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BOOK REVIEWS
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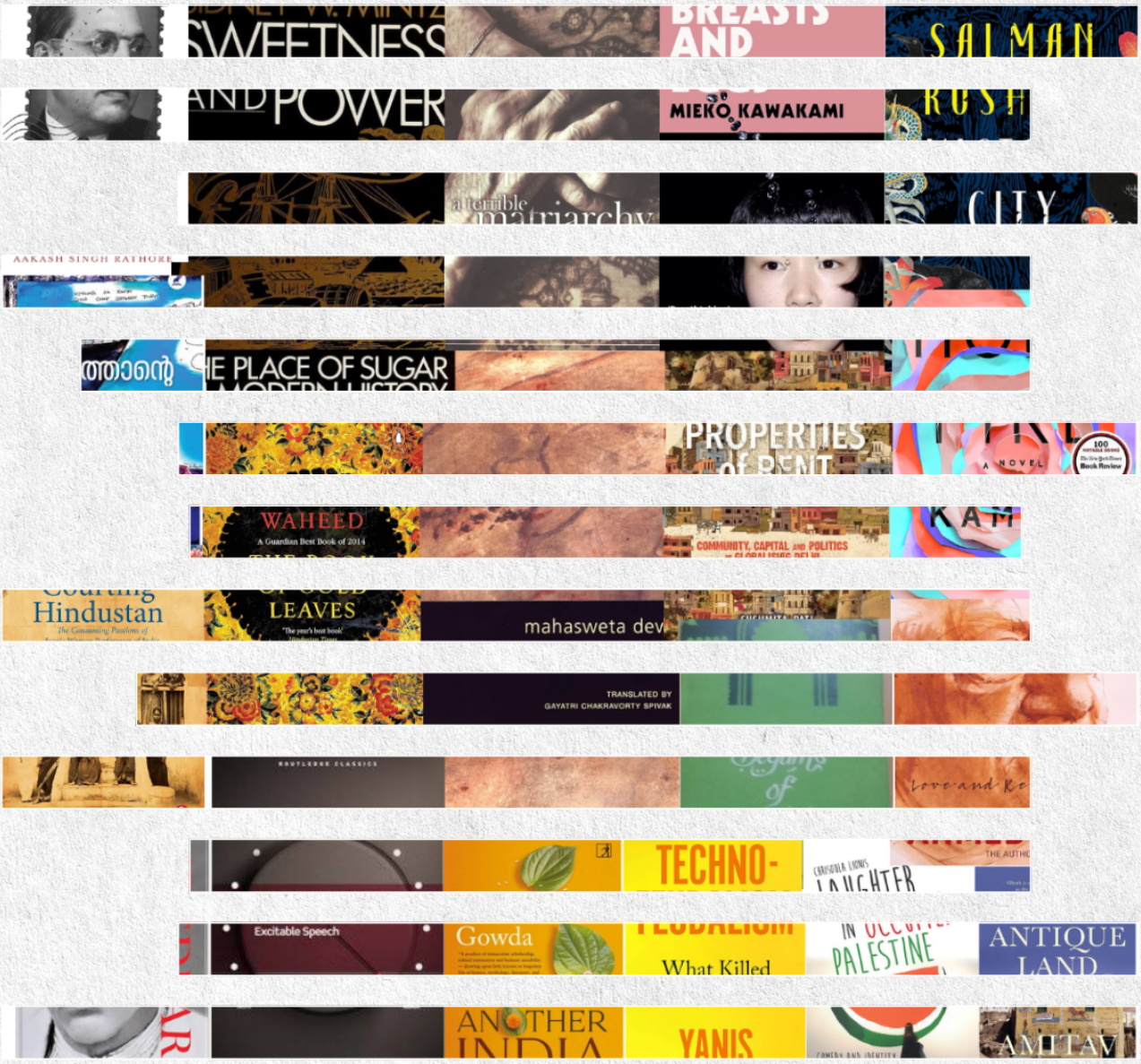

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CONTENTS

BOOK REVIEWS

Victory City by Salman Rushdie
Amir Ali *1*

Properties of Rent: Community, Capital and Politics in Globalizing Delhi by Sushmita Pati
Ishan Shahi *3*

Laughter in Occupied Palestine: Comedy and Identity in Art and Film by Chrisoula Lionis
Pausali Guha *7*

In An Antique Land by Amitav Ghosh
Vinay Rajoria *10*

Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism by Yanis Varoufakis
Ritvik Singh Sabharwal *13*

A Terrible Matriarchy by Easterine Kire
Nanuma Subba *16*

Breasts and Eggs by Mieko Kawakami, translated by Sam Bett and David Boyd
Shreyanshi Bajpai *18*

Breast Stories by Mahasweta Devi
Namrata Gogoi *22*

Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative by Judith Butler
Aditi Gupta *25*

Courting Hindustan: The Consuming Passions of Iconic Women Performers of India by Madhur Gupta
Pushpita Mitra *28*

बेगम्स ऑफ अवध , लेखिका के.एस. सांथा
Sameer Mani Tripathi *32*

Another India: Events, Memories, People by Chandan Gowda
Soni Wadhwa *34*

Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History by Sidney W. Mintz
Malvika Singh *36*

കപ്പിത്താൻ്റെ ഭാര്യ/Kappithante Bharya by Bipin Chandran
Mileena Saju *39*

The Book of Gold Leaves by Mirza Waheed
Mehnaz Abdullah *42*

Lives Lived: Life Writing

Love And Revolution: Faiz Ahmed Faiz by Ali Madeeh Hashmi
Khushbu Sharma *45*

Ambedkar's Preamble: A Secret History of the Constitution of India by Aakash Singh Rathore
Shubh Sihaniya *48*

Ambedkar: A Life by Shashi Tharoor
Tanmay Kulshrestha *51*

From TheDaak reading group

Homefire by Kamila Shamshie
Jigeesha Bhargavi *54*

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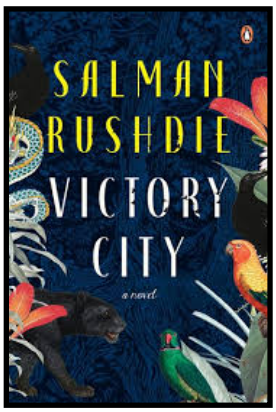
Victory City by Salman Rushdie, Penguin Random House, 2023, 342 Pages, ISBN: 9780670098460, 699 INR



AMIR ALI

My *rishta* (relationship) with Rushdie is an old one. In a word, I can describe him as my *alter ego*. As a child I remember watching with my father the Booker Awards ceremony when Salman Rushdie won the award for his 1981 book *Midnight's Children*. This would be one of my most formative literary and political memories. I was mesmerized by the title. There was an unmistakable hint of pride in my father's voice as he explained to me who Rushdie was, an Indian Muslim, who could write better English than the English.

I will never forget Rushdie being interviewed during the awards ceremony. His droopy *khwabeeda* خوابیدہ *neem-kash* نیم کش (dreamy and half-closed) eyes gave him the look of what I thought a genuine intellectual and writer should be like. It was only later that I came to know that the droopiness of his eyelids had to do with a medical condition called ptosis, which was corrected by surgical intervention. What a tragedy that Rushdie has now lost one eye in the shocking and despicable attack on him in the US in August 2022.

Until the Rushdie Affair exploded onto the international political stage with the publication of Rushdie's controversial *Satanic Verses*, I had not actually read any of Salman Rushdie's books as I wasn't old enough to read them. With the passage of time, that matter was resolved. I picked up *Midnight's Children* and right from the very first page, the lines from Rushdie jumped off the page, punched me in the nose and made my head dance with delight. My appetite for Rushdie was whetted. In my early years at JNU someone gave me Rushdie's *Shame* to read. I read it almost ravenously but could not find the joy of *Midnight's Children*. I went on to read *The Satanic Verses*.

I suppose that the trilogy that is constituted by *Midnight's Children* (on independent India), *Shame* (on Pakistan) and *The Satanic Verses* (on Thatcherite Britain) exhausted me. When Rushdie published *The Moor's Last Sigh*, I read it a little indifferently, yet at the same time I was fascinated by the evocatively derived title which comes from the Spanish *El Ultimo Suspiro del Moro*, the name of a rock just outside the famous Alhambra Palace in Andalusia, Spain. By the time Rushdie published *The Enchantress of Florence,* my immersion into teaching as a newly appointed faculty member at the Centre for Political Studies, JNU prevented too many divergences in my reading. Rushdie and I kept growing apart. Yet I cannot say that I forgot Rushdie. It is best captured in that wonderful line from the Urdu poet Firaq Gorakhpuri: *Ek muddat se teri yaad bhi ayi na hamein, aur hum bhool gaye hon aysa bhi nahin* (It seems like an eternity since I last remembered you/But to say that I haven't thought of you would be a lie).

When I wrote my first book, *South asian Islam and British Multiculturalism*, a substantial chapter on 'Revisiting Rushdie' meant that I read, multiple times, *The Satanic Verses,* grimacing each time at the tastelessness of Rushdie's criticism. Around this time Rushdie's memoirs *Joseph Anton* came out, with the title taken from two of Rushdie's favourite writers Joseph Conrad and Anton Chekhov. I enjoyed reading Rushdie's memoirs, perturbed only by what I felt was a habit of referring to himself very often in the narcissistic third person. The funniest part of it though was when Rushdie

recounted how he was involved in a road accident as he drove with his family across Australia. The police officer was able to recognize Rushdie and said in an inimitably Australian way, that Rushdie was the guy who had that 'thing' issued against him, and as he was not quite able to recall the word fatwa, ended up calling it a 'fatso'!

And this long introduction brings me to the book that I have been asked to review which is Rushdie's latest offering, *Victory City*. I thought that Rushdie had lost his mojo, that he was now bereft of the enchanting touch of his magic realism. I was pleasantly proved wrong. I also realized that Rushdie was attacked by Hadi Matar in New York state in August 2022, very soon after he completed his book. After the attack, life-changing in its consequences, Rushdie announced in his characteristically impish manner that he was back, missing an eye. Rushdie's status as one of the greats of modern literature is securely established. There will almost inevitably be a Nobel Prize for literature announced for him in the not-too-distant future. Until then one can speculate on the contents of his acceptance speech.

Victory City is vintage Rushdie. It is a story of epic proportions as Rushdie keeps returning to the land of his creative genius, India. In *Victory City* the rise and fall of the kingdom of Vijaynagar in Southern India is recounted with that typical Rushdie-esque combining of history and myth. There is the central character of Pampa Kampana whose semi-divine status ensures a longevity of 247 years that allows her to establish the city of Bisnaga through the magical scattering and sprouting of seeds. She is witness to, partakes of and contributes to the kingdom's creation, triumphs, tribulations and travails that culminate in the ultimate demise of the empire in 1565. With this Pampa Kampana herself dies, having outlived many generations of her own lineage. The witnessing of Bisnaga's history is extensively chronicled by her in the magisterial poem *Jayaparajaya*. *Victory City* is itself an abridged version of that extensive chronicle, captured and condensed by a lesser storyteller of far humbler means, a mere 'spinner of yarns', whose identity is not revealed. The narrative and story line of *Victory City* marches along at a brisk and lively pace, capturing and arresting the attention of the reader until the very end. This tighter plot sets *Victory City* apart from other works of Rushdie where there are often multiple and parallel plots and dream sequences within dream sequences.

Victory City revels in its ability to evoke and explain the original stories of political entities, in its own case Bisnaga. These origin stories necessarily have the element of the imaginative in them, which serve the function of presenting the polity as special and convinced of the exceptionality of its imperatives. Even though the kingdom and people of Bisnaga emerge almost *ex nihilo* from its magically sprouting seeds, Pampa Kampana whispers stories into them to give them the necessary historical and mythical depth and perspective that any polity aspires for and acquires. Such imaginatively told stories also serve the function of concealing the unseemlier side that exists and taints like an original sin, every polity. One of the first acts of sovereignty for any polity then is to drape that original taint with a cover of concealment that no one can then dare approach, as hinted by the 18th century parliamentarian and political theorist Edmund Burke.

An important element of *Victory City* is the contemporaneity that it both captures and about which it wonders aloud. Bisnaga is colourfully portrayed as a cosmopolitan, tolerant and gender just polity that through the efforts of Pampa Kampana allows women to play an outsized role in a context of 14th century medievalism in which it begins. Yet threats to this openness, tolerance and cosmopolitanism are forever bubbling and brewing. *Victory City* seems to suggest that the ice on which tolerance

and cosmopolitanism gracefully skate is always wafer-thin; tenuous, temporary and threatened by forces inimical to them. Rushdie almost seems to be thinking aloud if in today's grand epochal struggle between democracy and autocracy, where battle lines have hardened, democracy's triumph can be guaranteed. The answer seems to be a sensible rejection of any naive Whig interpretation of history that in its complacent confidence views the victory of progress as underwritten and guaranteed by the forward movement of history. Rushdie seems to be hinting at the US of our times which braces itself for a bruising electoral contest in 2024 where almost inevitably the Republican Presidential candidate is likely to be Donald Trump.

Will democratic dissent in the US and for that matter many other parts of the world be drowned out by the disciplinary drum beat of autocracy? We await that historical verdict with bated breath. On a more pessimistic note, the principle of free speech today stands even more precariously perched than it was 35 years ago when the Rushdie Affair broke out. Rushdie and his supporters with their grandstanding defences of free speech have not been able to make the principle safer in the dangerous world of the early 21st century. On a further pessimistic note, the precariousness of free speech could mean that democracy may have already lost half the battle against autocracy. But no battle is finally over. Sometimes the greatest victories are those snatched from the jaws of defeat or victory follows defeat in quick historical succession. Recall the title of Pampa Kampana's epic historical account, *Jayaparajay,* meaning victory and defeat.

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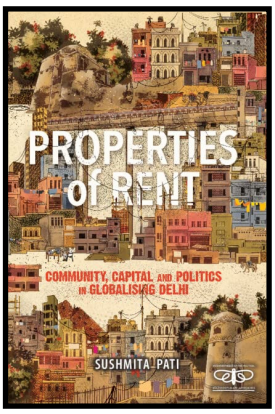
Properties of Rent: Community, Capital and Politics in Globalizing Delhi by Sushmita Pati, Cambridge University Press, 2022, 320 pages, ISBN:9781316517277, 989 INR.



ISHAN SHAHI

> What we call land is an element of nature inextricably interwoven with man's institutions. To isolate it and form a market for it was perhaps the weirdest of all the undertakings of our ancestors.
>
> —Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (1944)

Properties of Rent studies two urban villages in South Delhi-Munirka and Shahpur Jaat. Urban villages of Delhi are a product of its southward expansion, when the Delhi Development Authority Passed an order to acquire 34,070 acres of land under section 4 of the Land Acquisition Act,1894, it distinguished the village settlement area from the agricultural land of the villages based on a land settlement report of 1908-1909 which separated the two areas by a line drawn with red ink. This red line which once demarcated the taxable from non-taxable land became the legal demarcation of the rural from the urban, and resulting in the nomenclature *lal dora* villages (p.3). It goes beyond considering rent simply as a form of

accumulation and considers the emergence of specific housing properties under the impetus of rent maximization. The two villages became a part of the expanding city of Delhi in the 1950s and 60s, and their agricultural land was taken over by the DDA. The red line also signified that the building bye-laws of the DDA did not apply to these villages which led to the evolution of creative housing configuration in the two villages.

The book focuses on the role of community organizations and cooperatives as informal sources of credit for developing rental properties. The book traces the broad occupational trajectory of the landholding communities, especially the majority Jat landholders. The Jat landholders expressed the sentiment of feeling shortchanged by the compensation they received for their land in the 1950s and 60s. The book then shows how the Jats of the two villages accumulated capital across generations through jobs in the lower bureaucracy, the sale of construction goods and the transport business. Community cooperatives were one of the significant sources of credit, which allowed the landholders to develop their properties for rent. This trajectory was not shared across all the communities, especially Dalits who borrowed money for developing their properties under relatively unfavourable terms and their current living conditions are marked by precarity despite being landlords (p.174-198).

The two villages follow distinct trajectories of development determined not just by the absence of the DDA bye-laws but also by distinct connections to the globalized production chains that reached Delhi after the economic reforms of 1991. Munirka witnessed the proliferation of the one-room set, which allows maximum units in a single building. This caters to a large number of migrants from the north-eastern states, of whom 85% are Manipuris (p.152). They have been working in Delhi's burgeoning service sector economy, from jobs in the BPOs (Business Processing Outsourcing) to restaurants that have sprawled across the city. This community has also faced xenophobic attacks from their landlords, an issue that we shall touch upon later.

