his day (187). He points out that the usual subject matter in this poetry is love, sex, food or justice. In Pash's opinion, these should not be the major subject matter of poetry. Great poetry, according to him, is always about the beauty and majesty of life. Starvation, love, sex and death are aspects of life, not the entirety of life. Similarly, the place of the human being

in the universe is an important theme for poetry. Likewise, the struggle for individual and collective justice and freedom can be a fit subject matter for poetry, but this should not be too loudly proclaimed; it should be a part of the poet's sensibility and it should be expressed in a subtle and spontaneous manner. Pash adds that in real good poetry, the difference between the conscious and the unconscious is negligible. Pash emphasises the multidimensionality of good literature. Religious literature is, according to him, an example of one-dimensional literature. Thus, the literature that deals only with hunger or justice or revolution alone is not good literature. On this touchstone, Pash judges the poetic achievement of Bhai Veer Singh as ultimately insignificant. Poetry cannot be limited to nature only, as it is in Bhai Veer Singh's case (188).

In the same letter to Bulandvi, Pash evaluates his own poetry. He mentions that the scene of his own poetry is restricted to his village Talwandi Salem and the surrounding twenty kilometres. However, his vision and concern are vast. He pronounces that there is no restriction on the mind and imagination of a poet. Referring to Pablo Neruda, he says that he could smell a poem in the footprints left by a cat in his backyard. However, this was only possible because Neruda had experienced the vast spaces in the universe as well as in the human heart (189). It is essential for a poet to depict the sound of waves as well as the stillness of waters so as to show the forces of life and death together.

This idea is developed further in Pash's letter to Surjit Patar (which has been mentioned above). He says that he does not excel in any extraordinary expression of emotions (183). His strength as a poet lies in the observation of minute and simple things and incidents. This is also the reason, according to Pash, his poetry is liked by young readers living in villages; they find their own experience reflected in his poetry. Paradoxically, great poetry may deal with small and minute things. His own poetry, which is about an ordinary Punjabi villager's experience, serves also to remove the sense of cul-

tural backwardness from the mind of his readers. It helps them to affirm faith in life in spite of the squalor and misery of their daily living (183).

In short, Pash's letters demonstrate his sustained preoccupation with several vital issues pertaining to literature, particularly poetry. As we have seen above, these issues range from the power of poetry, the role of a poet, the place and value of ordinary experiences as the subject matter of poetry, the significance of Neruda's practice of poetry for Pash's own practice, the relationship between politics and poetry with special reference to distinction between the bourgeois and the Marxian aesthetics, the relevance of "impure poetry", the uses of imitation, the distinction between literary art and popular writing, the limitations of language in poetry, the element of propaganda in progressive literature and the meaning of revolutionary poetry, etc. It is worth noting that these issues were so important for Pash that even in his poems, he can be seen reflecting on them. In this respect, some of his more significant poems are "The Most Terrifying", "An Open Letter", "Word, Art and Poetry", "I Refuse", "Give Me Some Tuneful Words", "You Don't Know", "Where Poetry Does Not End" and "I Take Leave Now" etc.

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Mudasir Altaf Bhat

## The Legacy of Violence in Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil*

"It was a Hundred Years' War with modern weaponry,  
and backers on the sidelines in safe countries"

(*Anil's Ghost* 43)

These words of Michael Ondaatje about the bloody civil war of Sri Lanka that lasted for around 27 years are echoed in Nadeem Aslam's observations about Afghanistan: "... [P]ull a thread here and you'll find it's attached to the rest of the world" (426). The novel shows Afghanistan in a state of civil war. In the hegemonic discourses that serve as the packages of consciousness, this ongoing civil war has been read as the result of the country's inability to govern itself. However, *The Wasted Vigil* (2009) forms a counter-discourse by challenging such stereotyping through its insistence on representing civil war in Afghanistan alongside of colonial invasion and occupation. Aslam is of the view that Afghanistan today is not haunted by Taliban and Al-Qaeda sponsored terrorism only, but there are multiple forces at work that have caused the destruction and devastation of this country. The novel actually illustrates that instead of civil wars we are now in the realm of what Hardt and Negri have termed as "global civil wars" (4), where no one appears to be accountable for the culture of violence that these civil wars breed. Violence has become an effect of power and authority that stands de-nationalized and is no longer tied to one place; and it has produced a normalized and permanent "state of exception".

Aslam not only examines the instances and consequences of imperialism in this novel, but also the effects and tyranny of Islamic fundamentalism and its correspondingly destructive nature. Just as

the Soviet invaders are criticized for devastating the country, so too are the Taliban for their nihilistic war against everything. Nadeem Aslam spares neither side while empathizing with the innocent victims who continually bear the brunt of the ceaseless fighting.

*The Wasted Vigil* is set in post-September 11 Afghanistan. It narrates the interlinked stories of a cast of geographically different characters that are all drawn, for different reasons, to an isolated house in the countryside near Jalalabad. The house is owned by English-born Marcus Caldwell who, after marrying a liberal Afghani doctor Qatrina, started living as a permanent resident in Afghanistan. His house is the meeting site of four other characters: Lara, a Russian woman in search of her brother; Benedikt, who went missing during his military service in Soviet Afghanistan; David, a former CIA American spy and lover of Marcus' deceased daughter, Zameen. There is also Casa, a Muslim fanatic, who is radicalized in Taliban sadistic training camps to fight all things American. There he falls in love with the beautiful Afghan girl Dunia, who is a liberal minded school teacher. All these characters maintain devoted, sometimes futile, vigils for long missing family members and loved ones. But the vigil and the hope results in despair because ultimately every relationship is destroyed by death. Each person has a quest, and each quest is thwarted — by circumstances and history. The story moves fluidly between the present, where these characters all live in proximity and yet are worlds apart, and the past as they look back and reflect on their journeys that brought each of them there.

Aslam's cast of characters represents most of the factions involved in Afghanistan's long running civil war, in which local warlords, the Soviet invasion, Taliban insurgents and a Western alliance waging its so-called War on Terror all play their part. They all are representatives of global conflicts and relations, demonstrating the offences and misunderstandings, both historical and contemporaneous that have led to the devastation of Afghanistan. Through Marcus

we are able to explore the British colonial presence in the region in the late nineteenth century; through Lara it is the decade of Russian occupation; and through David we are able to receive information about the subversive American presence in Afghanistan through the decade of Soviet occupation. Likewise, Casa stands for the Taliban rule that annihilated Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001.

Aslam portrays Afghanistan as a landscape that is part physical and part spectral. The first image of the unusual ceiling to which hundreds of books have been fastened with iron nails becomes a metaphor for Afghanistan and its disruption. The image is described as “A spike driven through the pages of history, a spike through the pages of love, a spike through the sacred” (5). These books are nailed to the ceiling by Marcus's traumatized wife Qatrina in a crazed effort to preserve these from Taliban raids. The second image is of the painted walls depicting “scenes of lovers either in an embrace or travelling towards each other through forest and meadow” (12-13). These images of the romantic love are terribly damaged by bullets, demonstrating the violence inflicted by Taliban and the external forces within the borders of Afghanistan. Lara further reinforces the experience of atrocities inflicted over centuries on this land:

This country was one of the greatest tragedies of the age. Torn to pieces by many hands of war, by the various hatreds and failings of the world. Two million deaths over the past quarter-century. Several of the lovers on the walls were on their own because of the obliterating impact of the bullets – nothing but a gash or a terrible ripping away where the corresponding man or woman used to be. A shredded limb, a lost eye. (14)

Almost all characters of this novel are tormented by wars. The interconnectedness of the wars that have so deeply affected these characters is made apparent when Lara, having heard David speak of

his brother, thinks about Vietnam:

A different war – but may be at some level it was the same war. Just as tomorrow’s wars might be begotten by today’s wars, a continuation of them. Rivers of lava emerging onto the surface after flowing many out-of-sight miles underground. (362)

Lara’s musings suggest that we are too hasty in considering wars in different regions and at different times in isolation. No local war can be viewed in isolation, but only as part of a grand constellation, linked to other war zones and areas that might not be presently at war. As Nadeem Aslam says about wars in Afghanistan: “Once the Soviets withdrew, and US interest waned, the Taliban rose ... 10 years later 9/11 (and the ensuing War on Terror) happened and half the planet woke up. They had no idea it came out of the cold war”.

Civil war in Afghanistan is not “the armed conflict between sovereign and non-sovereign combatants within a single sovereign territory” (Hardt 08). It involves a wide range of global actors. It is being funded by foreign sources that have stakes in the region by virtue of former colonial occupation and because of economic interests which range from the mining of gems to the production of opium and heroin poppies. Aslam outlines the economic interest in the region as ancient, through the image of the diamond taken at some point from Afghanistan, placed in the eye of a statue in India, and then looted to end up first on an Armenian’s hand and then on a Russian ruler’s. At one point Marcus ruminates: “The lapis lazuli of their land was always desired by the world, brushed by Cleopatra onto her eyelids, employed by Michelangelo to paint the blues on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel...” (18). Such references underline the fact that Afghanistan has been raided for commodities for millennia, and that the current-day occupation of the country by NATO only mimics and echoes earlier invasions and raids.

There is a close relationship between civil war and what

Giorgio Agamben terms as “the state of exception”. He says in *State of Exception* that “civil war is the opposite of normal conditions, it lies in a zone of undecidability with respect to the state of exception, which is state power’s immediate response to the most extreme internal conflicts” (2). He adds: “...[M]odern totalitarianism can be defined as the establishment, by means of the state of exception, of a legal civil war that allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system.” (2)

After 9/11, some Western powers have imposed nothing less than a ‘global state of exception’ in several parts of the world. The phrase ‘War on Terror’ provided the US government enough freedom over time and space. The word ‘terror’ not being a country, so the war could be taken to different places. And it is very difficult to find out who the enemy really is in the War on Terror. As Spivak says, the War on Terrorism has been “zoomed up to face an abstraction” (82). Afghanistan has been virtually turned into a “camp” that, according to Agamben, is a space where the rules of the world cease to apply, where we have the communities of people without the rights to have rights. It is the ‘bare life’ of these ‘homo sacers’ in Afghanistan that Nadeem Aslam brings to the light in *The Wasted Vigil*.

The way the War on Terror has been represented contributes to the construction of hegemonic narratives through which America projects itself as a beacon of democracy and a civilizing bulwark against the violent forces of rogue states. Using the rhetoric of just and unjust wars, the War on terror moralizes the use of global violence by putting it outside the realm of reason and critique. The violence inherent in the War on Terror is thus normalized and dehistoricized. It changes the entire social and political makeup of Afghanistan and the world at large, as a distinction between war and civil society becomes obsolete. It is through the disembodiment of global violence that the dehumanization of Afghanistan in particular and of majority

of the globe's population in general takes on normative and naturalized state of existence.

Aslam's novel dramatizes the transformation of the country's civil war into a permanent state of exception. In post-9/11 Afghanistan the state of exception has become a rule. "When state of exception...becomes the rule," Agamben says, "then the juridico-political system becomes a machine which may at any moment turn lethal" (86). It is this lethal machine whose biopolitical motor is the state of exception that is, in Agamben's analysis, "leading the West toward a global civil war" (87). *The Wasted Vigil* articulates an extraordinary search for social justice through the narrative and seeks to understand the operative modes of violence beyond their historical and social configurations. Conceptualizing global civil war as engineered by the Global North, that is, predominantly by the United States and its allied nations, it reveals the ways in which global war deeply invests in and ensures the continuous accumulation of global capital through increasingly uneven capital distribution. Global civil war aims at maintaining a historically received global order of unequal power relationships and has also become the geopolitics of resource control. It is thus intrinsic to the formation of a new global sovereignty that supersedes colonialism and imperialism. Aslam's critical narrative confronts this violence through a critique that exposes and unsettles contemporary configurations of imperial and colonial practices and habits of mind, and in this way it dismantles the conditions that produce social violence and anguish.

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## Gurdev Chauhan

### *From my book shelf*

*Imaginary Maps* by Mahasweta Devi is a book of radical fiction, one short story and two novellas, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the well-known translator, feminist, literary critic and theorist acclaimed for her translation into English of Derrida's famous *Of Grammatology*. For long she has also been translating Mahasweta Devi's writings while being very actively involved in decoding the poetics and politics of subaltern studies, neo-colonialism and gender.