Properties in Shahpur Jaat were rented out to two categories of tenants—artisans working in garment factories and high-end stores of designer clothing. In the 1980s, Shahpur Jat emerged as a garment manufacturing hub and began housing many artisans, mostly Bengali Muslims from the North and South 24 Parganas (p.95). With the economic reforms, elite entrepreneurs sought to develop areas like Shahpur Jat which were away from the city's arterial roads, into markets for niche consumption (p.91). The village of Shahpur Jat became a favourable location because of the availability of cheap labour, low rents and their 'rustic rurality could be curated, packaged and sold' (p.91). This trajectory of property development has led to sky-high valuations and pushed the landowning community to further gentrify the area.

Expectedly, the relationship of the landholding communities and their tenants reflects their economic and social location. The north-eastern migrants renting properties in Munirka have been subjected to racist abuse and even sexual harassment. After the incident of the rape of a minor Manipuri girl in 2014 by the son of her landlord. The Youth Brigade Munirka an organisation devoted to fostering a sense of Jat solidarity issued emotive appeals to the resident community. The Jat centric nature of the organisation did not sit well with residents of the Jatav and Nai communities. The ambition to remain politically relevant and led YBM to expand its membership base expanding its membership base. It is now led by a Jatav and a tenant and has enlisted as an organisation by the Delhi Police which supported North-Eastern students. The YBM also campaigned for the

inclusion of women in the voting process of the RWA, a demand which was begrudgingly accepted (p.189). This shows the paradoxical position of landowning communities in urban villages with rent as the primary source of income which ensures that the landowners have to include and address the concerns of the tenants however this does not eliminate the racism and xenophobia which even takes violent forms. They feel threatened from the cultural erasure which is a consequence of being absorbed into a large city like Delhi and being surrounded by the radically different cultural norms of their tenants who outnumber them significantly.

However, rental markets also force the Jat landlords to form a common front with other communities like Jatavs and Nais in Munirka as well as address the concerns of their tenants. In the case of Shahpur Jat which has seen property values sky-rocket, presenting the area as a safe, secure, and a well-curated space is in the best interest of the landlords. The book chronicles the modernizing influence of rental markets on the landlords in great detail. The differences in the kind and speed of the changes are a function of the demands of the rental markets and the social location of the tenants.

Shahpur Jat shows a different aspect of this dynamic. While landlords compete amongst themselves to attract high net-worth commercial tenants, they also make sure that the tenants cannot form a collective front or become members of the Resident Welfare Association. Though occasionally volatile, the landlord-tenant tensions in Shahpur Jat pale in comparison to the situation in Munirka. This is helped by the extremely high rents that landlords here can extract from their tenants. The aesthetic changes catering to the tenants raise both the rent and value of the properties in the village. This has led both individual landlords and extended families organised through the kinship group of the *Kunbas* which are spatially organised act like joint stock companies to improve whole portions of their village which cannot be done by a single family (p.124).

Properties of Rent is an important contribution to the literature on cities in the Global South as it highlights the relationship between rent and built structure. The book studies the networks through which the value and rental spaces are produced in globalizing Delhi. It compliments the literature on world-class spaces and cities, focuses on the politics and networks of finance and expert bodies which built world-class form of cities in the global south (Ghertner 2015a; Roy and Ong 2011). While the one-room set is a defining character of Munirka, its emergence is also a consequence of the burgeoning service sector economy. The adda and the commercial properties of Shahpur Jat are parts of another circuit of Delhi's economy which produces distinct spaces and very high valuation. In this way, the book contributes to the literature on the production of spaces through informal practices (Palat Narayanan and Véron 2018). The simultaneous examination of the circuits producing spaces and value makes *Properties of Rent* a necessary work for those interested in the relationship of rental accumulation and built structure in the India where the planning regime is an informalised entity(Roy 2009).

Like all important works, *Properties of Rent* also suffers from some limitations. It describes the movement of values across landscapes as mysterious (p.91). But then it demonstrates how migrant flows into the city and their position in the global circuits of production either as BPO workers or as craftsmen working in emerging boutique fashion stores shows how value moves across space and time dispelling any notion of mystery, especially when read with the literature of spatial transformation that accompanies financialized economic growth (Harvey 1991; Ghertner 2015; Roy and Ong 2011; Palat Narayanan and Véron 2018).

Without this hesitation in drawing conclusions from its empirical material, the insights of the book would have come forth with greater clarity.

The book also characterises the improvements made to their properties and the area by the landlords of Shahpur Jat as 'gentrification'. But if we are to define gentrification not just as improvement to properties seeking higher rents but also as the displacement of poorer existing residents then we have to ask some questions about this characterization (Ghertner 2015b). The presence of garment factory workers in the Shahpur Jat attracts the high-end commercial tenants who would lose out if the factory workers were to be removed. It is also interesting to ponder why it is that the gentrification of Shahpur Jat is happening only to the benefit of the landowners and not at their cost. After all, the tenants are significantly richer than them and should have been able to buy these lands and displace the original landowners, had the land not been in the confines of lal dora villages. This shows the limitation of the lens of gentrification, understood as market induced displacement associated with rising rent accompanied by aesthetic improvements in built structure in the context of the different forms of property regimes and informality that characterizes the land market in the global south (Ghertner 2015b).

Despite the occasional misses, *Properties of Rent* is an important and ambitious monograph. Empirically rich, it is a fertile ground for further theoretical exploration of the relationship between circuits of accumulation and built form of cities. Across its breadth we can trace how agricultural villages whose lands were acquired by the government evolved as they were surrounded by a globalizing city. This allows us to see how a natural product like land gets commodified and transformed to cater to the needs of migrant workers and rich elites of Delhi through specific housing innovations like the one-room set and the adda.

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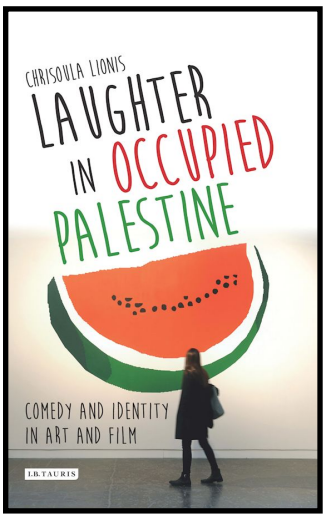
Laughter in Occupied Palestine: Comedy and Identity in Art and Film by Chrisoula Lionis, I.B. Tauris, 256 pages, ISBN-13: 978-1784532888, $40.95



PAUSALI GUHA

Amidst the stark realities of the Israeli occupation, where concrete divides carve through lives and checkpoints become grim monuments to dispossession, Chrisoula Lionis' *Laughter in Occupied Palestine* presents a compelling exploration of a seemingly incongruous phenomenon: the subversive power of humour. This is not a book about punchlines or witty repartee, but rather a daring expedition into the heart of a people who have chosen laughter as a shield against the relentless onslaught oppression and exile.

Lionis traces the correlation between humour and identity in Palestine by applying theoretical insights from the field of 'humorology'. She contends that despite the challenging circumstances faced by Palestinians, modern Palestinian art and film exhibit a notable inclination towards humour. This apparent contradiction is investigated in the text by examining the evolution of Palestinian artistic expression and cinema in reaction to pivotal historical junctures, contending that this artistic shift has radically reshaped Palestinian identity. Lionis argues that the recent blossoming in art and film stems from the profound social impact of the 1967 defeat and the subsequent trauma. This tragedy spurred the use of humour as a coping mechanism and a means to confront collective suffering.

She dissects this intricate dynamic by focusing on five key chapters in the Palestinian narrative: the Balfour Declaration (1917-1948), the Nakba (1948-1968), the Battle of Al-Karameh (1968-1982), the Israeli invasion of Lebanon (1982-1993), and the Oslo Accords (1993-present). Each of these historical junctures reflect the shifiting anxieties and resilience of the Palestinian collective.

Examining the works of Larissa Sansour, Khaled Hourani, Taysir Batniji among others, Lionis exemplifies this transformative power, wherein the role of humour in shaping perceptions of Palestinian identity becomes evident through works like Sansour's *Space Exodus* and *Nation Estate*. Sansour's work delves into the complexities of Palestinian identification with place, challenging conventional narratives through 'humor noir'. *Space Exodus* parodies Western Orientalist imagination, while *Nation Estate* critiques the shrinking Palestinian land amidst ongoing occupation. Similarly, Khaled Hourani's *No News from Palestine* humorously obstructs traditional representations by presenting postcards devoid of news, thereby challenging conventional expectations, while Taysir Batniji's *Watchtowers* employs irony to challenge perceptions of Palestinian mobility and landscape representation. Unable to access the West Bank himself, Batniji commissions a photographer, resulting in intentionally imperfect images that challenge traditional documentary methods. By subverting the formalist approach of renowned photographers, Batniji critiques the political and cultural constraints faced by Palestinian artists. These examples in the book showcase how humour, intertwined with art and film, serves as a means to forge a borderless Palestinian identity amidst displacement and geopolitical turmoil.

Lionis contends that humour's current prominence in Palestinian film and art didn't always exist. Before the Israeli invasion of Lebanon (1982), humour was largely absent from these mediums, despite some initial glimmers after the 1967 defeat. She argues that the Israeli invasion of Lebanon (1982) saw a crucial shift in Palestinian identity from 'Palestinian-ness' to 'Palestinianism.' Prior to this shift, Lionis suggests, the Nakba solidified a common Palestinian identity based on the shared experience of being refugees. However, she argues that this 'Palestinianess' lacked a deeper defining element. It was the Battle of Al-Karameh (1968)that truly ignited 'Palestinian-ism,' infusing the identity with a revolutionary spirit and solidifying its distinct character.

The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) subsequent exile to Tunis marked a pivotal moment for Palestinian cultural output and identity. Lionis analyses the impact of this 'double exile' on a generation who came of age amidst the Lebanese civil war and witnessed the fall of Beirut as their 'surrogate capital'. This sustained trauma forced them to confront the haunting reality of a 'past not yet passed', echoing the *Nakba* experience. Paradoxically, however, Beirut's destruction also opened a creative window for Palestinian artists and filmmakers. Geographically and culturally decentralised for the first time in decades, their work moved beyond rigid narratives of exile, revolution, and militarism. They began deconstructing the fixed categories of 'Palestinianess' and 'Palestinianism', leading to a rise in international recognition for their art and film. This newfound self-criticism was characterised by a blurring of the lines between personal and collective experiences, with memory and oral history playing central roles. The book echoes Edward Said's observation that these elements served as potent substitutes for Palestinian citizenship, symbolising both history and aspirations.

Lionis then shifts her focus to the Oslo Accords of 1993, which she views as the most recent and ongoing critical juncture in shaping Palestinian identity. In her analysis, Oslo marked a crucial turning point by dampening Palestinian nationalist aspirations. This sense of disillusionment, Lionis argues, is directly linked to the rise of humour in contemporary Palestinian art and film. Lionis further delves into the theme of 'borderlessness' within Palestinian identity. She examines how artists and filmmakers like Batniji, Omari, Sansour, and Saadeh through humour, explore the link to place and homeland, but outside the traditional confines of a nation-state with defined borders.Lionis argues that Palestine, for these artists, becomes more about identification than citizenship or residency. Consequently, humour increasingly serves as a tool to explore both the connection to Palestine and its very definition within the international context. She dwells into a specific set of signs and symbols employed in Palestinian cultural output. She argues that these symbols, even decades after exile, act as crucial vehicles for constructing an 'imagined community', as Benedict Anderson termed it. By referencing shared cultural touchstones, these symbols help forge a collective identity that transcends physical boundaries and the limitations of traditional nation-states.

Lionis then goes on to explore the conditions of laughter itself. She divides the audience into two groups: Palestinians witnessing humour within their own community and international audiences encountering it for the first time. In either case, Lionis argues, laughter fosters a shared understanding of the world, solidifying collective identity and forging solidarity. This newly-minted connection, sparked by humour, leads to greater intimacy, understanding, and potentially even empathy with the Palestinian experience. Therefore, throughout her work, Lionis demonstrates how contemporary Palestinian cultural output harnesses humour as a multifaceted tool. It articulates the ongoing

consequences of the Israeli occupation, incites laughter that unsettles the political status quo, acts as a mature defence mechanism against trauma, and shines a spotlight on systematic Israeli violence.

While dedicating her work to exploring humour in the Palestinian experience, Lionis readily acknowledges the seriousness of their struggle. She emphasises that real emergencies and daily hardships mark their lives, demanding a grounded approach. However, through this analysis, she delves into the unique role of laughter in navigating these harsh realities. She argues that humour is not merely a permissible but a necessary response to such traumas.

Building on the idea of forging connections through humour, Lionis posits it as a critical tool for understanding the world and, consequently, the suffering of others. This insightful perspective extends the previous discussion on humour's ability to build collective identity and empathy. Lionis' work stands as a testament to the transformative power of humour in the Palestinian experience. Her analysis skilfully reveals how Palestinian art and film weave humour into a shared social tapestry, inviting the international community to witness the absurd politics, unrelenting violence, and enduring trauma that constitute daily life for many Palestinians. This laughter, far from being frivolous, emerges as a vital mechanism for understanding, coping, and forging solidarity.

However, it's important to acknowledge the limitations of this approach.The effectiveness of humour as a tool for subversion may not translate equally to all Palestinians, particularly those facing the most brutal forms of suppression. Additionally, Lionis' framework doesn't encompass the full spectrum of Palestinian suffering. Nevertheless, these critiques don't diminish the significance of her contribution. Lionis' exploration of the intricate dance between Palestinian art, identity formation, and humour offers a profound understanding of how these elements mutually constitute each other and shape the ongoing struggle for dignity and self-determination in the face of adversity. As the Palestinian story continues to unfold in the ever-shifting sands of global politics, Lionis' work reminds us of the importance of recognising not just the pain, but also the resilience and the unwavering spirit that find expression in even the darkest moments through the transformative power of laughter.

In conclusion, *Laughter in Occupied Palestine* is not just a book about Palestinians; it's a book about humanity. It's a testament to the indomitable spirit that refuses to be silenced, a celebration of the transformative power of art, and a call to action for all who believe in dignity, freedom, and the unyielding power of laughter in the face of darkness. For anyone seeking to understand the complexities of the Palestinian struggle, to delve into the profound depths of human resilience, and to appreciate the subversive power of humour, Lionis' work offers an invaluable window into a world where laughter dances amidst the rubble, a defiant echo in the long march towards justice. This book should be read not just as a window into history but as a call to action, a reminder that solidarity thrives, and laughter, like hope, will never be truly contained by concrete walls.

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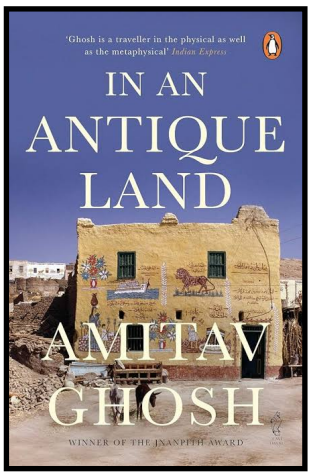
In an Antique Land by Amitav Ghosh, Penguin Publication, 2009, 336 pages, ISBN 978014306649, 252 INR



VINAY RAJORIA

The novel, *In an Antique Land,* is enmeshed in two overlapping narratives separated by some eight hundred years of history. The book's prologue provides a historical framework to the turbulent and cosmopolitan world of the Middle-East1: starting from the 12th century, a time when the Crusades reached Jerusalem, and when Khalaf Ibn-e-Ishaq (one of the historical characters in this novel) wrote a letter to his friend Yiju in Mangalore, India. It is their story, along with other characters from that time, that Ghosh will retrace, using historical documents combined with fictional soldering, as one of the key plotlines in the novel. On the other hand, in the prologue, we embark on a fascinating journey with Amitav Ghosh, a 22-year-old Oxford research scholar in social anthropology. He arrives in Latifa, a small village in Egypt, to collect data and unravel the story of an Indian slave, Yiju, (called the slave of M.S H.6). The journey takes us from England to Egypt, and finally, all the way to India. Through these two parallel and connected plot lines, Ghosh presents a comparative analysis of pre-and post-colonial Egyptian and Indian societies; by historically recreating the Indian Oceanic trade world of the Middle Ages and juxtaposing it with his experiences across India and Egypt in the latter half of the 20th century.

Written in the first-person narrative voice, Ghosh's alternative treatment of history lends the novel an academic mood, where narrative passages from his amiable time in Egypt and India are interspersed with entire chapters on the social, political and cultural world of these colonised nations; as they were before the Europeans arrived and when colonisation began. Though it must be mentioned that Ghosh's descriptions of the past are not dry and lacking in vigor. This is in part because the language he employs is not jargonistic and abstract, but is lucid, literary and fable-like; which makes this work a literary text and not a historical or anthropological guide.