Mahasweta Devi's mother, Dharitri Devi, was a noted writer; her father, Manish Ghatak was also a writer of repute; her uncle Ritwik Ghatak was a famous filmmaker. Devi is the recipient of various awards: Sahitya Akademi, Jnanpith, Magsaysay, and Padmashri. For many years now she has been editing *Bortika (The Lamp)*, a literary magazine for tribal voices. She founded the first Bonded Labor Organization of India in 1980. Her novel *Mother of 1084* about the Naxalbari movement was made into a film by Govind Nihalani. *Rudaali*, an award winning film, is also based on one of her short stories: it is about Sanichari, a tribal woman for whom ritual mourning at the passing away of rich people is a source of livelihood.

Devi's fiction is a strange mix of fact, history, myth, folk poetry, ritual, belief systems, discussion, narrative and polemics dealing with for the wretched of the earth who in her case are the dispossessed people of the tribal belt stretching through the states of Bihar, West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh. Thus seen, *Imaginary Maps* is a book about the least imagined territories. Everything is real, concrete, raw, and naked for all to see, feel and suffer in the mind if not in the body. The stories are set in the real villages of Seora, Kuruda, Murhai, Seeho, Thapari, Dhumma and Chinadoha in the Palamu District in Bihar, which are inhabited by the bonded labour from the Oraon,

Dusad, Ghasi, Nagetia, Lohar, Parhaia and Munda tribes.

*The Hunt* is the story of young woman, Mary Oraon, half white and half tribal, who has the pluck for coming to terms with the harsh realities. Rebuttal and fighting back are in her skin. What happened to her mother at the hands of the contractors and landlords cannot happen to her. She is daughter of a tribal woman, Bhikni, who was 'christened' after the birth of her daughter from a white man. Mary's father was a white planter who had raped her mother when she was working at the Dixons' bungalow. Mary Oraon is very beautiful and is the centre of attraction everywhere she goes. People lust for her but she loves Jalim, a Muslim young man. She'd marry him when she is able to save 100 rupees for her railway fare and other expenses for their getaway. The timber merchant's house where she works is frequented by a tehsildar who is bribed by the merchant to allow illegal felling of trees. The tehsildar takes fancy to her and tries to rape her, but she proves to be physically too strong for him. Then, Jani Parab, the spring festival arrives. It is a festival in which the men go hunting of wild animals and birds. After the hunt, they celebrate with food, booze and dance. For twelve years it is the men's festival, while the thirteenth year it belongs to women. And this happens to be the women's year. Finding her walking alone, the tehsildar forcibly catches her hand; she tricks him into meeting her on the festival night behind a rock. She kills him with a machete, takes the money from his pocket, drags the body to the ravines for hyenas and leopards to eat, and after enjoying the dance with the women, quietly elopes with Jalim.

*Douloti the Bountiful* is a tragic story of victims of bonded labour in the tribal belt. The story takes place in Palamu, the place well known for Naxal insurgency. This is the place where tribal people are thrust into bonded labor initially by giving them meager loans to meet their unexpected expenses. Once loaned, the amount is

multiplied by the lenders into hundreds of times by way of interest making innocent tribal people Kamias( bonded laborers) for their and their children's life time. It sometimes runs into a number of generations.

In this story, Monawar Singh is a virtual owner of Negatia tribe people, a virtual god to them. Kamias habitually address him as god while talking with him. Ganori Ganatia, Dauloti's father has taken a loan of 300 rupees which amount has now turned into forty thousand strong. So there is no escape for him and his daughter in their life time. They are now his Kamiyas, the bonded slaves. What's more, Negatia has become a crook, due to excessive load handling work extracted from him by beating him blue. His value is less than a cart. Ganori himself says this to his wife. But Bono is different. He belongs to their tribe but is psychologically too strong to be tamed. He revolts and frees himself. Says Ganori,

He came. Listen , if there is a real human being in Seora, it is Bano. We are all animals. It is good that the master beat me and made me crook. What should he do with an animal but beat it? Bono is human and we are all animals. This is the thing.

Permananda offers to pay up Ganori's loan of 300 rupees and tricks the father to believe that he is doing so to marry his 14 year daughter although unbelievable to the him and his people as Permanand is a Brahmin. In fact, he is running a brothel in the city and earning thousands of rupees a month out of the sex trade. Along with women like Somni and Reoti, the previous victims of Permanand's greed to earn more money by using them as assets, Dauloti is also put by him in the sex trade. In a matter of few years she is reduced to a skeleton and what is worse she happens to contract VD and ends up dying while walking back to her village after being looted of her money by miscreants and on being refused to be treated by a local hospital.

Mahasweta Devi calls her bountiful because she sacrifices her whole life by paying with the cost of her life in captivity as a whore to free her father from the loan, by earning for her illegal keeper a lot of money by the use of her body, by giving money out of her hard savings to her activist friend who is trying to free her, and by keeping money with her to be looted by the sweeper in the hospital. She even makes her one particular client for over two years happy serving him her best. She falls down and instantly dies with blood from her mouth smearing the tricolor flag spread by Mohan, an activist, on the ground to be readied for unfurling as it was 15<sup>th</sup> of August that day. The story ends with the following words:

Today , on the fifteenth of August, Douloti has left no room at all in the India of people like Mohan Srivastava for planting the standard of the Independence flag. What will Mohan do now? Douloti is all over India.

The third and longer story, *Pterodactyl* , *Puran Sahay and Pirtha* set in the tribal society of Pirtha falling in Madhya Pradesh, is built around the prevalent myth of an evil spirit appearing in the form of death of a prehistoric bird named Pterodactyl. According to this myth the bird's death brings about death through draught, disease and destruction. The sighting of the ancient bird in the area has set in gloom and deaths by starvation have started occurring. What is more, the tragedy that has befallen Pirtha has come just short after the Bhopal Gas tragedy which has taken thousands of lives in immediate death toll and many more to come from lifelong disability and terminal disease spread as a result of poisonous gas leak. It was believed that the ancient bird was the discontented soul of their forefathers. But the government is still not fully aware of the fact of famine due to draught in those parts. Maybe the bird was mythical but the tragedy that befell these poor people was not a fantasy. It stood as dark reality, a naked

fact. Puran is journalist and is drafted to report on this uncanny event to the city newspaper whether such a bird exists or not, has it died or not and what has actually happened over there in the community and the area it inhabits. To government the belief of the community about this mysterious bird is enough to turn the mainstream against them. Although a boy tells him about the death of such a bird but he is not the one to report that because he finds no truth in it. Puran is a committed progressive journalist and reports about the fissures and mismanagement in the system of distribution and application of funds aimed at helping the community in distress. He is convinced that even if Pterodactyl is no real bird and his supposed death is also not real but the belief carries weight in so far as the mainstream media has lost touch with the abject reality of poverty, disease, famine, bonded labor, sexual exploitation of women, and much more that ails the system.

All the above narratives speak of much that is wanting with the system at every level. Mahasweta uses the 'language like a weapon', says a journalist interviewing her. She has done a real lot by bringing graphic details of tragic life of tribal people residing in different parts of India to the attention of outside people. Such field images of tribal peoples' abject condition and pathetic existence have nowhere been so painstakingly woven into the narratives by any other writer. As she says in one of her interviews 'Independence has failed' in the case of all these marginalized tribal people. Her engagement in integrating them with the mainstream is total.

But if we try to evaluate these three stories as narratives, these appear to suffer from the canons of realistic literary fiction. It would be quite obvious that *Pterodactyl*, *Puran Sahay and Pirtha* is not a work of creative fiction in the true sense. It is history, fantasy, mystery, myth, journalism, tribal culture, magic realism, dissertation all rolled into one. Similarly *Douloti The Bountiful* contains songlike passages which mar the fictional effect. Moreover, making Doulati

end her life on the tricolor, on 15<sup>th</sup> of August makes the ending contrived. *The Hunt* too has weak narrative structure. It seems more like an allegory than a literary short story. It does not seem plausible that a woman who has murdered a young man can dance and safely de-camp with her lover. Perhaps, for Mahasweta Devi, canons of literature are not as sacrosanct as the message she wants to convey and bring strongly home. For that, she foregrounds the message to bear the desired fruit, early and quick. For her the message is the form.

## Book Review

*Light of the Universe: Essays on Hindustani Film Music*

By Ashraf Aziz

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**Swaraj Raj**

It was in the late sixties and early seventies of the twentieth century when the transistor radio revolution took the Indian film music to most homes in India. This horizontal democratic spread of the cine-music space occurred in an era of heady dreams of what appeared to be just-around-the-corner socialist revolution, nationalistic fervour spurred by the two Indo-Pak wars in 1965 and 1971, and – for me – coupled with all this, a period of stirring of adolescent romantic dreams even in a staid, not-so-happening city of Patiala. This was also the period during which my mind, fed up with the sketchy tidbits of information driven down our throats by our geography, history and civics teachers in school, drifted away from all scholastic concerns and sought refuge in the fantasy world opened up by the film music. Songs of *Pyasa* (*yeh duniya agar mil bhi jaye to kya hai*), *Phir Subah Hogi* (*woh subah kabhi to ayegi*), *Door Gagan Ki Chhaon Mein* (*aa chal ke tujhe maen leke chaloon*), *Jagte Raho* (*jaago Mohan Pyare*), *Mahal* (*ayega aane wala*) and many others which spoke of love and revolution were igniting the imagination of many starry-eyed youngsters like me. Listening to such songs, poring sedulously over the world they disclosed with all their gentle but explosive power, and memorizing them, these had become my major obsessions and that of many friends of mine. Film songs, Urdu couplets and verses picked up from here and there were scribbled all over our college note-books.

We remained glued to film music based radio programmes such as Tameel-e-Irshad, Awaz de Kahan Hai, Bhooli Bisri Yadein and Binaca Geet Mala, which was later rechristened as Cibaca Geet Mala.

To me film music was not only a raconteur of the collective dreams of a nation, a unifying, uniting force across all boundaries and barriers, exemplified by the famous *Baiju Bawra* bhajan *man tarpat Hari darshan ko aaj*, a Hindu devotional song sung by Mohammad Rafi, composed by Naushad and penned by Shakil Badayuni, it also kindled dreams which appeared eminently achievable, dreams which were an exhilarating mixture of zeal for change, desire and patriotism. If Noor Jahan sang of pangs of love and separation, the innocence of Lata's voice was disarming; it was the erotic twang of Asha Bhonsle propelled to venture into forbidden territories by the robust folksy music of O. P. Nayyar which aroused fantasies of a distinctly libidinal nature. If Platonic Lata was all ethereally gossamer, Asha was corporeal and sensuous. The heavily-accented voice of Malika Pukhraj from Pakistan was in a different league altogether; she was a playful, intensely melodious Amazon who had the courage to celebrate her youth – *abhi to maen jawan hoon*. Among the male voices Rafi, Mukesh, Talat Mahmood, Hemant Kumar, and Kishore were the favoured ones.

In those days music recording and playing devices such as tape recorders and record players were quite rare and beyond the reach of most music lovers from the lower middle class. We had our radios and transistors to whet and satisfy our hunger for music. Film songs, even of the new, yet-to-be released films, were available in the form of printed pamphlets costing one anna each. These could be purchased from book shops and also from hawkers who sold cheap sweets such as orange candies and *churan* – a kind of sharp, tangy and spicy powder we enjoyed licking and which could also be sprinkled on fruits as a seasoning.

I would purchase these one anna pamphlets and spend many

an hour reading and memorizing the lyrics of film songs. Initially film music drove me to watch films. However, because of shoddy picturization, watching the film songs was quite a disappointment on many occasions. Reading a song or listening to it involved picturing it in the mind's eye. It gave wings to the imagination for participating in the life of the song, the way I liked. And then a time came when I started preferring listening to film music rather than watching it on the screen. The visual extravaganza became secondary, and film songs, primary. Film music was no more a mere adjunct or filler. I started believing that the film's visual narrative should not only bear out but also be woven around the songs.

Each music director had a distinct style of his own. One could tell Khayyam, Ravi, Anil Biswas, Khemchand Prakash, Madan Mohan, S. D. Burman and others apart from each other just by listening to the refrain. However, I marvelled the most at the personality of the lyricist, the singer and the music director. We could get to read a lot about cine stars from the gossip columns of glitzy film magazines but they provided very little information about music directors and playback singers. There were some stories about the rivalry between Lata and Asha, about the tempestuous love affairs of Noor Jahan, and about how K. L. Saigal drank himself to death. Beyond this, we were left with our own imagination to account for lyricist Shailendra's preoccupation with loss and death, the waning of Sahir's revolutionary spirit which seemed to sound the death knell of all dreams for an egalitarian society, and the lugubrious tone of Mukesh's doleful numbers. There was hardly any serious academic discussion of film music. Rather people like Satyajit Ray berated the Bollywood musicals for meaningless song and dance sequences.