Through the author's eyes, reader gets to see a secular, cosmopolitan, and syncretic world of medieval India and the Middle-East which is more tolerant, flexible, and truly modern towards differences and diversities than our so-called 'modern' age. It is because of its ability to contradict and unsettle our core historical presumptions, which are a product of the colonisation of our minds, that makes *In an antique Land* such a crucial piece of literature. In this text, Ghosh deconstructs our tainted, colonial conceptions of the Middle Ages or the 'Dark Ages' – a prized creation of the 'white' historiographers – which make us look back upon this swath of history as backward, dogmatic, intolerant, violent and 'dark'. Contrary to this, Ghosh's characters concoct, through the medium of their letters, an entirely different and unforeseen world which must be an ideal for today and, therefore, worthy of our attention. For instance, the deep friendship between an Arab Jew (Yiju) and an Arab Muslim (Khalaf ibn Ishaq) formed in 12th century Africa and Asia is heartwarming and endearing. We also see the fluidity and acceptance of varied identities in the medieval Arab-Indian world through the unconventional but intimate relationship between different characters in the story. Ghosh also demonstrates to us the ardent trust and familial relationships

between a slave (Bomma) and a master (Yiju), and even between Bomma and Ishaq (master's friend); which subverts our conceptions of the brutal and inhumane master-slave imagery that we have imbibed from the trans-atlantic slave trade of the 17th and 18th centuries.

Through Bomma's travels Ghosh narrates the tale of a medieval Indian Oceanic trade world that is non-violent, tolerant, and full of love and affection for people who are different from each other. In the prologue of the novel, while explaining the nature and tone of Ishaq's letters from Aden to Yiju in India, Ghosh writes:

Yet, despite all the merchandise it speaks of, the letter's spirit is anything but mercenary: it is lit with a warmth that Goitein's translation renders still alive and glowing, in cold English print. 'I was glad,' writes Khalaf ibn Ishaq, 'when I looked at your letter, even before I had taken notice of its contents. Then I read it, full of happiness and, while studying it, became joyous and cheerful… (Ghosh, p. 7)

Moreover, *In an Antique Land,* Ghosh builds on Frantz Fanon's critique of the West and displays the lingering legacy of colonialism that, with centuries of domination, has become part of the Eastern psyche. It has not only affected his world materially but has also altered the ways in which he experiences and articulates his emotions, thoughts and memories. In this light, Ghosh reflects not only on how the West distorted and ghettoised the heterogeneity of the East, but also how in the decolonised world of these ancient lands, the natives have consented to the hegemonic structures of Western epistemes.

The syncretic and accepting world, once inhabited by Yiju, Bomma, and Ashu is, therefore, lost forever. All traces of those humane and affectionate worlds have been systematically and carefully erased. With the invasion of the West in the East – religious, linguistic, and national identities have become solidified and sterilised. Rather than being used to define people, identities are employed in modern nation-states as potent weapons to categorise and divide. Ghosh's work is important as it offers us an alternative morality of a medieval world where individualities were not rigid; where a Jewish merchant could be friends with an Arab Muslim, marry a Hindu girl out of love, and have the most trusted ally in an Indian slave.

This sense of loss for the East is pertinently made manifest by Ghosh towards the end of the novel, when he visits the shrine of Abu-Hasira in Damanhur, Egypt. Abu Hasira was a 19th century Jewish saint who is revered among Jews, particularly of Israel and Morocco. Because of his Hindu identity, Ghosh is stopped from entering the premises and is interrogated by the Egyptian personnel on suspicions of being a spy. Conditioned on the Western model of identity, the policemen fail to comprehend what a Hindu man from India has to do at a Jewish shrine. Unlike the world of Yiju and Bomma, in modern nation-states religious identities are perceived to be straight-jacketed, with no overlap whatsoever and only suspicion and fear prevailing within them. In this divided world, Amitav Ghosh and his curiosity seemed like a dangerous anomaly to the personnel. While in custody, Ghosh muses:

But then it struck me, suddenly, that there was nothing I could point to within his world that might give credence to my story – the remains of those small, indistinguishable, intertwined histories, Indian and Egyptian, Muslim and Jewish, Hindu and Muslim, had been partitioned long ago. (Ghosh, p.283)

Nine hundred years later today, in that same Promised Land, in the same Fertile Crescent, in the same Arab World, can you imagine a similar friendship being forged just as naturally and amiably between an Israeli Jew and a

Palestinian Muslim? Can you think that in current times when the right-wing is on the rise and with it nationalism is turning into 'the opium of the masses' inter-religious love of the kind of Yiju and Ashu will be tolerated by this world? I contemplate that let alone letters being exchanged or marriage knots being tied, even a mere mention of such a bond will be looked upon with utter suspicion and with inklings of national and international conspiracy.

Ghosh, through this novel, repeatedly warns the previously colonised people to be aware of their true stories and not buy or succumb to the stories sold to them by the West. Ghosh's novel, thus, sheds light on how global power is still carefully guarded and held by the barrels of Western guns while marginalising other voices; especially those coming from the Global South.

This is echoed, in a different way, in a later novel *A Calcutta Chromosome* by Ghosh, where he subverts the West's notion of scientific discovery and advancement (that was cemented during the Enlightenment) vis-a-vis the magical and mysticism of the East (another tainted construct of Europe). In this work, he argues that the genealogy of modern science is in itself a cultural fiction – a part of the colonial discourse – of the West and is therefore not as objective and neutral as it claims to be. Similarly, in his most celebrated text *Shadow Lines*, Ghosh challenges our fundamental assumptions about national identities, wars and migration. Like Rushdie does in *Midnight's Children*, in this work, Ghosh consciously chooses memory as the epistemological tool to reconstruct history over the supposedly objective gimmicks of Western historiography. In the light of these other works, a novel like *In an Antique Land* becomes even more urgent and relevant since these books help us articulate the questions of identity, power, and epistemology in East-West encounters from the past to the current times.

1. The term 'Middle-East' used for the geo-political region encompassing Asia and Africa is a construct of the colonial academia itself. I am using it, solely, because Ghosh employs it in the original text, though, from the perspective of decolonial theory, 'West-Asia' will be a more appropriate term for the same.

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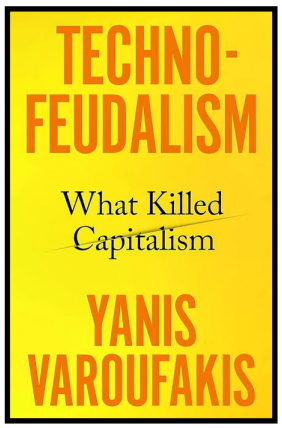
Techno-feudalism: What Killed Capitalism by Yanis Varoufakis, London: The Bodley Head, 2023, 304 Pages, ISBN: 1847927270, £16.99.



RITVIK SINGH SABHARWAL

The book *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism* seeks to present a revised account of the Marxist theorisation of historical materialist epochs. It is written by a prominent left-wing scholar and former finance minister of Greece, Dr. Yanis Varoufakis. The primary aim of this book is to explain the changes occurring within global capitalism due to unprecedented technological advancement. Its central premise is that Capitalism, the twin child of 'Markets' and 'Profits' is dead and is replaced by a neo-feudal arrangement, where data and the internet decide the flow of wealth and power. It begins with a discussion on the nature of labour and capitalism. It further discusses the history of Capitalism – from the end of feudalism to the beginning of the epoch of modern capitalism in the USA, wherein it served as a Technostructure of business and banks operating on the State's terms. Subsequently, the discussion moves onto the age of Global Capitalism that operated under the Bretton Woods system. It then shows how the collapse of Bretton Woods made way for the 'Global Minotaur' of the neoliberal US Economy, which consumed the world's goods and capital and then repurposed them as 'loans and shares' back to the world (p.43). Excessive speculation in the stock market, enabled by non-liquid loans and 'derivatives' caused the 2008 financial crisis, which killed this Global Minotaur.

Varoufakis goes on to assert that in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, commodified data became Capital. The creation of the privately owned internet led to the emergence of 'Cloud Capital' consisting of algorithms and internet networks that influence the users' preferences (p. 75). The harvesting of data into the 'cloud' became a central feature of the Global Political Economy. Technology users unknowingly provide data to platforms like Google, and receive no compensation for it, thereby becoming 'cloud serfs' (p.83). The author theorises that the dominance of markets has ended, since tech-conglomerates produce or sell no concrete commodities. Rather, they monopolise the connection between the producers and buyers. These platforms have created 'Digital Fiefdoms' that are controlled by 'Cloudalists', who assign their digital might to 'vassals' who either do their bidding or go out of business due to being deplatformed (p.88, 103). These economic fetters ensure that the data of users is extracted by the service provider vassals, and then used to fill the coffers of the 'Cloudalists'. This system, where a few private entities have divided the global data cloud amongst themselves, is what Varoufakis calls 'Techno-feudalism'.

The author hypothesises that Techno-feudalism has killed the capitalist premise of 'profit'. Digital Fiefdoms don't sustain on profit, since central banks bail them out whenever they incur crisis-inducing losses. Online platforms make money by collecting 'cloud rent' for hosting services on their platforms, which is not 'profit' since there is no productive process behind it. Cloudalist enterprises do not extract fees from consumers but mould their exposure to dictate the services they will use and the goods they will buy. Techno-feudalism has also taken hold of China, the other big pole of the world economy. Unlike

American Cloudalists tech American conglomerates are openly embedded into the state system. The new cold war between the cloud realms of the USA and China has caused them to ask their borrowers to return their loans. This is disastrous for the Global South governments, who can default on their debts, which would force economic restructuring by the IMF and World Bank, opening the way for Western Cloudalists to take over their economies. Or they could enact economic austerity and increase prices of goods, pushing people into poverty. The author opines that the escape from techno-feudalism will not come via state regulation. There needs to be a democratisation of corporations by strengthening the voices of workers and a democratisation of money by central bank-issued digital wallets. In the end, people must make the cloud into a 'public commons' through an online cloud revolution.

This text presents a brand new, novel and completely radical theory of Global Political Economy. The idea that Capitalism will kill itself is not new, yet Varoufakis differs from other Marxists in that he argues that it is not socialism, but a dystopian data-centred technocratic system that has replaced Capitalism. Therefore, Varoufakis's theory is a revisionist and heterodox take on Marxist Socialism. As a treatise regarding a new socialist theoretical framework in international relations and global political economy, this work is rooted in class binaries as well. The 'cloudalists' and 'cloud serfs' form one major binary, and the other binary is the dichotomy of 'Internet Commons' and 'Private Internet'. From an international relations perspective, this book focuses on how the two great poles of Cloud Capital, China and the USA, are using their stranglehold on data to commercialise people's information. Varoufakis also critiques in detail the Global South 'mitator' cloudalists, who seek to replicate the tech-conglomerate model in countries like India (p. 127). With technology becoming the central fulcrum of world polity, techno-feudalism as a theory seems to become a very relevant and poignant perspective. While the idea that profits and markets are dead may seem outlandish, it is a fact that things like the Goldman Sachs 'Non-Profitable Technology Index' of 2021 showcase the economic viability of enterprises that make no profit and produce no commodities. In Varoufakis's worldview, all governments and financial institutions, whether in the Global South or North, are in some way beholden to local or global tech-conglomerates. However, the extent to which the cloudalists control our world is yet to be empirically determined.

Without any equivocation, however, it can be stated that *Techno-feudalism* is an extremely important body of work. From a qualitative perspective, its approach is clear and systematic. One need not have a broad understanding of political economy or history to grasp its central conceptions. Varoufakis has previously proven his mettle as an approachable and verbose yet loquacious narrative storyteller in works like *The Global Minotaur* (2011) and *A Brief History of Capitalism* (2013). Yet, this book exceeds his other works through its stylistic clarity and sheer depth of research. The author's focus here is on creating a conceptual framework, for which he engages in a third-person dialectical conversation with his father. This style allows the reader a greater degree of engagement than a straightforward treatise discourse. For people who shy away from theoretical works due to their dryness, this work will not be a problem due to its ingenious usage of pop culture references. The author also gives an auto-ethnographic touch to the book by using his own experiences as examples and by incorporating myths from native Greece to elucidate concepts.

There exist a few areas for improvement that are noticeable in this book. First and foremost is the retroactive and normative nature of the theory of techno-feudalism. Despite containing a

properly structured framework with detailed models (found in the book's many appendices), techno-feudalism is largely a theory evolved in hindsight and therefore, lacks empirical and scientific prediction-making capabilities despite possessing great explanatory power. Secondly, techno-feudalism is a concept limited only to political economy and, therefore has a major lacuna in that it is limited to the 'base' of processes and does not explore how a techno-feudal system changes the 'superstructure'. The author also does not explain or demonstrate the changes techno-feudalism brings to the social and cultural ideology of world society. This further extends to the book's lack of explanation as to how techno-feudalism interacts with other social cleavages like gender, class or race. Varoufakis also showcases a degree of Anglo-Western centrism. Not only is Global South painted as a passive and second-tier actor in the entire process of techno-feudalism, but all examples and references used in the book are derived from Western media exclusively. Furthermore, the book makes long unneeded deviations in a few places and then fails to connect those subsidiary discussions to the main ideas of the book. This is especially pronounced in the long discussion on private equity firms, whose actual connection to the techno-feudal system is never explained conclusively, despite allusions found across the book to the fact that these firms play a key role in the system's evolution. Lastly, as with many theoretical works, the solutions mentioned in the book to deal with the many inequities of techno-feudalism are highly utopian, impracticable and improbable.

Despite its flaws, Dr Yanis Varoufakis's *Techno-feudalism* is an earnest, engaging, valuable and innovative book that presents a unique paradigm in global polity, world economy and international relations. The interdisciplinary nature and engaging style of the book make it an easy read. Although its primary audience is novices, experts will also derive great insights from this book. Its methodology is clear and informative as well. Such an important and knowledge-enhancing work is to be given a thorough reading by students of International Studies and Global Political Economy. This book is, therefore, a recommended must-read for both beginners and veterans in the field of social sciences.

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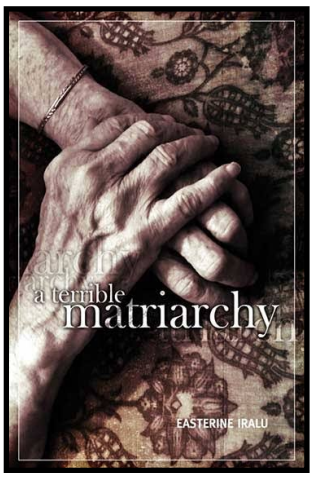
A Terrible Matriarchy by Easterine Kire, New Delhi, Zubaan, 2013, 204 pages, ISBN: 9788189884079 495 INR



NANUMA SUBBA

It is an unfortunate reality that stories from Northeast India are a rare find, rarer still is the subtle art of creativity that portrays complexities in simple ways. From the outset and as the title expressly suggests, *A Terrible Matriarchy* by Easterine Kire reflects on the subjects of patriarchy, women's share in society and the socio-cultural context surrounding women in every wake of life, which makes for a compelling read. Through the protagonist Dielieno (Lieno), the author narrates the everyday life of women in a village in Nagaland. Set in Northeast India, the novel starts with a grandmother serving meat to grandchildren. The grandmother ladles the most desired piece of meat to Lieno's brother and instructs that there are different portions for boys and girls. The book dwells on themes that focus on women's share in a family—be it a share of food, division of property, or the disparate amount of housework women constantly engage in, which is right where the novel takes off.

One of the first things noticeable in Kire's work is how it extricates the dynamics of a family inside the house. Kire, in this book, extracts intricate details at a micro-level that exposes the politics of the household. More often than not, discussions on the workings of the household are reflected in a limited manner in non-fiction, which is where works of fiction like Kire's find its brilliance. While it is apparent in the book that the eldest woman in the house upholds the power dynamics in a household, it is also clear how the grandmother exercises internalised patriarchy and actively passes it on to her future generations too, all within the household.

The central theme of the book rests on women's household labour. Women's labour and leisure have been manufactured and differentiated since the formative years of early childhood. It then becomes common knowledge which dictates that women are better at performing household labour. But again, with a lifetime of training inside the house, women are bound to be skilled workers. The binary revolves around men doing the 'heavy' and 'technical' work, not necessarily out of compulsion, but as a measure of displaying their 'strength' and 'masculinity', where they can choose to be good at it or not. However, in the case of women, they are trained to be good at household labour with quality control, which is made effective by their mothers, grandmothers, or any other female figure in charge of the household. A chain of 'duties' in a hierarchical order of command is built in the household via the institution of family. This book reiterates these uncomfortable realities that may not find much expression elsewhere.

Therefore, as a grandmother dictates that girl-children should 'marry and have children and be able to cook and weave cloths and look after the household', the protagonist/narrator Lieno, a girl struggling between her current life and her little dreams, says, 'I could not fall asleep for a long time. I thought about school and how nice it would be to learn to write and sing and draw as my brothers did' (p. 22). This juxtaposition of two women in two different generations wanting very different things in life is portrayed in a very lucid manner. It propels to where Kire

wants the reader to see how often women negotiate between these two worlds, put to test every time, in the middle of a patriarchal world where women are always taught 'how to behave'.

As the story progresses, it resonates with women's experiences in general, coming face-to-face with their self-sacrificing tendencies for the men in their family, and realising this fact very early on in life whilst preparing oneself for an impending one. While Lieno is fond of studying, her grandmother quickly makes her realise that the struggles of being a woman are literally between sustenance and non-sustenance — between reading or eating, when the grandmother says, 'people can't eat books' (p. 28). These are not things unheard of. Many generations of women have heard such things, not only from their grandmothers but also from their mothers, who sometimes, unfortunately, propagate inherent patriarchies around the world.

Even as the book tends to relate to women's experiences, it transports the reader to Nagaland. Kire offers a prismatic view of the geography, culture and society in Kohima. She describes how harvest depends on rain, the cruel winters in the hills with flimsy housing arrangements in the village, and the warmth of sunny days. She weaves into the story some specific cultural markers of the region for the reader to imagine the novel's backdrop. She writes about spirits, dreams, Christianity, marriage, food, drinks, and the Battle of Kohima. Her lens traverses from inside the home to the outside, where the story travels around the village, drawing in many characters in and around the protagonist—making the story not of one woman, but of many persons. Given this vast arena of storytelling, the book occasionally risks juggling between too many stories. However, it quickly picks up and ties loose ends as it draws closer to the end.

Kire undertakes each theme in the story with careful description while orchestrating their deep metaphorical meaning. For example, when she describes beliefs like dreams as signs, she explains their prophetic character in the story, where Lieno says, 'Isn't it strange that dreams always come true especially if they are dreams of death in the family?' (p. 98) Similarly, when Kire engages with the topic of food, it is descriptive of the culture in Nagaland, and the mention of meat is found quite frequently. At the same time, Kire offers a clear picture of hunger, gendered division/distribution of food, its significance and the patriarchal structure embedded in the everyday.

She unearths village life, where there are specific social interaction spots, like the village's water spot in the book. The gossiping women at the water spot is also something that makes the story familiar. It reminded me of the water spot we had seen growing up in our neighbourhood and how we, as children, feared spirits near the water because we also knew that 'spirits liked water' (p. 54). When Kire ventures into death, loss and grieving, there too it is accompanied by strength, calm and forgiveness. While doing so, she also discerns that patriarchy not only affects the living but unfortunately engulfs women even after death, when she writes, '… *and the most feared of spirits were those of old women*' (p. 180). The book ends at a sombre pace and leaves the reader with a lot to reflect on.

It is a simple story of the everyday packed with unanticipated but very intriguing twists and deep metaphors. This gripping tale of the life story of a woman is a much-awaited prose that rips open the societal mesh, and presents a picture so effortless yet daring in such profound ways. *A Terrible Matriarchy* is a moving story of intergenerational patriarchy. As a tribal woman from India's Northeast, Kire's writing gave me much solace. Representation matters, and so do stories of the everyday. Often overlooked and unvoiced, some forms of storytelling engage

with the person of a reader. It alters a small part of one's existence and contends another simultaneously. This is one such story.

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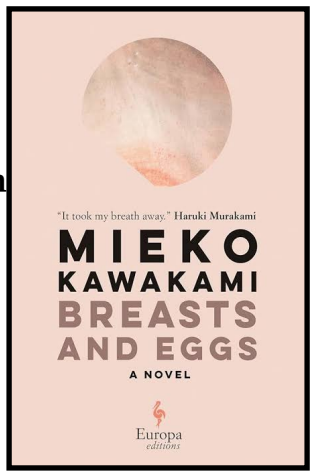
Breasts and Eggs by Mieko Kawakami, translated by Sam Bett and David Boyd, Europa Editions, 2020, 393 pages, ISBN: 9781609455880, 625 INR



SHREYANSHI BAJPAI

'Mother says there are locked rooms inside all women; kitchen of lust,
bedroom of grief, bathroom of apathy.
Sometimes the men – they come with keys,
and sometimes, the men – they come with hammers'

–Shire, Warsan "The House", in Her Blue Body, Flipped Eye Publication, 2015

Mieko Kawakami is a Japanese writer-poet from Osaka. Her novel *Breasts and Eggs* (*Natsu Monogatari* (夏物語)), published in 2020, features characters from her short novel *Chich to Ran* (2008), which was awarded the 138th Akutagawa Prize.

Breasts and Eggs emerges from a nuanced exploration of a woman's identity as it exists within societal constructs. Delving into the complexities of societal expectations and the iterative process of redefining womanhood, Kawakami weaves narratives of women from different class positions with great insight and

sensitivity. She illuminates how societal norms govern and influence the expression of women's bodies and sexualities within Japanese culture.

The title *Breasts and Eggs* is an act of radical reclamation, encapsulating the paradoxes embedded within the imagination of the female body. It juxtaposes the nurturing aspects associated with 'breasts' alongside the objectification they endure. On the other hand, the 'eggs' serve as a symbol for communicating the beginning of life and creation. In addition, they denote the unpredictability of existence through their properties of fragility and resilience of existence—the themes discussed in the book's second part.

The first half introduces us to Natsuko, a writer in Tokyo, being visited by her sister Makiko, along with her 12-year-old daughter, Midoriko, from Osaka. It provides a glimpse into the poverty-stricken early childhood of the two sisters. With a father who abandoned them, leaving behind only debt, the sisters lived with their grandmother and mother till their passing. Forced to provide for themselves, they had to lie to employers to find odd jobs at hostess bars. While Natsuko's ambition of becoming a writer led her towards the capital, Makiko's responsibilities towards her daughter led her to continue the same job.

Makiko is hyper-fixated on the subject of breasts and the procedural details of breast enlargement surgeries. Midoriko disapproves of her mother seeking consultations for the same. Her journal entries reveal the ambivalent nature of her relationship with Makiko. Though Midoriko wants to protect and provide for her mother, she is also angry with her for creating another life and dooming them both to an existence filled with only suffering.

The second half, set ten years later, is longer and evidently more introspective and raw. It is focused on 'eggs' —Natsuko's desperate desire to have a child of her own, which finds manifestation in her obsessive readings related to fertility treatments. The author brings in critical discourses around the right to have a family and who has a say in determining the same. The reader is compelled to consider the selfishness of each parent who decides to bring life into the world despite knowing the risks of living and still choosing to subject their child to pain and suffering that is interlinked within life. Ultimately, Natsuko weeds herself out of these apprehensions, doubts, and debates to realise that she would rather fail than not try at all to be a mother.

What does it mean to be a woman?

In answer to this question, Natsuko's dream about women crying out, 'There is no such thing as women' comes to mind (p. 56). Lacan (1972) famously said (and is often misunderstood for doing so), 'The woman does not exist.' He wished to convey that it was impossible to conceptualise women as a singular entity with a universal definition; that womankind exists in its own right. It is not subsumed under 'mankind'. The prevailing definitions of what a woman should be are mere constructions and inventions of men's desires and do not encompass 'women'.

Prevalent ideas and beliefs around women have long been oppressive, which is illustrated by Makiko's dissatisfaction with her body and Natsuko's commentary on how beauty holds significant societal clout, 'Beauty meant that you were good. And being good meant being happy' (p.48). This subjugation is apparent in Midoriko's disillusionment about her changing body. '…the body I'm in keeps on changing, more and more and more and more, in ways I don't even know…. Everything gets dark, and that darkness fills my eyes more and more' (p.57) Natsuko's friend puts this systematic exploitation of women succinctly, 'my

mom was free labour—free labour with a pussy' (p.227).

In that light, the absence of men in the novel is an intentional attempt to centralise women's narratives alone. Natsuko even stresses that it was in her father's absence that she finally found agency and new meaning in her surroundings. 'I saw these things every day, but now they gleamed as if sprinkled with magic dust' (p.12). Though one cannot remove the 'men' in menarche[1] Kawakami has slyly removed the need for them in narrating women's accounts. However, one is left to question what happens when men translate such accounts. To make it palatable, Brett and Boyd may have tamed Kawakami's unbridled writing.[2]

Motherhood, the Idea of Family and 'Knowing your child'

Midoriko questions the assumptions and expectations imposed upon women. Why was her body constructed in a way that even before she was born into the world, she had the biological materials required to create a baby? This prescribed trajectory of female existence that necessitates childbirth meets Midoriko's discontent. It finds expression in her cathartic outburst of cracking eggs on her head. Midoriko is highly critical of the idea of women, which essentialises and idealises motherhood.

I wish I could rip out all those parts of me, the parts already rushing to give birth. (p.99) *It's not our fault that we have eggs and sperm, but we can definitely try harder to keep them from meeting.* (p.101)

On the other hand, Natsuko grapples with the complexities of navigating parenthood outside the conventional parameters of the heterosexual partnership. She desperately wishes to 'meet her child'. This desire itself is a subversion of the traditional imagination of a family where only two opposite-sex partners are thought to be acceptable to raise a child. Till this point, the novel attempts to dismantle maternal essentialism, challenging the convention to assert women's freedom and autonomy. The attitude is also reflective of the plummeting birth rates in Japan, where feminist stirrings have highlighted the illusory nature of the rewards of motherhood. Thus, the shift in tone makes one inquisitive about the author's intentions with respect to childbirth.

Midoriko and Natsuko represent the two opposite ends of the spectrum of women's identities in patriarchal societies. The contrasting perception of motherhood that Natsuko and Midoriko have can be traced back to their relationship with their respective mothers. Midoriko's decision to not have children emerges from anger and pity for her mother's life. 'It's your fault for having me. I realised something after that, though. It's not her fault she was born' (p. 67)

In Natsuko's recollection of 'When Mom was my age, she had two kids, fourteen and five', we find a possible basis for her need to be a mother as an echo of the mothering received by her mother (p.150). This is substantiated by Nancy Chodorow in her book *The Reproduction of Mothering*. She suggested that it is not, in fact, the biological drive of a woman that drives a woman's maternal instinct but the quality of the relationship of a woman with her own mother.

In pursuit of motherhood, Natsuko considers donor conception but is greatly troubled by the ethical considerations of this process and of parenthood itself. The argument that considerably shakes her is an anti-natalist one. The readers also find themselves convinced by the argument, mainly due to another character, Yuriko. Her experiences of assault and abuse at the hands of her adopted father make the reader averse towards the idea of childbirth as well. One leans towards the ideas of this philosophy, as propounded by many anti-natalists such as

David Benatar, who insist on abstention from the gamble of procreation because life's pleasures do not balance out the sufferings.

Upon my initial engagement with the novel, Natsuko's choice to proceed with the conception, regardless of her dilemma, leaves the reader with a disconcerting feeling. It is far too easy to give in to such pessimism than to believe that hope in itself is an act of resistance. Natsuko's courage to accept the possibility of failure, rather than sacrifice her wants, warrants commendation. In Freud's *On Transience,* he writes about how it is through the transient nature of things in existence that one can identify beauty in them. It is through destruction that we can value creation. It is through loss that we remind ourselves of an object's worth. And, it is through pain that one can experience pleasures. Natsuko's resolution is an attestation for the same.

1. "I was wondering about the "men" in "menarche." Turns out it's the same as the "men" in "menstruation." It means "month," which comes from "moon," and has to do with women and their monthly cycle. Moon has all kinds of meanings. In addition to being the thing orbiting the earth, it can involve time, or tides, like the ebb and flow of the ocean. So, "menarche" has absolutely nothing to do with "men." So why spell it that way? What happened to the "o"?" (from Midoriko's Journal entry, pg. 17)

2. Midoriko writes about her mother's desire to get breast augmentation surgery, in the Brett and Boyd version as: 'It's gross, I really don't understand. It's so, so, so, so, so, so gross … She's being an idiot, the biggest idiot'. Here is Kawai: 'I don't get it. PUKE PUKE PUKE PUKE PUKE! … She's off her trolley, my Mum, daft, barmy, bonkers, thick as two short planks.' — Madeleine Thien (11 Sep 2020), Breasts and Eggs by Mieko Kawakami review – an interrogation of the female condition, *The Guardian*

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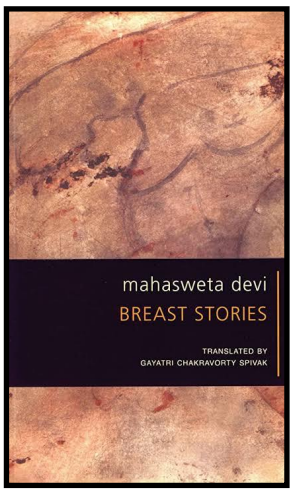
Breast Stories; By Mahasweta Devi; Calcutta; Seagull Books; 1997; 166pp; ISBN: 8170461405; 499 INR



NAMRATA GOGOI

Breast Stories, originally written in Bengali by journalist-turned social activist and fiction writer Mahasweta Devi, is a short fiction trilogy. Translated into English by feminist critic and postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, it consists of three stories — *Draupadi*, *Breast Giver* (*Standayini*) and *Behind the Bodice (Choli ke Pichhe)* — conjoined by employing the breast as a common motif, a 'concept metaphor' to indict a culture that denigrates women. *Draupadi* was first published in *Agnigarbha* (1978), *Breast Giver* in *Stanadayini O Onnanno Golpo* (1979) and *Choli ke Pichhe* in *Devi-r Panchasti Golpo* (1996). The central theme is the weaponisation of the breast by Devi's protagonists to resist their oppressor — a repressive postcolonial state machinery and oppressive societal norms.

Employing mythical and historical engagement as a narrative tool in each of these micro narratives, Devi illustrates how gendered subaltern subjects are oppressed. *Breast Stories* begins with the story of the eponymous protagonist Draupadi, a re-creation of the episode in the epic Mahabharata in which Draupadi, wife of the Pandavas, suffered the plight of being publicly stripped, only to be rescued by Lord Krishna. In Devi's story, Dopdi Mejhen, a landless tribal agricultural labourer, is gang raped in custody. What then becomes her source of strength and resistance is her naked, raped body which transforms her from Dopdi to Draupadi, enabling her to stand as what Spivak calls a 'terrifying super object'. *Draupadi* is set in the backdrop of the Indian state's anti-Naxalite operations against tribals in the 1970s. Devi oscillates between both versions of the protagonists' names — Draupadi and Dopdi. Spivak in her foreword interprets this as either Dopdi's inability to pronounce her own name or the non Sanskrit form Dopdi perceived as the proper name for a tribal.

Unlike monogamy-privileging Scriptural prescriptions, Draupadi from the Mahabharata was 'dependent on many husbands' and could therefore be designated as a prostitute, making Dushana believe that there was in fact, nothing improper in bringing her unclothed into the assembly (p.10). This Draupadi is rescued from being disrobed in court by Krishna. Devi's Dopdi, on the other hand, is brutally violated. The state machinery in the postcolonial context can perhaps be seen paralleled with Draupadi's saviour in the Mahabharata. But in Dopdi's case, the state is no longer the saviour. While the primitive Santhals stood guard over their women's modesty, the educated, so-called leftist intellectual Senanayak ordered and enabled Dopdi's rape— a participant in the production of an exploitative society (Spivak). Draupadi had thus, become the victim of a repressive state machinery in a country where 'even a worm is under a certain police station' (p.20). She however, undergoes a transformation, the one symbolic of her empowerment.

Overcoming a sense of shame, Draupadi recognises that her body is in fact, her weapon, her sole possession in an otherwise deprived existence. She refuses to be clothed and walks with her head held high, bare- breasted, towards

a perplexed Senanayak. It is from her torn body that she now derives strength, making Senanayak tremble before his 'unarmed target' (p.37). The tyrant now stands powerless. Here, one can find Devi's critical exploration of female subjectivity.

Moreover, the intersectionality of discrimination or multiple marginalisation experienced by women at the peripheries is also evident in the plot. This is shown as Dopdi is being exploited not only by the upper caste officers but also by her fellow Santhal men Shomai and Budhna, who cannot come to terms with the fact that following Dulna's death, Dopdi, a woman, would lead them. This theme of entwinement of gendered identity with one's socio-economic standing is recurrent in each of the three stories.

Unlike Dopdi and Gangor, Jashoda, the protagonist in Devi's *Breast Giver*, is a Brahmin woman— one who has internalised reproduction and nurturing of children as her sole purpose, believing goddess Durga to have bestowed upon her the responsibility of suckling her own children as well as the babies of the rich Halder family for whom she works as a wet nurse. Exploiting the fact that she was now a 'professional mother' who has to lactate continuously for the dozens of Haldar babies, Jashoda's husband too impregnates her seventeen times, making a 'year breeder' (p.54) and a 'fruitful Brahmin wife' (p. 51)

Her profession, however, comes to an end as the new generation of Haldars begin to move out of their ancestral home to live as nuclear families. Overwhelmed and shocked, the Haldar matriarch passes away, attaining liberation in a way, while Jashoda continues to suffer. Once Jashoda stops lactating and her breasts are no longer ample, she is neither the object of filial piety, nor of sexual fetishisation. Both her husband and her sons abandon her. None of her 'milk sons' come to save her from misery. Stripped of her goddess-like reverence, the Brahmin Jashoda now lives with the low caste maid of the Haldars, who also looks down upon her— an image that powerfully captures the futility of caste superiority when intersected with gender and economic identity.