It is, as if, Ashraf Aziz's unputdownable text *Light of the Universe: Essays on Hindustani Film Music*, published first in 2003 and revised later in 2012 comes to fill this gap. The author, a teacher of human anatomy in Howard University, ventures into musicology

and undertakes a socio-historical cartography of the Indian film music starting with the earliest talkies up to A. R. Rahman's compositions which have a truly global appeal. Considering film music to be popular music, Aziz takes a view which is quite the opposite of what the Frankfurt school believed about popular culture. Unlike Adorno and Horkheimer who considered popular culture to be a product of the nefarious culture industry which transforms art into commodities and turns masses into consumers thus securing the continuity of capitalism, Aziz takes the stand that the Indian film singers, lyricists and music directors made strong contribution to the creation of popular culture in the Indian subcontinent, a culture which is a record of the subcontinental ethos, aspirations, struggles and dreams of the common people. Whereas the Frankfurt School theorists thought of popular culture as reactionary, Aziz finds it imbued with subversive potential.

Starting with the premise that the "uniqueness of the Indian pop film lies in the fact that its visual "narrative" is there to amplify (and revivify) the songs . . . . The picture serves the song and not the other way round. The song validates the visual narrative. It can even be argued it is the song that sings the popular Hindi film" (20), the author discusses not only the socio-political aspects of the Indian film music, he also employs insights provided by psychoanalysis, media studies and by mythologists like Joseph Campbell for an in-depth analysis of the well-springs of creativity of eminent cine songsters and lyricists.

Apart from a Preface, Postscript and an Appendix, the text is divided into six chapters. The Preface begins with a quote from Satyajit Ray in which the world renowned film maker pours contempt on the Indian films and the cine goes alike: "Hindi Films? You mean the ones with a lot of singing? ... They love songs, you know. They keep going back just for the songs." However, Ashraf Aziz not only points out the falsity of Ray's facetious pronouncement, he also goes on to proclaim the centrality of the Indian film music in the life of Indians

living in India and the Indian diaspora scattered in Africa, Oceania, Europe and the United States. Plumbing his memory he tells us how he first heard a Hindi film song as a whistled tune in Muheza in East Africa in 1946 when he was barely six. Film theatres where Hindi movies would be screened came up much later. He very tellingly states:

The phenomenon to emphasize is that the Hindustani/Hindi film song preceded the film itself. When we went to see these films we really did so to hear the songs....Long before Raj Kapoor's *Awara* (1951), the Hindustani/Hindi film song was wandering everywhere.

*Avara hun  
Ya gardish men hun  
Asman ka tara hun  
Avara hun...*" (7)

*(Phoenetic spellings are by the author)*

In the first chapter "Introduction: The Long Life of Film Music" the author argues that the Indian film music is neither classical, nor folk; it is a mongrel genre that combines Indian classical, folk and even western music. Hence, constructing a hierarchy of classical, folk, pop or film music is misleading. The Indian film music is a distinct genre in its own right and hence it cannot be judged by employing extraneous standards. He avers that "based on the longevity, retelling of old Indian myths, mass appeal, and principles based on traditional aesthetic theories, it can be argued that the Bombay musical constitutes the national cinema of India" (27). Assuming, and rightly so, that a nation's popular culture is always a reflection of the aspirations, dreams and disappointments of people, the author emphasizes that the destiny of the Indian nation is so intertwined with the changing themes and forms of the Indian cinema that no "discussion of Indian culture and democracy is feasible in entirety without a

discussion of the popular film and the principal ingredient which makes it popular – its songs" (28).

To me, Noor Jahan's songs symbolize Keats's insight that "in the very temple of Delight/Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine". Her haunting melodies invoke mixed feelings of pain and joy. For most of us born after India's independence, she is a Pakistani artist but in the next chapter "Noor Jahan: Portrait of a Female Indo-Pakistani Artist", Aziz argues that this definition, though technically correct "attenuates her revolutionary contributions to the growth of the popular arts throughout the Indian subcontinent (including Sri Lanka), and the application of these for national awakening (41)." Noor Jahan was a witness to and also contributed to India's freedom through her songs. She was a witness to the birth pangs of a free nation and the wages that had to be paid for freedom. In carefully analyzing Noor Jahan's songs, the author is able to bring out how these songs bear testimony to the changing fortunes of the Indian subcontinent.

Without using the arcane jargon of literary theory, Aziz very subtly brings in the idea that Noor Jahan's songs, in particular the all-female qawwali from the film *Zeenat – ahein na bharin, shikve na kiye, kuchh bhi na zuban se kaam liya* she sang with Zohrabai Ambalewali, Rajkumari and Kalyani – bring her to the forefront of protest against male domination: "The qawwali – the traditional domain just of male singers – became a weapon of female protest under Noor Jahan's leadership. She reversed the direction of the qawwali – the instrument of male domination and expression – and pointed it at men. The medium and the message became one" (55). In a scathing comment on the persistence of hegemonic patriarchal ideologies, the author says:

It is odd that this qawwali is not featured amongst Indian patriotic songs. But then again, the compilers of Indian patriotic songs are men – who seeing their own oppressive selves in it – would not wish to

promote it. What is not realized is that this song protests colonial oppression in general as well. The exclusion of the Zeenat qawwali from the canon of Indian patriotic music indicates the continued discrimination against women in South Asia. It is a deliberate effort to erase their role in the struggle for Independence. (55)

The next Chapter titled “Lyrical Griefwork: The Genius of Sajjad Hussain” is a brief one and it dwells mainly on the composer Sajjad Hussain’s art, about which the author says: “Sajjad establishes a democracy of words and instrumental music. He wraps the instrumental music around the lyrics such that the two meld into a mesmerizing continuum” (70). Citing examples from Sajjad’s compositions, the author suggests that the composer’s minimalist music aimed at transcending the “world of common-sense and connect with the spiritual world” (74).