Spivak, in her foreword, sheds light on authorial intent, highlighting that Devi seeks to paint in Jashoda, a parable of decolonised India who like a "mother by hire" is being exploited by people who promised to protect her. Jashoda's breast cancer is a metaphor for the upper class' exploitative tendencies in the post-colonial context. Moreover, Jashoda's story highlights how systems of domination and patriarchy in alliance with capitalism tend to intersect with the endless reinforcement of women's subordination. This theme of the breast as the locus of oppression continues in the third story — Behind the Bodice, albeit with strong overtones of resistance, missing in Jashoda's narrative.

In *Behind the Bodice*, the victim protagonist is migrant labour Gangor, her name derived from Ganagauri(Rooted in the term Gana, demos or the people). This story too represents state violence meted out against Gangor by the police and her rage and resistance against it. The breast remains the central motif. Her sexual exploitation becomes the unintended consequence of photographer Upin Puri's capture and publication of photos of Gangor's breasts, taken as she was nursing her child. Upin intended, through his photos, a representation of the nation's pathetic condition. But his project is a non issue for Indian masses preoccupied with uproar over the vulgar Bollywood song Choli ke Pichhe instead — one replete with images of female objectification. When her pictures are circulated, Gangor is viewed with disgust by her community, and she becomes a victim of the patriarchal gaze of the state agents. Enticed by her bare breasted photos, the local police rape her in custody. She chooses to file a complaint against her offenders. Her rage and

resistance is thus more explicit than that of Dopdi. One can note that Devi introduces both Dopdi and Gangor as resistant subjects who challenge a homogenising nation- state myth through an assertion of their identity as subalterns. However, it is only when they experience sexual violence aimed at their degradation and humiliation that their identity as that of a gendered subaltern is underscored. For both of them, nudity is no longer a source of shame and vulnerability but an instrument of agentive resistance.

In each of her stories, Devi's interrogation of the exploitation of the marginalised through these graphic narratives vividly etches out prevalent tension between the powerful and the dispossessed. It produces what can be called a powerful emancipatory text. Besides, this piece also adds to public discourse concerning issues of social stratification, structural exploitation and sexual violence. But an important aspect to keep in mind is Spivak's translation. At certain points in the text, Spivak privileges her own interpretation of what Devi articulates as the intended meaning behind her narrative. In *Breast Giver* for instance, Spivak calls upon readers to not focus on the subaltern as an allegory of Mother India (Devi's interpretation) but as a gendered subject. In reading the work thus, one has to be mindful of possible loss of authorial intent owing to the translator's probable appropriation of the author's work with her own meaning.

On the whole, however, Devi's fiction presents a trajectory of the gendered subaltern attaining a sense of self-realisation through a process of renegotiation of socio-cultural norms and economic forces, otherwise structured in a manner that limits them. In the *Breast Stories*, the protagonists are victims of multiple marginalisations but they refuse submission to their plight, presenting instead vivid examples of resistance and rage against their oppressor. Through her method of mobilisation of myth and history, Devi succeeds in producing a work that stimulates the subaltern to assertively question dominant ideology, challenge and change the status quo that exploits and represses them.

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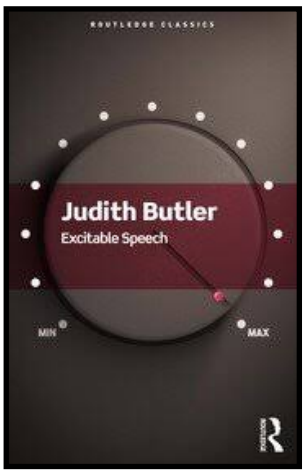
Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative by Judith Butler, Routledge, 1997, 212 pages, ISBN: 0415915880, 2234 INR



ADITI GUPTA

A reading of Butler's *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* allows thinking through the questions relating to speech acts, more specifically around hate speech – a speech that injures, words that wound. Questions such as: is the injury aspect of a speech located in what is uttered, and how it communicates, threatens, or performs violence? Or is it located in the utterer of the speech who injures those who are addressed in the speech? Both of these aspects can be found to be linked to language's propensity to act. To be vulnerable to injurious language is to rely on one's linguistic ontological condition of 'being' in language. Notably, according to Section 3 of the Slum Areas (Improvement and Clearance) Act, 1956, 'slum areas' are defined as mainly 'those residential areas where dwellings are unfit for human habitation due to […] or any combination of these factors which are detrimental to safety, health and morals'. It is because of such characterisations of urban informal settlements – that carry negative and unwarranted connotations with them extending to their inhabitants, making them into something requiring a correction, a solution – that Gilbert (2007) argues against the use of the term 'slum'. The concern with the vocabulary around urban informal settlements has to do with how such representations of slums as problems become the precursor for policy narratives and campaigns for 'slum-free cities'. At the same time, the vulnerability of informal settlements in being called 'slums' lies in how the framing of slums in terms of their identifiable existing conditions in official statutes uses what is already known about slums as the end of what can be known about slums.

Then, if the injury aspect of hate speech is located in how language constitutes us, is it possible to regulate hate speech without disrupting what we derive from language? The location of injury with the content of the speech creates a call for a legal discourse on what is speakable/unspeakable, and the location of injury with a speaking subject creates a call for who can and cannot transgress the demarcation of the speakable/unspeakable. Butler puts in perspective how both calls are calls to the state and the law to regulate not only what is injurious, but also what is speech. Butler instead argues for non-state-centered forms of thinking about speech, for if it is in language that we are constituted and threatened, then it is in language that we survive. It is in language that we constitute our agency precisely because of our primary vulnerability to language.

The location of injury in terms of what is uttered, and who uttered it against whom, has been part of the larger emphasis on interpreting the context of the speech act – that Austin (1962: 52) considers a 'total speech situation'. It is to argue that the sufferable effects of problematically injurious utterances are fully contextual. According to Butler, however, the line of argument that calls for contextualisation of speech acts fails to account for the ways in which injurious utterances are recontextualised –problematised, exposed, countered, and resignified. Butler's argument for resignification

is an argument for 'breaking with prior contexts of utterances and acquiring new contexts for which it was not intended' which both loosens and tightens the link between act and injury, between speech and conduct for it posits an unfixed transference (p.13). It is an argument about the possibility of a 'politically consequential *re*negotiation of language' (p. 92). This renegotiation is also of the trauma of being injured by language – from juridical to non-juridical, from state-regulated to non-state-regulated.

Another question that concerns this discussion is: if, with hate speech, an injury is inflicted against those who are already subordinated, would it affect the 're-subordination' of the one who is addressed? Butler introduces to this consideration of utterance, utterer, and referent, the complication of 'the body of the addressee' – arguing 'body of the speaker exceeds the words that are spoken, exposing the addressed body as no longer in its own control' (p.12). But to think that the one who is injured by speech is deprived of their power would mean to take a limited approach to understanding the relationship of words and language, of language and bodies, and of bodies and power. This, however, is not to take a non-performativity view of speech – that speech is not a performance of harm by the utterer inflicted on the addressed.

Rather, to think of hate speech as hateful conduct embodied by the speaker has the possibility of allocating the liability, and therefore, prosecutability, to a singular subject even though the injury may have its origins elsewhere. The utterer does not originate an injurious speech but is 'responsible' for the performativity of its 'repetition'. Butler muddles the authorship of an injury to argue that hate speech 'neither begins nor ends with the [singular] subject who speaks' , and that in many ways repetition of injury through speech is inevitable (p.34). However, this is not to say that the subject is not responsible for such speech, it is to say that the subject is not the originator of hate speech.

This is also not to argue that certain words with the propensity to injure be either forbidden from use and, therefore, locked in their places as traumas in themselves, or never be prosecuted for the lack of their absolute prosecutability. Rather, it is to argue against a juridical discourse that inflicts violence of its own and constructs the domains of the speakable and the unspeakable (p.77). It is an argument for an agentive approach to use, reuse, and defuse language in a way that repeats, iterates, and recites 'those injuries without precisely reenacting them' (p.40). In this sense, Butler preserves the possibility of a speech act 'as an insurrectionary act' (p.159).

The introductory sentences that appear on the foremost pages of each chapter of Butler's book find themselves at an oblique angle as if written as visual poetry. What that seems to do coincides with what Butler intends to do with the corpus of her texts – articulating a politics of performativity. In the slant aligned to the right, words become a performance on the page, giving visuality to textuality. However, in introducing a sense of 'body' to her sentences, Butler passes over the politics of spaces that this body-language visuality inherits.

Spaces punctuate bodies, as much as bodies punctuate language. And if language constitutes, threatens, and sustains bodies as subjects, there is an interrelatedness that language shares with spaces and spaces share with bodies (Vuolteenaho, et al. 2012).

Butler, in some ways, allows for a consideration of temporality in resignification of speech act, but not spatiality. The possibility for making a break with prior contexts, and for an offensive utterance to lose its power to injure, is attributed to 'the gap between the originating context or

intention… and the effects it produces', and the 'interval between instances of utterance' (p.14). However, resignification of the utterance, diffusion of injury, and autonomy in speech are made possible not only through time but also through space. This can be evidenced in how graffiti and street art become a renegotiation of spaces with linguistic art, a deterritorialisation of bodies that resignify a linguistic space.

The argument for space being constituted by language is substantiated by the vocabulary of interpellation. Being called a name is to be given an 'address', to be constituted in language but at a certain distance from one's subjectivity, and what one comes to occupy is a relation of subjectivation. Spaces then become instituted with morsels of power with their own narratives, translations, and fictions – a series of intertextual significations. The linguistic constitution of a subject, thus, is not limited to the interpellation of the body, but also an interpellation that exceeds the body.

Butler's *Excitable Speech* posits the body as the venue of power of language, however, the venue of the body and language is not construed as space that folds within itself a performative politics to be considered. This is addressed somewhat differently and relatedly in her *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly,* specifically in *Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street* where the relation between congregating bodies, free speech, and the public square as a space of politics is theorised to understand 'assembly' as 'performativity' – how a body 'speaks' in occupying a space (Butler, 2015).

Conclusively, it serves us to consider how *Excitable Speech* is a conversation that takes almost entirely within questions. It is a text written dominantly in terms of what the question is and what the question is not. Butler's quadripartite consideration of speech acts that are in some ways out of control is not just a critique of state regulation. Rather, it folds within itself a hope for radical acts of decontextualising and recontextualising the relation between word and wound.

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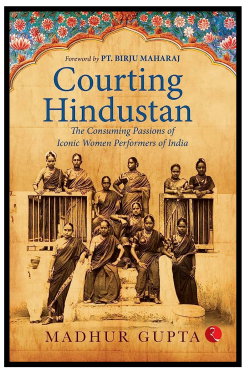
Courting Hindustan: The Consuming Passions of Iconic Women Performers of India by Madhur Gupta, Rupa Publications, 2023, 208 Pages, ISBN: 9789357021036, 228 INR



PUSHPITA MITRA

If one were to analyze the socio-political placement of women in the cultural project of modernity in India, they would come across as a very complex tale of both empowerment and subversion. On one hand, there were movements in support of women's rights, while on the other hand, a section of women was vilified, silenced and criminalized on charges of moral pollution. The women of the latter group stayed outside the conventional norms of marriage, spent life with suitors of their choice, and lived and worked under the public eye. Their 'non-marital sexuality' and association as 'women who were in the public gaze.. accessible to all' made them socially repulsive – 'fallen and dangerous' (Dewan, 2019, p.2-4). Their ways of living could not fit into the cultural imaginations of a monogamous-patriarchal structure of the newly emerging middle-class. The nexus of the colonial state and a group of Western-educated reformists started to look at these practices as exploitative and any female sexual activity outside marriage as prostitution and illegal. They sparked off the anti-nautch movements from the 1890s and finally on the ninth of October, 1947, the Devadasi Abolition Bill was passed (Subramanian, 2006, p.125-127; Gupta, 2023, p.172). By tampering the image and silencing the voices of these women from the cultural memory, these episodes turned into a history of violence when the artistry and knowledge of these women was squeezed out from them without even a fleeting mention of their acknowledgement. These processes marred them not only of their reputation but also economically by snatching away their livelihood. This community of women who were pushed into obscurity were the female performers and courtesans. They were chronicled by several names like *nagarvadhu, tawaif, baiji, devadasi, nautch-girls* et cetera in different parts of the country and at various points of time.

The courtesans carried strong matrilineal lines of performing tradition and underwent rigorous training in music, dance, and literature. In the pre-colonial times, they were regarded as 'cultured women' of high status in the society, expected not just to entertain the royalties but also to participate in the temple rituals (like in the case of the temple dancers or *Devadasis* of South India) and, serve as the guardians of art and culture. Titles such as '*jan*' or '*bai*', argues Gupta, were markers of such social standing (Gupta, 2023, p.5). In the North, young male members of the aristocracy (princes, *nawabs*-to-be) were sent to many *tawaifs* to learn good behaviour and social etiquette (*tameez* and *tehzeeb*) along with various male musicians and artists who also accompanied and trained with them. (2019, p.2). They were also quite active in the political spheres, some of them acted as important advisors of the monarchy running their day-to-day governing business and commanding the military in times of need. Since the nineteenth century, all that their persona got reduced to was a figure of prostitute – luring, swaying and trapping noblemen away from their households. Their free will and agency on matters of their sexual partnership and terms of living did not go well in the eyes of the Western colonizers and the newly-English educated native intellectuals who were guided by the Western ideals of Victorian morality. In their

place, a new set of upper-caste women of 'respectable', middle-class backgrounds were substituted as necessary steps taken to 'reform' and 'purify' the space of performing arts (Bakhle, 2005, p.5; Subramanian, 2006, p.115).

Active processes to invisibilize these women from the cultural memory started happening in many ways. To rise above the social stigma, the moral guardians gave them the forceful alternative of marriage and an honourable domesticated life. In reality, however, like the author has observed in the case of Begum Akhtar, this meant choosing between the art-form or the domestic life. In most cases, the upper-class man would show the broad-mindedness to marry a *tawaif/devadasi* but after the marriage, rarely did he approve of her performing in public, putting into place the subtle practice of *purdah*. The newly independent state and its apparatuses, brought stringent laws to deprive them of their patrons and opportunities for public performances. While the commercial ventures of the gramophone and film industry enabled them to survive after the first few years of independence, state-run cultural entities, like the All India Radio, openly made attempts to dehumanize them in order to curtail their traditional ways of living. In this context, the author has cited the interesting example of Jaddan Bai who was the mother of the famous cinema actress, Nargis and the first female filmmaker, producer and music-director of the Hindi film industry.

Jaddan ensured that her daughter grew up respectable. That may be the reason why Nargis was not taught how to sing. Those who remained gaanewalis had to suffer discrimination when the All India Radio put out a preference for married female vocalists over them. The gaanewalis were even required to use a different entrance so that their presence at recordings would not annoy 'normal', well-born employees (2023, p.136).

Saba Dewan's work has further made another interesting observation of the usage of nomenclatures at this time to distinguish women performers of the two different worlds. The colloquial term *gaanewalis* used for the *tawaifs* were often pitted against *gayika*, the Sanskritized term preferred for the married women from respectable household (p.5).

The cultural memory about these women entertainers have existed in two ways.Some solely chose to remember their skills, artistry, poetry and compositions, separated from their private lives. For others, the latter aspect of scandal and gossip about these women held more importance. The famous *tawaif,* Gauhar Jaan has been remembered for her feisty and extravagant character. She was the first to use the gramophone device in India at a time when the male *ustads* dreaded using the microphone, fearing the loss of their voice. Besides boasting her vocal prowess, Gauhar Jaan was known for her smart, bargaining skills of striking the perfect business deal with the foreign record companies. Janki Bai on the other hand, is remembered in the music fraternity by the acronym of *chappan-churi-* after she survived fifty-six stabbings by one of her lovers. Both these singers saw the epitome of their social status, glory and wealth when they were invited to perform for King George V at the Delhi Durbar in 1911. However, the results of their spendthrift habits did not go down well in history. They died with extreme penury, betrayed and robbed by their lovers and today lay in unknown graves in slum areas, forgotten in time. This was all that the moral policing eye chose to remember and document. It is only recently that the archivists and private music collectors have been finding a large corpus of unknown traditional *bandish* (Hindustani compositions) from their sound records, and cherishing their memory for their vocal expertise and understanding.

Of late, scholars, some of the performing artists, and archivists have taken a renewed interest in and around the lives and times of these women performers. Their efforts have discovered traces of these women through scattered memoirs, songbooks, sound (gramophone) records, and popular oral retellings among the artist fraternity. They have suggested an alternative narrative which does not just reduce them to promiscuous figures as the reformists posited, but rather tells stories about their skills, pioneering artistic inventions, combat and survival. The book *Courting Hindustan* by Madhur Gupta is another such attempt to revisit the world of this country's traditional female performers and entertainers, and the lesser-known narratives about their survival and little moments of victory. Within the sad episodes, the author chose to write in a celebratory tone to hint at a crucial fact that despite hardships the courtesans managed to survive, especially in the early decades of the post-independence period when the state was legally trying to erase them. Though their matrilineal tradition disappeared after the mid-twentieth century, their existence in the cultural memory is afresh among practitioners, artists and connoisseurs even today. Much of this has been made possible due to their sound records for the gramophone industry.

Tales of their absence and erasure cannot be considered absolutely fictional for many women have completely gone into oblivion. The case of Chandrabhaga Bai is one such stark example whose memory now lives only in a few anecdotal references. Chandrabhaga Bai was the courtesan and mistress of Jayarao Scindia (1834-1886) of Gwalior, with whom she had a son, Bhaiyya Rao Ganpat (1852-1920). Bhaiyya Rao received his musical legacy from his mother and became one of the famous harmonium maestros from the Gwalior Gharana. There is ample evidence about Bhaiyya Rao and his paternal roots but rarely any affirmative information about his mother, mainly because of the social stigma that started getting associated in the modern period. This was a common phenomenon that many ethnomusicologists have observed –

The male offspring of tawaifs are said to be acknowledged and cared for by their fathers..typically of wealthy classes… Some of the sons have risen to important positions…although I was told such musicians exist, I never met one who identified himself as such. (Neuman, 1980, p.100).

The reason for the celebratory tone adopted by the author partially lies in the successful attempts of some of these artists (Begum Aktar, Balasaraswati as some crucial examples) to leave their indelible mark irrespective of their marginal status. By exploring ten different lives in ten chapters, he has attempted to segregate them based on historical timeframes. They chronologically navigate from the ancient Buddhist period to the Medieval to the modern and early years of the post-independence era. The triumphs for some women were about fighting for one's dignity and principle (found in the chapters of Amrapali, Vasantasena and Roopmati). For few others, it was about rising to the ranks of a queen and exhibiting one's leadership qualities in a place highly dominated by men and sometimes at a time when they even lost the support of their patrons/spouses (Begum Samru, Begum Hazrat Mahal and Begum Akhtar). Yet for some others, it was about foreseeing the changing times, grabbing the opportunities they brought in, and eventually becoming pioneers in bringing revolution within the art form and their ways of consumption (Gauhar Jaan and Jaddan Bai). In other words, the author has portrayed these women singers and dancers as loyal lovers, diplomats and advisors, leaders, survivors, philanthropists as well as entrepreneurs. Madhur Gupta's *Courting Hindustan* meanders through accounts of oral history, mythology and empirical sources. His lucid language and story-

telling manner of writing can even grab the attention of such readers who might not be from the world of the performing arts but have an interest in it. The book thematically builds on the history and historiography of women entertainers of the Indian subcontinent, bringing forth issues of women independence, individuality, morality, marriage, resistance and survival within. Gupta's analysis of the traditional women performers stops at the case of Balasaraswati (1918-1984) whom he has stated as the last-living courtesan of India. However, the story of resistance and survival serves as a point of provocation and relevance to further analyze some of the post-colonial cases like the that of the bar dancers. Many journalistic and academic studies have thrown light on how some young girls and women from non-famous *tawaif* families ended up in the bar-dancing profession in search of employment. Thus, the vantage point of Victorian morality has often intertwined the business of women-entertainment with prostitution, but in reality, when the entertainment was stopped and they lost their means of livelihood, it was then these women entertainers who were forced into prostitution.

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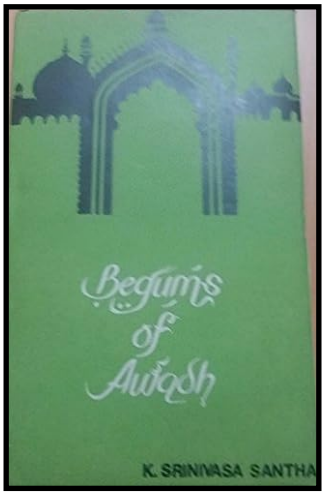

SAMEER MANI TRIPATHI

के. एस. सांथा द्वारा लिखित पुस्तक 'बेगम्स ऑफ अवध (Begums of Awadh)' 1980 ईस्वी में प्रकाशित हुई थी | इस पुस्तक के माध्यम से लेखिका, हमें अवध की स्थापना से लेकर उसके ब्रिटिश साम्राज्य में विलय और तदुपरांत 1857 ईस्वी के विद्रोह तक की ऐतिहासिक यात्रा में, बेगमों की राजनीतिक भूमिका पर पाठक का ध्यान आकर्षित करने का एक सफल प्रयास करती हैं | यह किताब किसी इतिहासकार के द्वारा अवध की बेगमों और उनके क्रियाकलापों के आलोचनात्मक विश्लेषण को समर्पित प्रथम प्रयास है | सांथा लेख में इस तथ्य पर अधिक बल देती हैं कि जब-जब किन्ही परिस्थितियों के फलस्वरुप आवश्यकता प्रतीत हुई, तब-तब बेगमों नें राज्य की आंतरिक और बाहरी राजनीतिक गतिविधियों में हस्तक्षेप किया|[i] हालांकि इस पुस्तक का सूक्ष्मता पूर्वक अध्ययन करने पर यह भी साबित होता है कि कई बार राजनीति में हस्तक्षेप करना बेगमों के लिए आर्थिक, सामाजिक तथा राजनीतिक रुप से हानिकारक सिद्ध हुआ | इसका एक बहुचर्चित उदाहरण 'बहु बेगम' का अपने पुत्र नवाब आसफ-उद-दौला के साथ अवध के शाही खजाने के ऊपर अधिकार को लेकर हुआ संघर्ष है| लेखिका बड़ी चतुराई से यह स्थापित करने में सफल हो जाती हैं कि अवध की सबसे प्रभावशाली बेगम और नवाब के बीच के संघर्षों का फायदा ब्रिटिश ईस्ट इंडिया कंपनी उठाती है| यह उदाहरण हमारे समाज में प्रचलित एक प्रसिद्ध लोकोक्ति 'दो बिल्लियों की लड़ाई में पूरी रोटी बंदर खा गया' को पूरी तरह चरितार्थ करती है | बेगम और नवाब दोनों ही अपने राज्य के आंतरिक मामलों में कंपनी को मध्यस्थता के लिए आमंत्रित करते हैं और कंपनी अपनी सुविधानुसार अपने पक्ष का चुनाव करती है | अनेक अवसरों पर लेखिका हमें नवाब, बेगमों और ब्रिटिश ईस्ट इंडिया कंपनी के बीच के महत्वपूर्ण परन्तु कम चर्चित संबंधों से अवगत कराने का काम करती है | उदाहरणार्थ बहु बेगम ने कंपनी के समक्ष अपना पक्ष रखने के लिए एक हिजड़े(ख्वाजासराय) बहार अली खान को अपना प्रतिनिधि बनाकर कलकत्ता भेजा था और लेखिका बेगम, नवाब, तथा कंपनी के प्रतिनिधियों के मध्य बातचीत का अत्यंत रोचक विवरण प्रस्तुत करती हैं | यह ऐतिहासिक कृति सदर-ए-जहाँ बेगम, बहु बेगम, बादशाह बेगम,बेगम हज़रत महल इत्यादि बेगमों के साथ ही अन्य कम महत्वपूर्ण बेगमों का भी उल्लेख करती है | अगर ईमानदारी पूर्वक बात की जाए तो मुझे ऐसी कई सारी जानकारियाँ मिली, जिसके विषय में इतिहास का विद्यार्थी होने के पश्चात भी मैं उनसे अनभिज्ञ था | मिसाल के तौर पर हममें से कितने लोगों को यह पता होगा कि 1837 ईस्वी में बादशाह बेगम ने एक तख्तापलट की कोशिश की थी | यदि इस पुस्तक में सबसे उल्लेखनीय प्रसंगों की बात की जाए तो लेखिका, हमें बेगम हजरत महल का उदाहरण देते हुए बताती हैं कि किस प्रकार 19 वीं शताब्दी की राजनीतिक अस्थिरता ने एक तलाकशुदा बेगम को 1857 के विद्रोह के दौरान लखनऊ का सर्वेसर्वा बना दिया | यह शोधकार्य हमें एक ऐसे विषय से रूबरू कराता है जो कि शायद अपने समसामयिक दौर में अवध के इतिहास-लेखन में एक 'वैकल्पिक इतिहास-लेखन' की अवधारणा प्रस्तुत करता है| इसके अतिरिक्त लेखिका अपने इस ग्रंथ में अवध साम्राज्य में हिजड़ों(ख्वाजासरायों) की भूमिका का संक्षिप्त परंतु अत्यंत रोचक और ज्ञानवर्धक वर्णन करती हैं |

20 वीं शताब्दी का उत्तरार्द्ध ऐतिहासिक लेखन की अनेक अवधारणाओं पर आधारित नयी बहसों जैसे सामन्तवाद, राज्य-निर्माण की प्रक्रिया, सबाल्टर्न (उपाश्रित वर्ग) का अध्ययन आदि के अभ्युदय का साक्षी बना | ये सभी नयी ऐतिहासिक लेखन प्रवृत्तियां इस बात का उद्घोषणा करती थीं कि वो इतिहास के उन पहलूओं पर चर्चा करना चाहती हैं जिनके बारे में प्रचलित इतिहास चर्चा नहीं करता। यहाँ एक विचारणीय संदर्भ यह भी है जब कभी भी किसी वैकल्पिक इतिहास की ओर इंगित

किया जाता है तो उसमें महिलाओं के योगदान(यदि प्रमुखता से कहें तो किसी महिला द्वारा महिला प्रधान इतिहास लेखन) की तरफ जरूर इशारा किया जाता है। इस बात की प्रबल संभावना है कि कई सारे पाठक/विद्वान मेरी इस बात से सहमत ना हों, परंतु इस वास्तविकता से कोई इंकार नहीं कर सकता है कि बिना महिलाओं के इतिहास के 'वैकल्पिक इतिहास' की बात बेमानी है। इसी दौर में सांथा की यह किताब प्रकाशित होती है | उस समय जब आवागमन इतना सुलभ और सुरक्षित नहीं था, ऐसे समय में जिस उत्कृष्टता के साथ देश के विभिन्न अभिलेखागारों में उपलब्ध स्त्रोतों की पहचान करना और ब्रिटिश राज के दौरान के उपलब्ध पत्राचारों के आधार पर महिला केंद्रित इतिहास लिखना एक अत्यंत ही सराहनीय प्रयास था | यद्यपि ये ग्रंथ किसी भी प्रकार से खुद को किसी वैकल्पिक या महिला केंद्रित इतिहास लेखन से प्रभावित होने का दावा नहीं करता, परंतु इसके अध्ययन के समय एक पाठक/विद्यार्थी के रूप में आपके समक्ष ये सारी बातें स्पष्ट हो जाती हैं |

उपरोक्त वर्णित सारी खूबियों के बावजूद भी ऐसा नहीं है कि यह कृति पूर्णतया त्रुटि विहीन है | इसको पढ़ते समय ऐसा अनुभव होता है कि कहीं ना कहीं ये किताब एक प्रकार बेगमों की राजनीतिक जीवनी बन कर रह जाती है | यद्यपि कुछेक अवसरों पर उनके व्यक्तिगत जीवन और हरम में विद्यमान आपसी द्वंद को दिखाया गया है | इस किताब के अध्ययन से मन में ऐसा भाव उत्पन्न होता है कि काश! इसमे अवध की आम महिलाओं की स्थिति अथवा हरम में घटित होने वाले सामाजिक और आर्थिक कारकों की थोड़ी सी और विस्तृत चर्चा की गई होती | इसके अतिरिक्त लेखिका पुस्तक की प्रस्तावना में अपने पाठकों से जिस 'आलोचनात्मक विश्लेषण' की बात कहती हैं, वो हमें ज्यादातर समय इस चर्चा में उपलब्ध नहीं होता है | इस किताब को पढ़ते समय मुझे ब्रिटिशों की भूमिका के बारे में लेखिका के विचारों से असहमति और आश्चर्य दोनों की अनुभूति हुई | यदि कुछेक घटनाओं जैसे बादशाह बेगम द्वारा तख्तापलट की कोशिश और 1857 के विद्रोह आदि को अपवादस्वरूप छोड़ दिया जाए, तो सांथा ने इस पूरी पुस्तक में ब्रिटिश कंपनी और उसके नुमाइंदों के प्रति तटस्थता की नीति अपनायी है, जबकि उनके द्वारा प्रस्तुत घटनाक्रम उन्हें तटस्थ रहने की अनुमति नहीं प्रदान करते |

व्यक्तिगत तौर पर मुझे ऐसा अनुभव होता है कि विगत वर्षों में 'मुगल हरम' के उपर अनेक प्रामाणिक और शैक्षणिक जगत में प्रचलित मानदण्डों को तोड़ने वाले लेखन कार्य किए गए हैं|[ii] उसकी तुलना में उसके उत्तरी भारत में 'उत्तराधिकारी राज्य' अवध की 'जनाना राजनीति' पर आधारित शोध कार्यों की कमी है | ऐसी परिस्थिति में यह किताब अवध की बेगमों के ऊपर भविष्य में होने वाले शोध कार्यों के एक पथ-प्रदर्शक की भूमिका का निर्वहन कर सकती है | निष्कर्षतः यह कहा जा सकता है कि उपरोक्त पुस्तक हमें अवध की शाही परिवार की महिलाओं के अनेक अनछुए पहलुओं से हमें अवगत कराती है| आखिरी में पाठकों को हमारा यही सुझाव है कि अपनी कुछ सीमितता के बावजूद यह एक ऐसी किताब है जिसको पढ़ा जाना चाहिए |

[i] सांथा, पृष्ठ. viii.

[ii] ऐसे इतिहासकारों में रूबी लाल, रेखा मिश्रा, इरा मुखोटी, रूखसाना इफ्तिखार के नाम प्रमुख हैं |

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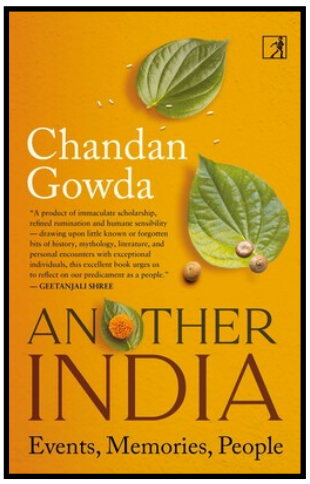

SONI WADHWA

In India, like elsewhere, texts of cultural heritage, such as the epics, are touted as a means to rediscover one's own identity and wearing it on one's sleeve. The resistance to this narrative of timelessness, benevolence and relevance of these texts to contemporary time and space often comes in the form of a backlash. The sources of this heritage are touted as patriarchal, even misogynist, and casteist or coercive. The two positions – let's say that of the fundamentalist and the liberal – find a refreshing revisit in Chandan Gowda's recent book *Another India*. It is a collection of his columns that reflect on instances and episodes, anecdotes and folk tales, historical figures and community cultures, all woven together with a concern for the richness of everyday examples primarily from Kannadiga contexts. Each piece has a story, a folk tale, a historical event, or a historical figure that makes the larger point about community cultures in India, urging readers to go beyond the binary of liberal/ illiberal in Indian thought and life, and to become listeners and readers of Indian tradition who understand the possibilities of ambiguities that exist among sources of Indian tradition.

The book has about 74 essays. Two examples will help point at the diversity of the material and also illustrate the approach and insight Gowda brings. The first essay, *A People Without a Stereotype* starts by pointing towards the absence of Kannadigas in 'this cute visual scheme of federal unity' as seen visible in images of brides and grooms on the walls of restrooms in the New Delhi airport and also in the way Kannadiga identity is somehow managed with a couple dressed in Coorg attire – that's somewhat odd given that Coorg and Kannadiga identities are not one and the same thing – in Indian broadcast channel Doordarshan's song from the 1980s, *Mile Sur Mera Tumhara* (p. 3), Gowda's observation is:

The non-arrival of a generic Kannada identity is also a triumph of its heterogenous nature. None of Karnataka's chief cultural zones, that is, the old Mysore region, coastal Karnataka, Coorg, Mumbai-Karnataka, and Hyderabad-Karnataka, has been able to stand in for the Kannada community image. Amidst the unpredictable twists in a fast-transforming India, a Kannadiga stereotype might yet emerge. At the moment, however, being an amorphous presence in the national imagination should mean a delicious freedom (p.5).