Shailendra’s verses, with their curious imbrication of life, death, joy and sorrow haunt Indian film music lovers even today. His songs from the film *Guide – aaj phir jeene ki tamanna hai/aaj phir marne ka irada hai* and *din dhal jaye hai raat na jaye* – set to lilting music by S. D. Burman, *chal ri sajni ab kya soche* from the film *Bombai Ka Babu*, *awara hoon* from *Awara* intrigue us with their obsession with death and dying, impermanence, alienation and the inability of love to mitigate human suffering and existential angst. Aziz tries to unravel the causes of Shailendra’s preoccupation with death and grief in the chapter “Shailendra: The Lyrical Romance of Suicide” – the longest and psychologically the most engaging chapter in the book. According to the author, Shailendra, who was a “meticulous cartographer of life’s edges” (110), was attracted to the “cinema because it is essentially a visual record of dying” (106). Psychologically, a deeply wounded man, Shailendra’s sensibility was defined by his “anxiety of day and dread of night” (101) and he “contrived to

infect his happiest songs with inexorable melancholy, even menace” (84). Shailendra had very limited vocabulary but with that only he was able to create songs which were “transient bursts of lyrical splendour” (85). Shailendra’s songs anticipate his suicide. The man who objected to and dreaded life’s mutability, ironically enough, gained a measure of immortality through his songs preoccupied with death and dying. The author muses, rather philosophically, if there is merit in dwelling on the shadowy edges of life? And the answer is in the affirmative: “By juxtaposing life and death he made us aware of how precious life is; life is precious precisely because it is vulnerable” (124).

Vijay Bhatt directed *Baiju Bawra* (1952) featuring Meena Kumari, Bharat Bhushan and Surendra in the lead roles is a musical about music. Its songs evoke very strong nostalgia for the days of yore. Aziz devotes one full chapter to this film. However, his is a different take on this film. The movie, as the author argues, arrived in the “midst of a furious debate regarding cultural value of Indian cinema” (128). *Baiju Bawra*, in fact, is an interesting reflection on the socio-political role of music in India. Not only does the author define the contours of this debate, he tries to interpret the film from a socio-political perspective also as he finds that despite its “dowdy *mise en scene*” it exhorts the masses through its soundtrack to “resist tyranny and its associated authoritarianism; this film offers its poetry and songs as instruments for resisting injustice and repression” (131). Aziz’s perceptive reading of the film’s songs reveals that despite the music conveying a progressive message, its “overall stance regarding gender equality is negative” (142).

Aziz makes some very interesting observations on the female voice in Indian film songs. His main argument in the last chapter “The Female Voice in Hindustani Classical Music” is that in the pre-independence days, female singers were more assertive but a change towards a less assertive singing occurred following the independence

in 1947: “Ironically, following independence, women in some senses suffered a loss in socio-political status. Although they became independent, equal citizens, they were expected in many ways to now become homebound. This is reflected in the Hindustani film song” (163).

The book ends with the Postscript triumphantly declaring the arrival of the Hindi film music on the global scene in the form of A. R. Rahman’s music. For the author, the journey of the Hindustani film music from the first whistled tune he had heard in Muheza when he was a child, up to Rahman’s *Jai Ho* reverberating over the White House grounds on November 24, 2009, has been very remarkable indeed.

It is not possible to write about the whole of Hindi film music in a single book. There are some serious omissions. For example films like *Mother India* get a short shrift and some very important films like *Do Bigha Zamin*, *Jagte Raho*, *Do Aankhe Barah Haath* and V. Shantaram’s musicals do not find even a mention. However, the problem with this kind of project is how to define and delimit the area of study. Whatever the author chooses to write about, he engages passionately with his subject yielding new insights and in the process revealing how rewarding such engagement with popular culture can be. For lovers of literature and popular culture, it is an engagingly indispensable work.

*The Blind Man’s Garden*

By Nadeem Aslam

Random House India: Noida, 2013

Pages 416

**Sumandeep Kaur**

In his poetic and symbolically rich novel *The Blind Man’s Garden*, Nadeem Aslam explores the aftermath of the post 9/11 through the lives of ordinary people in the war-torn region of Afghanistan and the bordering Pakistan. Britain-based Pakistani writer of fiction, Nadeem Aslam was born in 1966 in Gujranwala, Pakistan. He migrated to England in his teens when his family sought political asylum there after being exiled by the Zia-ul- Haq regime. His writings include the novels *Season of the Rainbirds* (1994), *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), *The Wasted Vigil* (2009) and *The Blind Man’s Garden* (2013), and a novella *Leila in the Wilderness* (2010).

Like his earlier novel *The Wasted Vigil* (2009), in which he revisits the cruelty and bigotry that tore the region apart, while tracing also its political history from the Soviet invasion to the years of the Taliban regime, this novel— his fourth— is an attempt to deal with how the CIA-sponsored Afghan Jihad of 1980s affected Pakistan. The novel opens notably with the sentence: “History is the third parent” (5). The narrative is set in a fictional town, Heer, in Northern Pakistan, but parts of the novel are also located in the chaos of Afghanistan. In the wake of 9/11, after the American bombing of Afghanistan, hundreds of young men, volunteering to help the victims of war, travelled from Pakistan to Afghanistan as Jihadi fighters. They were recruited through, or lured by, the religious seminaries. This serves as the larger backdrop of the novel.

The novel is divided into four sections; each section offers a critique of the situation, the treatment and the self-perceptions of the Muslim community in contemporary South Asia, particularly Pakistan and Afghanistan. Engaging with loss and exile, love and hate, gender and religion, tradition and modernity, separation and remorse, war and brotherhood, the novel provides a space for acknowledging diversity, complexity and difference as constituent elements of the community as a lived being. The first section of the novel “Footnotes to Defeat” opens with Elderly Rohan, a blind man, delving into memories of his son and wife. He had founded an Islamic school, called Ardent Spirit, with the assistance of his wife Sofia. After her death, he was forced out as the school came under the administration of Ahmed, a hard-core fundamentalist, and was turned into a training centre for the Jihadists. However, Rohan has continued to live in the house that is the part of the school premises.