What starts as a narrative of absence turns into something of an occasion for celebration: instead of some hue and cry about absence of a community or identity, one finds 'a delicious freedom'. That is the lens of engaging with identity, outside that of critique, that one must learn.

The second example is 'The Adventures of Puttakka', a folk tale narrating the story of Puttakka, a beautiful wife who cuckolds her husband with the village headman who lusts after her. The focus of the story is not what happens to her marriage after that, but Puttakka's smart ways of confounding thieves who break into her house by seducing one of

them and teaching him a lesson by biting his tongue. Gowda's point behind drawing attention to this strange story of an unusual heroine, in contrast with the wronged Sita is:

The complex amoral story admires the quick-witted heroine while staying non-judgmental about her actions throughout. Besides, the husband's overlooking of her affair with the headman contrasts with the more commonly found sentiments of injured male pride on such occasions (p.110-111).

The choice of story helps one realise that there is a lot more than epics to understand gender dynamics in the subcontinent of a different time. Methodologically speaking 'anotherness' seems to be Gowda's take on the philosophical 'Other' that Western thought in general has been concerned with by evoking a sense of alternative narratives to the mainstream ones. These examples are an illustration of that 'anotherness' and are likely to be found charming by those interested in the nature of archives and memory. Gowda's curation of 'events, memories, people' as conveyed in the title of the book stands out for the assortment of life experiences that need to become a part of debates and dialogues in the country. The book is also a rich example of how to archive, curate, and read different texts empathetically. One learns that critique is not noise, and that religion and rationalism are not antithetical to each other. Critique is also a way of engagement that could best be explained with the Buddhist idea of *maitri*. How to practice maitri within critique is an art towards the vision of 'political creativity in the present' (p.124). This creativity uses 'the mythological inheritance of India' to work with 'the cultural psychology of Indians' (p.134). It 'melt(s)' the epics and slightly upgrades them to the current times (p.145). There are quite a few metaphors to understand the practice of 'anotherness': 'We need to acquire cultural sight by grafting on to the mother-creeper of the community min (p.147).

Perhaps, a better title for the book is 'Another India: Notes from Kannadiga Contexts', for its anchoring in the region, the language. It is also an inspiration for one to speak courageously from one's own linguistic or regional context without worrying about it being too particular, or risky when it comes to saying anything definite about a nation as heterogeneous as India. The particularity of the context might as well multiply with one's own linguistic and regional context and inspire more versions of anotherness.

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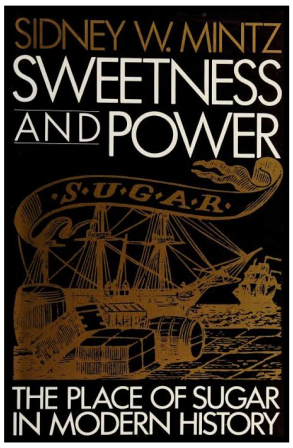
Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History by Sidney W. Mintz, Penguin Books,1986, 320 Pages, ISBN: 978-0140092332, 888 INR



MALVIKA SINGH

Sweetness and Power is a seminal work by anthropologist Sidney Mintz that explores the historical, economic, and cultural significance of sugar in the modern world. His well-researched account of the importance of sugar in the world, with a focus on England since the 1500s, shows how its trajectory changed from being a rarity in 1650 to a luxury in 1750, and into a virtual necessity by 1850. The book is a fascinating examination of how, through many centuries, the cultivation, production, and use of sugar have influenced international trade, labour relations, and cultural practices.

Mintz argues that sugar has played a central role in the rise of capitalism and the development of modern society, notably in the Western world. He examines the origins of sugar production, tracing its history from its cultivation in the Middle East and its spread across the Mediterranean, and then to the New World, where it became a key commodity in the Atlantic slave trade. The author also examines the cultural relevance of sugar, focusing on its contribution to the growth of mass consumerism and modern confectionery. He demonstrates how sugar changed from being a luxury good only available to the wealthy to become a cheap good that was enjoyed by individuals from all social stratas.

In the first chapter, he provides an introduction to the anthropology of food, discussing the role of sugar in that field of study, and mentions about the extraction of sucrose, its association with people, historical sources and provides a detailed description of early civilisations' dietary practices and how the idea of sweetness evolved over time, which was not characteristic before the 18th century. Mintz devotes much of his time to the two chapters on production and consumption. He provides a thorough analysis of the historical sources in the second chapter, which covers sugar manufacture, the locations and methods of sugar production. He also cites the influence of the westward expansion of Arabs on the European experience of sugar, the movement of the sugar industry to the Atlantic islands and the introduction of sugarcane into the New World from the Canary Islands.

In his description of consumption in Britain, in the third chapter, Mintz rekindles his interest in the topic of sugar itself. This is the best and most fascinating chapter in the book, and a noteworthy addition to the social history. He mentions the uses of sucrose as medicine, spice-condiment, decorative material, sweetener and preservative and how it came in connection with three other exotic imports- tea, coffee, and chocolate. He also includes a thorough description of how, beginning in the Middle Ages, affluent aristocrats and nobles used sugar and marzipan sculptures, figures, and things to demonstrate their wealth at banquets. It is fascinating how he depicts through images the giant sugar sculptures of cathedrals, ships, chariots, and nude women that were created at the time by royal sugar bakers. He also sheds light on the social aspects of it and mentions that 'the nutritional value of foods was not equally distributed within family units where usually wives and children are undernourished because of a culturally conventionalised stress

upon adequate food for breadwinner'. He also states that the uses and meanings of sugar would change in the hands of new users, becoming what they had not been before, but he didn't elaborate too much on this.

In the chapter titled 'Power', Sidney Mintz explores the power relations related to the production and use of sugar. In the age of sugar plantation economies, Mintz explains how European colonial powers possessed great strength due to their control over sugar production and trade. He delves into the exploitative aspects of sugar production, specifically focusing on the Caribbean and other regions' usage of slave labour. According to Mintz, this exploitation was essential to the colonial elites' rise to power and prosperity. The fifth and last chapter is devoted to in-depth reflections on dietary changes from the 20th century, with a focus on the shifting roles of sugars and sweeteners. The best thing is that he has justified the facts and data with many scholarly writings.

Mintz concludes by speculating on the societal effects of our new diet that is high in sugar. He makes the case that traditional diets that relied on complex carbohydrates like wheat, rice, or maize were communal in nature and required extensive preparation before being eaten. The modern diet, on the other hand, lays emphasis on individualism and is centred on prepared and processed meals that are high in sugar. These dishes are consumed solitary or on the go, signalling the demise of the traditional meal as a social ritual.

The rise in the use of prepared foods, the increase in meals eaten out, and the decline of the meal itself as a ritual (particularly for kin groups) have led in recent decades to different patterns of sucrose usage as well as to increases in the consumption of sugars overall, said Mintz. He also asserts that combined with bitter beverages, sugar was consumed daily by almost every living Briton. Mintz discusses how sugar became a symbol of wealth and status, shaping social hierarchies and consumer habits. He contends that sugar became firmly embedded in cultural norms and practices by satisfying psychological and social requirements in addition to physical cravings. Mintz provides a thorough examination of sugar's transforming influence on human cultures by looking at its historical, economic, social, and cultural aspects.

Mintz's work, which combines historical analysis, ethnographic study, and cultural criticism, is captivating and thought-provoking. In general, *Sweetness and Power* is a must-read for anybody interested in the rise of capitalism, the history and culture of food, or the effects of globalisation on contemporary society. This book is a significant contribution to the discipline of anthropology and an interesting read for everyone because of Mintz's enlightening and perceptive views.

Although the book is largely considered a classic in the fields of anthropology and food studies, it has also come under fire for a number of reasons. The book has been criticised for omitting the agency of the Africans who were held as slaves and made to labour on the sugar plantations. Although Mintz acknowledges the role of slavery in the development of the sugar industry, some critics argue that he does not fully explore the experiences of the enslaved people themselves, which I totally agree with. Although he mentions their eating habits in the book, their lived experiences in the production of sugar are not extensively discussed. This has led some readers to argue that the book downplays the violence, exploitation, and resistance of enslaved people in the production of sugar. Secondly, I noticed that Mintz's research is overly focused on capitalist, Western countries and does not adequately examine how sugar is used in non-Western cultures or how sugar production and consumption have

changed over time and across different geographical areas and historical periods.

In the assessment of this work, Mark Wilde points out that 'meaning' and 'power' may seem ill-defined or vague. Mintz provides scant information regarding how the British elite defined the uses and meanings of sugar for the general public. He suspects that his assertion has some validity, but we are offered little on which a judgement can be made. I somewhat concur with Mark Wilde's assertion that Mintz's conception of power in regard to sugar was hazy, because he has just briefly touched on the subject. He did, however, briefly highlight how different social classes use sugar in their diets. B W Higman, an Australian historian, states that Mintz's approach is anthropological rather than historical, and he explains in some detail what this means for the treatment of his topic. The historians will find it difficult to avoid noticing that the book's subtitle, *The Place of Sugar in Modern World History*, suggests something more comprehensive than is delivered. In response, I would argue that while Mintz may not have delved far into the history, I think the book was thorough enough to grasp the subject.

Despite these criticisms, *Sweetness and Power* is still a significant and influential work in the field of food studies and anthropology. Its analysis of the role of sugar has inspired a generation of scholars to explore the complex and multifaceted ways in which food shapes our world. The rise in the use of sugar is a central feature in the development of the modern diet. Numerous facets of this shift are successfully captured by Mintz.

Overall, *Sweetness and Power* is a perceptive and engaging study. This book analyses the development of sugar production and use, and further examines its connections to class, industrialisation, and slavery along with discussing how sugar has influenced modern food and eating practices. Mintz takes his readers on a detailed journey through the history of sugar to see how Europe was transformed into a sugar craving nation. The numerous references to sugar found in chronicles, letters, and cookbooks from the Renaissance period to the present day represent a treasure trove of amusing and quaint lore that can arouse the interest of anyone interested in the history of food.

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Kappithante Bharya by Bipin Chandran, Malayalam, Mathrubhumi Books, 2021,104 pages, ISBN: 9789355490650, 150 INR

MILEENA SAJU

From Rajavinte Makan[1] to Titanic: A review of Bipin Chandran's Kappithante Bharya.

While giving me a copy of *Kappithante Bharya (The Captain's Wife),* the guy at the DC Books counter told me that it is impossible to keep the book down until one finishes reading it. I would not exactly agree with him as I kept the book aside several times, once as I was tempted to revisit the Malayalam classic film *Rajavinte Makan*, and the second time to google Octavio Paz's poem 'Whenever two people kiss', both mentioned in the Novel.

Kappithante Bharya is the very first attempt of fiction by the Malayalees favourite '*Cinema Ezhuthukaran*' (one who writes about films) Bipin Chandran. Bipin Chandran has mostly done his work on non-fiction around Malayalam Cinema, and it is no wonder that his first novel shows the qualities of cinematic realism. Nothing can be said about this novel without drawing an image of two desperate women staring at a poster of Jack and Rose on the deck of the *Titanic*, an image that festoons the cover page of this novel. This image defines the novel and the intricacy of everyday life that it portrays. This Malayalam Novel Kappitante Bharya is a story of two strong and independent women, Annie and Rosily, who fight the piercing judgements and expectations of a family in particular and society at large while they wait for their lovers to come free from the clutches of the Ocean.

The novel and its plot and the life that is woven around it expresses the potential to break away from the conventional boundaries of Malayalam literature tainted by elitism and patriarchy. The author dares to move away from the typical Malayalam literary settings of 'significant happenings' and of a long narrative of the misery of human life intended to satisfy the upper layer of readers, which used to define Malayalam literature, to simple everyday life. Though the shift away from the elitist imaginations of fiction writing makes the novel acceptable for a wider audience, the author somewhere fails to replace the old orders with new politics.

Bipin Chandran walks us through a hoard of films released during the 1980-1990s and unveils the life of Thomas, Annie and Rosily in a tiny village in Kerala. Thomas, who was in love with Annie, had to go through unprecedented events in his life, which are beyond the imaginations of a Malayalee simpleton and is separated from Annie for years. The sea parts them as he is being imprisoned revengefully on the island of Mali. Annie lives with Rosily Aunty, an elderly woman who is also separated from her husband, John Fernandes, who was the captain of a sailing ship that disappeared in the blues of the ocean. While a friend's betrayal designed Thomas's fate, John Fernandes's disappearance is shrouded in mystery. Even though everyone believed that Fernandes was dead, even after time fluttered from *Rajavinte Makan* to *Titanic*, Rosily did not lose hope.

In the universe of *Kappithante Bharya,* cinema determines time. It is through the films played in the Leela Mahal that people look back at their lives in retrospect and introspect. Cinema, for

them, is memory; it reminds them of that time in their life, their love, lust, hunger and sorrow. Annie's and Thomas's romance started blooming when *Rajavinte Makan* was being screened at Leela Mahal, a local film theatre around which community life revolves. A new mimicry troop was created by Thomas and his friends when Leela Mahal was screening *Ramji Rao Speaking*[2], Thomas was betrayed by his friend while *Kilukkam*[3] was being screened. Leela Mahal is the centre of Bipin Chandran's fictional Universe. Every incident, every tiny life story is marked by the films played in this theatre. Finally, Annie and Rosily are reunited with Thomas and John Fernandes while *Titanic* was being screened, not at Leela Mahal, something equally unusual in the narrative as the sudden shift to a Hollywood film.

Cinema is the only true witness of their lives. The community life is enhanced with the spectacle of popular Malayalam films, villagers imitating the popular heroes and adding popular dialogues into their everyday language. Every comparison, each reference point, and all the 'rememberings and forgettings' are guided by these films. Rosily Aunty, the captain's wife, often reminds people of Balan Mash from the film *Thaniyavarthanam*[4]. Her longing for her husband, who was long lost at sea, and her belief that he will come back reminds them of *Amaram*[5]. Finally, Titanic brings closure – a fairy tale ending- a meaning to their lives. I was unable to digest at first how the beautiful narration of pure life, simple yet complicated, guided and recorded by Malayalam cinema and its classic characters, was taken over, all of a sudden by a Hollywood movie, The Titanic, which eventually plays a determining role in the life of Annie and Rosily.

The language of the novel indeed, as Benyamin in his foreword says, is 'enchanting and haunting' (p.ix). The language has been skilfully chosen and it carries a degree of poetics that can create a 'longing for home' for the Malayalee diaspora. The language indeed is not the standard elite textbook Malayalam but a language that is always spoken at home, which carries the feeling of home. The narrative style reminded me of the bedtime stories that my father used to tell me when I was young, in a language that is close to the simple existence, the day-to-day lives of the village.

The author attempts to undo the hierarchy that privileges the *Savarna* outgrowths of Malayalam literature which prefers a certain kind of language and a certain kind of narrative over the other. Basheer[6] was a rebel, and Bipin Chandran attempted to be so. It could not be a coincidence that Basheer's literature has been given an important space in Bipin Chandran's fiction. Like Basheer's *Andakadaham*[7] (World), Bipin Chandran's universe will also survive the miseries of elite expectations. Bipin Chandran's women, too, do not speak the language that is traditionally written for women, but needless to say, Chandran fails to attribute enough importance to these women as 'women.'

The 'fairy taleness' in the story is disappointing. The novel does not show any justice towards the title 'Kappitante Bharya.' Neither is Rosily given an appropriate space in the Novel nor is the term Captain's wife politically suitable. The identity of Rosily Aunty, even though she is portrayed as an independent woman with frequent descriptions of her bold character – a feminist perhaps – is almost always referred to as the captain's wife, and her story is solely completed by the happiness of meeting her man after years of loneliness. Love and loneliness of the protagonists are powerful emotions which deserve their own space in literature, and indeed Bipin Chandran's language has beautifully done its part in evoking a catharsis with the emotional undercurrents of his characters. We do sympathise with Annie, and we do find happiness when Rosily meets John Fernandes after years of suffering. But it is the privileging of the women's love for their man,

over and above their individual personality, depriving them of any other sort of existence, is what happens to be disturbing in the narrative. Both the women are enslaved within the boundaries of a house, whereas the men are out in the world, in the unknown waters and in an alien land. The same old fashion man-women relations are redrawn with new colours and sketches, something that the readers would not have expected from young writers like Bipin Chandran.

Bipin Chandran's obsession with Cinema, *Kadal* (Ocean) and *Kappal* (Ship) is beautifully translated into the story (This obsession is evident in the preface, which is, again, brilliantly crafted). The Sea is a silent character in this film, sometimes romantic, sometimes brutal. The Sea took away loved ones from Annie and Rosily, and the ocean united Thomas and Fernandes. The relationship between Rosily Aunty and Annie is more beautiful than their relationship with their men. Beyond her role as a home nurse, Annie develops deep friendship and sisterhood with Rosily Aunty, who guides her in her life and gives her the courage to fight for her love. Annie and Rosily help the film survive the currents of male heroic adventures and make the space available to discuss the politics of society and family.