Without his knowledge, his two sons, Jeo and Mikal, who are in love with a girl Naheed, now wife of Jeo, leave Pakistan to go to Afghanistan with the intention of helping those injured during the first weeks of American invasion. The ‘warriors’ between the ages of sixteen and twenty five have come from all parts of Pakistan and the wider Muslim world, Egypt, Algeria, Saudi Arab, and Yemen. The two of them are easily entrapped in the fight, traded and sold between factions and sub-factions of Jihadists and warlords. During a fight with the Americans, Jeo is killed and Mikal is left alone in the wilderness of war and destruction.

The family Mikal and Jeo leave behind now lives in a region controlled by the Islamic fundamentalists who tolerate no dissent. Holding a blood-drenched heron in her hand, Naheed receives the news of the death of her husband Jeo and her life falls apart. The young widow, carrying the child of Jeo, is now vulnerable to the threat of Sharif Sharif’s ‘inappropriate conduct’. Her mother is determined to marry her off as she is traumatised by her own disturbing

past as a widow. On the other hand are the memories of and the wait for Mikal— she waits for him in the blind man’s garden, absolutely sure that he will return.

Unbearable pain of the death of his son Jeo and the disappearance of Mikal force Rohan to go to Peshawar and later to Afghanistan with the bird pardoner. His son Jeo is also trapped in the same ‘snare’. The reader is thrown into the mayhem and chaos of war, and Aslam uses the opportunity to bring out the brutality and cruelty of war. He remarks: “The opposite of war is not peace but civilization, and civilization is purchased with the violence and cold-blooded murder. With war” (127). It is here that a pulverised ruby is crushed and poured into Rohan’s eyes. And Rohan, whose ‘blind’ devotion for Islam forced him to act harshly against his wife on her death bed, turns into a completely blind man.

In the second section “The Blind Man’s Garden”, Mikal tries to get back to Pakistan and to be with Naheed whom he loves. In an effort to escape the warlords, he comes to know that he has been sold to the Americans for five thousand dollars but his fate is yet undecided. He is kept in a sleep-deprivation cell flooded with blinding light.

Here Aslam traces the history of contact between the West and the East and takes a dig at people like Major Kyra, the present owner of Ardent Spirit, who, in an effort to establish ‘pure’ Islamic rule, wants to eliminate all other communities and even plans to lay siege to the Christian school with the help of his students, though he fails in the attempt. He wants the birth of a new world, and will keep on killing until that birth happens. Aslam remarks: “We have been witnessing a clash between an incomplete understanding of the East and an incomplete understanding of the West”. He points beyond Orientalism and Occidentalism; towards a better understanding of both East and West. War is thus not seen through the single perspective, and this is strength of the novel.

In an effort to escape, Mikal kills two American soldiers and is rescued and sheltered by Akbar on his family's property where they manufacture the weapons and hide Al-Qaida leaders. Ultimately, he returns home to meet Naheed and other family members. But Naheed's wait does not end here as he has to go again to help Akbar's sister.

In its third section "Equal Sons", the novel explores the philosophical and existential implications of forming a community of the two. This is done in terms of Mikal's relations with Akbar and his eagerness to help his sister Salomi, and his relations with the American soldier. He feels an unresisting bonding with the American soldier and weeps before him and unfolds the pains and bruises of his life even though he is not able to communicate with him. Like Mikal, the American soldier is also a victim of war, wounded by the sorrow of his brother's death. Ultimately, Mikal saves him from the local warlords.

The novel ends with a short section "Isaiah" on a note of hope as Naheed is still waiting for Mikal to return. The last lines of the novel are very suggestive: "She moves towards him and her eyes are full of a still intensity— as though aware of unnamed, unseen forces in the world and attempting in her mind to name and see them." (416)

Aslam writes from a well-defined political stance. It is his political vision that inspires him to engage so intensely and critically with contemporary politics and with history. Aslam's prose is loaded with allusions to history, literature, religion, science and nature. He widely quotes writers like Candia McWilliam, E.M. Cioran, Salman Rushdie, Walt Whitman, Ahmed Syed, Simone Weil, W. B. Yeats, Timothy Philips and Chris Mackey. Moths, tulips, parakeets, books, djinns, and the images of the Buddha are the recurring motifs in his novels. At the same time, Aslam confronts the ugliness of war directly and gives vivid details of the evil through the mutilated human body. For example, when Naheed looks at Jeo's dead body, he writes:

"The stomach has been cut open in diagonal strokes, deep enough to slice through the intestines... she touches the mouth which is a purple blotch..." (77) The exquisite prose consistently makes the reader imagine not only personal loss but also the unimaginable violence and ugliness of the war. Beauty and pain are thus intimately entwined in this remarkable novel.

## Bhim Singh Dahia

### *Not by way of an obituary*

#### On Khushwant Singh

Khushwant Singh submitted to none in life,  
However mighty in uniform or in civil outfit.  
Secular through and through he remained,  
Never intimidated by any charge of sacrilege,  
Nor afraid of calling the bluff of false gods.  
He had the courage to endorse the Emergency;  
But also bold enough to return the state awards,  
when it came to opposing the Operation Blue Star,  
An Indian to the innermost core of his heart,  
He loved all religions and communities alike.  
Following the modes of realism and naturalism,  
As a narrator he considered nothing forbidden.  
He wrote frankly about all that he knew of ,  
And he laid bare fearlessly all that he felt.

Who would see with his eyes now  
The eyes he has left behind of will?  
Who would see India as he used to see,  
With eyes wide-open to varied scenes,  
Luxurious life of leisure for the lucky few,  
But - full of lament for the toiling millions?  
Khushwant Singh left for the unknown land,  
In his well known pace marked by poise;  
Beginning his day with warm malt-whisky,  
Ending the day with the same elixir;  
Seven o' clock he thought was lucky,  
For such an activity that revitalized  
His aging body and mind, for producing  
His special brand of the cocktail fiction.

## Contributors

**Ajmer Rode** has written and directed over ten plays. He has published poetry and translation in Punjabi and English. His book *Leela*, co-authored with Navtej Bharati, is regarded as an important milestone in Punjabi poetry.

**Anuradha Ghosh**, a literary and film critic, teaches English at Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi.

**Ashutosh Dubey** is a Hindi poet, with three poetry collections: *Chor Darwaze Se*, *Yakeen Ki Aietein*, and *Asambhav Saransh*. His poetry has been translated into English and German as well many Indian languages. He is the recipient of Makhan Lal Chaturvedi Award for Poetry in Hindi.

**Ben Antao** is Canadian-Goan novelist, poet and journalist. His books include *Images of the USA and Goa - A Rediscovery*.

**Bhim Singh Dahia**, former Vice Chancellor of Kurukshetra University and Professor of English is Chief Editor of the *Journal of Drama Studies*.

**Cyril Dabydeen** was born in Guyana. He arrived in Canada in 1970. In 2007 he won the Guyana Prize for Fiction. A regular book critic for *World Literature Today*, he currently teaches in the University of Ottawa. His poems have been anthologized in the Oxford, Penguin and the *Heinemann Book of Caribbean Verse*.

**Deepti Zutshi**, a PhD scholar with the Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, has recently submitted her titled *Between Violence and Silence: A Study of Performance Aesthetics in Manipur*. She currently lives in Toronto.

**Devneet** was fast emerging as a very promising Punjabi poet when cancer of the brain cut short his life. He passed away recently.

**Gagan Gill** has published four books of poetry and one book of prose. She was literary editor with *The Times of India* and *Sunday Observer*. She has been also a visiting writer at the International Writing Program in Iowa (1990) and a Nieman Fellow for journalism at

Harvard University in 1992-93. Her poetry is widely anthologized in English. She has received the Bharat Bhushan Agrawal Award (1984), the Sanskriti Puruskar (1988) and the Kedar Samman (2000).

**Gurdev Chauhan** is a poet, translator and reviewer. He is the editor, with Rajesh Sharma, of *SAE*.

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**Harjeet Singh Gill**, a world-renowned anthropological linguist and semiologist, is Professor Emeritus, Jawaharlal Nehru University.

**Jaswant Deed** is a Punjabi poet and a winner of Sahitya Akademi Award. After his retirement as Joint Director, Doordarshan, Shimla, he has made Canada his permanent home.

**John Brandi** is a poet and painter. He is one of living finest writers of haiku. He has also been in the forefront in the struggle for land rights and civil liberties for the Andean farmers, a protestor against the American war in Vietnam and the founder of Tooth of Time Books which published the first books of aspiring poets. He is a recipient of National Endowment for the Arts Poetry Fellowship and other awards. Currently he is teaching creative writing in New Mexico (USA).

**John Siddique** is the author of *Full Blood*, *Recital – An Almanac*, *Poems from a Northern Soul*, and *The Prize*. He is the co-author of the story/memoir *Four Fathers*. He has contributed poems, stories, essays and articles to many publications, including *Granta*, *The Guardian*, *Poetry Review*, and *The Rialto*. He lives in UK.

**Kamleshwar** (1932-2007) was an eminent Hindi writer known of short stories, novels, and screenplays. He introduced a new sensibility in Hindi literature and launched the *Nayi Kahani* movement in post-independence India. He was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award for his novel *Kitne Pakistan*. He is also the recipient of Padma Bhushan.

**Lakhvinder Singh Bedi** is Head of the Department of English at

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**Manglesh Dabral**, a prominent Hindi poet, has published several collections of poetry, including *Pahar Par Lalten*, *Ghar Ka Rasta*, *Ham Jo Dekhte Hain*, *Awaz Bhi Ek Jagah Hai* and *Nae Yug Men Shatru*; two books of prose, *Lekhak Ki Roti* and *Kavi Ka Akelapan*; and a travel diary, *Ek Bar Iowa*. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2000 for *Ham Jo Dekhte Hain*. Dabral's poetry has been translated into all major Indian languages and also into a number of foreign languages.

**Mudasir Altaf Bhat** is a research scholar with the Department of English, Punjabi University, Patiala.

**Nida Sajid** is a scholar of South Asian Studies with a PhD in Comparative Literature from Western University, Canada. She has taught Hindi language and literature at Rutgers University, USA and University of Toronto, Canada. Her areas of research include Postcolonial Theory, South Asian Literatures, and Translation Studies.

**Navtej Bharati** writes poetry and prose in Punjabi and English. He was awarded the Best Overseas Author Award by the Punjab Languages Department in 2004. He lives in London, ON, Canada.

**Neeru Aseem** writes poetry in Hindi, Punjabi and English. She has published two books of poetry in Punjabi, *Bhurian Keedian* and *Sifar*. She lives in Brampton, ON, Canada.

**Priscila Uppal**, a well-known Canadian poet, playwright and writer of fiction, is a Professor with York University. Her work has been recognised internationally and translated into Croatian, Dutch, French, Greek, Italian, Korean and Latvian. *Six Essential Questions*, her play, had its World Premiere as part of the Factory Theatre 2013-2014 season. Her memoir, *Projection: Encounters with My Runaway Mother*, has been recently published by Thomas Allen Publishers.

**Rajesh Kumar** writes short fiction and non-fiction. He is Professor and Chair of English at Nilamber-Pitamber University, Medininagar (Jharkhand).

**Rajesh Sharma** is the author of *In/disciplines: Notes on Politics*,

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**Rana Nayar**, well-known critic and translator, is Professor and former Chairman, Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh.

**Rosalia Scalia** writes fiction and non-fiction. She is currently working on a novel. She teaches creative writing and lives in Baltimore, Maryland, U.S.A.

**Sandeep Dhanoa** is a Punjabi poet, painter and radio artist. She lives in Brampton, ON, Canada.

**Sasenarine Persaud** is the author of ten books of fiction and poetry. He is the recipient of KM Hunter Foundation Award (Toronto), the Arthur Schomburg Award (New York), Canada Council Poetry Award, Ontario Arts Council Award, as well as Fellowships from the University of Miami and Boston University. His work has been published internationally, including in Canada, England, the Caribbean, India and the USA. He lives in Tampa, Florida.

**Sidharth** is a celebrated artist, with many exhibits of his work in India and abroad. His art has spiritual overtones, the influences he gathered over the years when he wandered in the Himalayas with Tibetan Buddhist monks and later learnt and practised Thangka painting at Dharamshala. Other influences on him include 'Solids' and the Madhubani painting techniques. Baramasa and the cow are some of the favourite themes of his paintings.

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**Talilula** is doing her PhD on Wawa Menu, a performance art of the Ao Nagas at Jamia Millia Islamia. She is from Nagaland.