Indeed, Bipin Chandran dared to take the road that was least travelled by and one does expect Bipin Chandran to travel more through the thorny dense wilderness and dissent with the expectations that normalise life in an unfair society.

New Malayalam films are being released, and the readers are waiting.

Notes

1. *Rajavinte Makan* (The Prince) is a 1986 classic Malayalam film directed by Thampi Kannanthanam. The novel begins with a reference to this film.
2. Ramji Rao Speaking is a 1989 Malayalam comedy film directed by Siddique and Lal.
3. *Kilukkam* (Jingle) is a 1991 Malayalam film directed by Priyadharshan.
4. *Thaniyavarthanam* (Repetition) is a1987 Malayalam film directed by Sibi Malayil. Balan Mash, the protagonist of the film, was deemed mentally ill by the villagers.
5. *Amaram* (Stern) 1991 Malayalam film directed by Bharathan. This film revolves around the life of a fisherman named Achootty. Sea plays a prominent role in this film.
6. A popular Malayalam author and freedom fighter.
7. From Basheer's dictionary.

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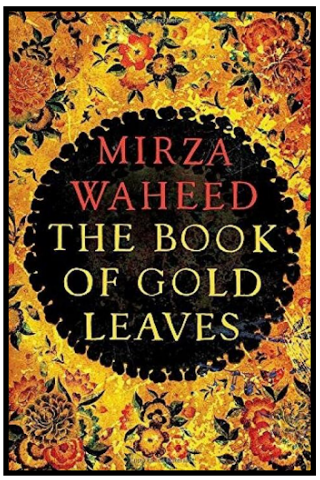
The Book of Gold Leaves by Mirza Waheed, Penguin Books, 2014, 280 Pages, ISBN: 9780143422839, 399 INR



MEHNAZ ABDULLAH

In the dark times

Will there also be singing?

Yes, there will be singing.

About the dark times

Bertolt Brecht

Svendborg Poems (1939), trans. John Willett

The epigram 'Motto' by Bertolt Brecht encapsulates the vicissitudes of turbulence-ridden times. On one hand, it suggests that despite the harshest adversities, the art of expression has an unyielding resilience, but on the other, it suggests that conflict becomes the dominant leitmotif of dark times. Thus, the all-pervading nature of a conflict captures our imagination in a way that both our songs and silences narrate the tales of the same. Similarly, Mirza Waheed's novel The Book of *Gold Leaves* takes us on a poignant journey where he unravels the nature of chaos that dark times entail. While normalcy is the first thing that is robbed in times of conflict, the hijacking of desires and dreams is perhaps conflict's greatest collateral damage. Both the mundane and the extraordinary are shaped by the invisible hand of turmoil. Likewise, the world created by Mirza Waheed in his novel highlights how each character's destiny is inseparable from the zeitgeist of political instability. The novel is set in the early 1990s in downtown Srinagar. The author narrates the story of the region's rapidly changing political landscape and the effect it has had on the lives of different characters. The novel displays the love story of Faiz and Roohi against the backdrop of sprawling military presence. It goes on to outline changes in the daily activities of local residents following heavy militarisation of the city: from late-night outings to deafening silences on the roads at dusk. The tragic exodus of Kashmiri Pandits after the selective targeting of the community has also been narrated in the book. The spawning of army bunkers at every nook and cranny along with the conversion of hotels into torture cells creates a psyche of fear. Makeshift bunkers are set up in school 'rooms that have for ages listened to the whispers of the older girls, the laughter of the younger ones'(p.64).

The novel is successful in exploring the complexity of human existence through the portrayal of love between Faiz and Roohi. Despite being set in a war-torn state, where basic survival takes precedence over catering to an elaborate array of human emotions, the spark of love ignites the protagonists. Faiz is a *naqāsh* (papier-mâché artist) who earns a meagre income and supports his large household and Roohi is a spirited, headstrong and attractive woman who dreams of experiencing a love story.

The picturesque scene of the swirling breeze sweeping everything on its way conspires the lovers to meet. Waheed portrays the power of destiny writ large. The characters succumb to its force, mindless about consequences and oblivious to social realities. As in any quintessential love story, it is only when characters are all engrossed in love, the jolt of reality strikes, making the lovers see what seemed invisible at its inception. In the case of Faiz and Roohi, they each belong to different sects of Islam. So, they have to navigate not only

through the political turmoil which is all-encompassing but also through deep social cleavages Waheed's lyrical prose gives us a glimpse of the shared world that Roohi and Faiz create together while juxtaposing it with the vivid details of the grimness that engulfs the city. 'They dream and dream. Together and alone. They meet and talk, the evening prayer their pretext and sanctuary' (p.71). But the rapidly deteriorating political climate results in the city being subjected to a round-the-clock curfew. Thus, 'All movement proscribed. All meetings banned. All life besieged. A deathly calm has spread everywhere, as soldiers circle the area from sides' (p.89).

Faiz's character takes a dramatic turn when there is an attack on a school minibus and his Godmother is killed in a crossfire. As a result, he swings to 'the borderland between sanity and insanity, or, that, his mind is filled with the thoughts of escape, of flight, or running away and freeing himself. He cannot take it anymore' (p.106). The need to escape the state of helplessness pushes him to become a militant. His artistic brilliance at papier-mâché seems meaningless when he cannot contribute to a greater cause. Remaining true to his artistic sensibility— like his namesake Faiz Ahmed Faiz whose poetry is marked by defiance against the might of President Zia-ul-Haq— Faiz marches unwittingly towards the mission of bringing justice to his people. Waheed explores the notion of how conflict drags individuals out of their personal space, a sensitive artist transforms into an armed fighter. The luxury to remain 'apolitical' is lost when immediate lives are at stake.

Mirza Waheed has also touched on the significant theme of unplanned development in Srinagar. Unregulated urbanisation has blocked the city's natural drainage canals and the network of lakes has collapsed. The devastating flood of 2014 was a grim reminder of the need to reevaluate the parameters of development in an ecologically sensitive area. The nostalgia about the currently non-existent Nallah Mar canal invokes a sense of remorse in the novel. Environmentalists cite the filling up of the Nallah Mar navigational canal which connected Bari Nambal to the Khushal War lake and its conversion into the Nallah Mar Road as an ecological disaster. 'This road, too, was built on water, filling yet another artery of the city' (p.86). Such issues of great significance become marginalised in conflict zones as people are forced to focus primarily on the concerns of life and death. Waheed suggests that there is a lot that goes on in the background of the conflict. However, the events from the background get lost into oblivion. Therefore, conflicts create selective memories of history. While the consequences of conflict usually focus on death, destruction and despair, a range of events and episodes from the history of a region are erased alongside. Waheed maintains that the presence of a canal in the place of Nallah Mar road will, in a similar way, become a legend to be forgotten by posterity.

The plight of the Kashmiri Pandits who were forced to leave their home during the upheaval is represented by a sense of loss to Kashmiri culture. Waheed depicts the heart-wrenching details of the departure of Faiz's immediate neighbour, Dinanath's family, who had been his neighbour for at least half a century. The mass exodus of Kashmiri Pandits shook the very foundation of the valley's composite society, as it witnessed a radical shift in the aftermath of their departure. Principal Shanta Koul's transformation from being an assertive woman who speaks her mind to living as a forced recluse for survival captures the painful complexity of the shifting power dynamics. However, the novel gives scant attention to the fact that an element of insularity has a tendency to brew when communities grow in isolation.

Waheed justifies the narration of the story about Kashmir by a Kashmiri with his usage of

colloquial expressions throughout the novel. One is reminded of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* where Achebe deliberately introduced Igbo words and metaphors into a novel written in English. While it is refreshing to know the sociopolitical landscape of Kashmir from the lens of a native, it is equally baffling how Waheed has glossed over the Shia-Sunni divide in the Valley. The phenomenon of inter-sectarian marriages doesn't enjoy general social acceptability in the Valley. However, Roohi and Faiz's relationship receives an easy acceptance from their respective families. Minor resistance from some insignificant characters doesn't adequately reflect the magnitude of opposition such relationships/marriages face. Waheed wants to show that the sectarian divide retreats during times of adversity, yet, at no point can one ignore the fact that conflicts can often exacerbate parochialism.

Overall, *The Book of Gold Leaves* is a riveting story about love during a time of conflict. It captures the layered complexity of the Kashmir conflict by providing it with a human element. It explores the richness of tradition bequeathed to the region from the plurality of different cultures. Waheed's melodious prose accentuates the beauty of the Valley's geographical distinctiveness, which has earned it the sobriquet '*Firdaus*'. The outstanding element of the novel is the authenticity of its narration, as the writer gives the reader an insider's view of a person living and loving amidst dark times.

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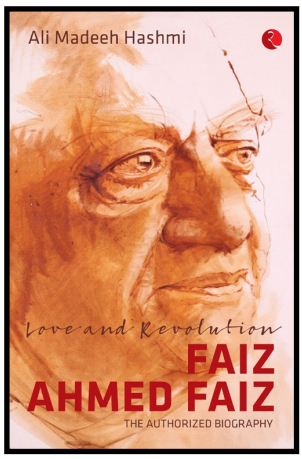
Love and Revolution: Faiz Ahmed Faiz: the authorized biography by Ali Madeeh Hashmi, Rupa Publications, 2016, 310 Pages, ISBN:9788129145468, 495 INR



KHUSHBU SHARMA

Transcending national boundaries, Faiz Ahmed Faiz was, in his lifetime, a poet of many lands and became, in his death, a poet of the world.

For a young academic, writing a review of a book like this is not an easy exercise. The dryness that the crass professionalism of academia induces in its practitioners essentially blunts their literary sensibilities. Reading Hashmi's closely witnessed and lucid account of one of South Asia's tallest literary figures- Faiz Ahmed Faiz was a much-needed creative interruption, not only to change the reading palette of the reviewer but also to revisit the times that ran parallel to the fascinating life of an intriguing figure like Faiz.

The best thing about this book is that it does not read 'heavy' in comparison to the figure that it seeks to portray. Ali Madeeh Hashmi being the grandson of Faiz Ahmed Faiz has perhaps seen him too closely and therefore could successfully present him with all his human characteristics in all their shades, a quality that is usually absent in other character sketches written about Faiz. This is a story that slowly yet engagingly narrates the tale of how a young boy Faiz Ahmed Khan, an amateur poet who begins with poetry as a means to come to terms with his unrequited love, rose to become the FAIZ AHMED 'FAIZ'-one of the most celebrated poets of the Indian subcontinent and an invaluable asset for the progressive and left movement across the globe.

The book begins with the funeral of Faiz Ahmed Faiz. Usually, biographies begin with the birth but this one begins with death. Such a beginning is not unintentional: it symbolizes how great poets like Faiz and that of his league do not have an end and even an end is a beginning of their afterlives- as eternal figures who break the notions of time and space to become immortal. Hashmi is a psychiatrist by profession and he rightly says in the beginning that his profession might creep into the descriptions, narrations, and analysis of Faiz's life events, feelings, and actions at different points which becomes very evident in his attempts during his writing to find out why something has happened the way it has happened. The vivid descriptions of Faiz's personality reveal many intricate details of his life which are not known otherwise- his love for cricket, his guilty pleasures in scotch whiskey and cigarettes, his serene attachment to his mother and a taste for Afghan delicacies like Gosh-e-Feel. It is interesting that at several points in the biography, the author tries to present a larger socio-political scenario of the times about which he is writing, joining the dots with the specifics of Faiz's life to whatever was happening around him. For instance, while discussing the times of his birth, the chapter begins with the history and the political economy of this city named Sialkot where Faiz was born.

The way Faiz's life story has been narrated does not kill the 'suspense' at any moment, rather the author builds it incrementally to the levels where knowing what the reader craves for feels equivalent to the act of quenching one's thirst searching for water for too long. People across the globe know that Faiz was a communist but

when did he became one and why? Most people assume that one becomes a communist during one's days at college or university; and for Faiz since he studied at an institution like Government College Lahore, one would automatically assume that it must be his life here that introduced him to leftist ideas which would encourage him to choose this ideology. However, as the author reveals, it was not Lahore but Amritsar that not only exposed him to communist ideas but also enabled him to participate directly with the grassroots labor movement of his times. Everyone's life has a city that changes their fortunes, which city did change Faiz's destiny? Though he would call Lahore his love and the city of lights, it was Amritsar that brought the hundred-and-eighty-degree shift to his life-

Faiz lived in Amritsar for about six years (1935-40). He often described this as one of the happiest times in his life. This was where he was first introduced to leftist ideas, where he became involved in the All-India Progressive Writers' Association, and where he met and fell in love with his wife, Alys (p.76).

While writing the biography of a poet especially one as great as Faiz Ahmed Faiz whose life revolved around Nazms, Sher, Ghazals, Marsiyas, etc. the biographer also needs to have a tight grip over poetry and various literary traditions not only of her own times but also of the person's whose biography she attempts to write. In this case, it must be said that Hashmi even while being a psychiatrist by profession has a deep knowledge not only about poetry in general which becomes very evident in the sections wherein he discusses the making and aftermath of Faiz's very first masterpiece 'Naqsh-e-Fariyadi' (which holds his most popular creations like 'Bol ki Lab Aazad Hein Tere' and 'Mujhse Pehli si Mohabbat'), but also of the larger socio-political impulses of those times- from World Wars to anti-imperial mobilization, Hashmi describes it all with adequate accuracy, depth and in complete sync with Faiz's personal life.

The beauty of this text also lies in the manner in which Faiz's letters to his wife Alys (which he wrote from Jail after being charged with the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case) have been creatively used. Some lines here and others there- Faiz's emotionally penned down words from the toughest time of his life remain sprinkled throughout the text around which the author knits the narration of his grandfather's other important life events. The text must be credited for its attempts at de-deifying Faiz and as a consequence humanizing him. It is also to the credit of the writer that while writing about his grand-father he puts forward certain familial details which if concealed would not have made much difference but since they have been revealed have definitely shed light on the slippery streaks in Faiz's ideology. For instance, events surrounding the marriage of Faiz's elder daughter Salima. While Faiz chose Alys as his partner for himself against several odds, when it came to his daughter's marriages, he appears to behave slightly traditionally in his approach as is evident from his words mentioned in the book-

there is a certain way of doing everything in an established social system other than the boy and girl liking each other. The parents should agree as well. In society, waywardness causes disharmony. Some basic principles cannot be ignored for a young couple, what better than to have their elders' blessing as well as live for each other. This is what marriage means in socialism. (p.217)

However. one thing that bothered me as a reader while reading this text is the constant back and forth with the timelines and repetition of certain incidents of Faiz's life which became very confusing at some points. Probably it is because the author wrote different chapters of the book at different times and hence the biography lacks the sync between different phases of Faiz's life. At certain moments it feels

as if one is constantly juggling with the several socio-political events around the world while also trying to situate Faiz's personal and professional life in relation to them. But interestingly, one can only wonder at the writer's awareness of the political history, progressive literature as well as Socialist and Marxist thought which defined the contours of Faiz's political activism and literary career.

Based on the kind of life one lives, especially someone like Faiz who constantly remained under the public gaze, there are perceptions and rumours that tend to surround one's personality. Sometimes these rumours crystallize into how that personality is received by the world while living and how it is remembered after death. The last two chapters, especially 'Man and the Myth- I and II' felt as if the author is trying to clear the dust that surrounded Faiz's personality since he himself is not here to clear it up and even if he were alive would not bother to do this. But everyone needs a defence and one can find it here in the form of this book. It reaffirms what the world outside knows about Faiz but it also reveals what the world does not know. However, this defence might be a side-product of what the author actually intended to produce through this text- a humane, raw and real account of Faiz's life. One can definitely read it without being burdened with excessive dry detailing and therefore it still feels like more than a biography, a beautifully crafted story- of a grandfather by his grandson.

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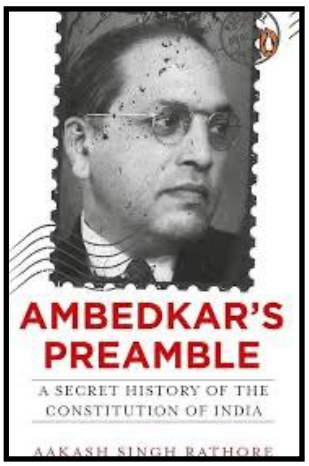
Ambedkar's Preamble: A secret history of the constitution of India by Aakash Singh Rathore, Vintage, Penguin Random House,2020, 236 Pages, ISBN: 9780143457183, 399 INR



SHUBH SIHANIYA

In 2020, when India experienced a nationwide outcry for the protection of citizenship rights against the CAA and NRC, *Ambedkar's Preamble: A Secret History of the Constitution of India* authored by Aakash Singh Rathore arrived on the shelves of bookstores. As the country was swept by protests, rallies and public meetings, the people of India read and re-read the Preamble as a reminder to the state of the rights and power of the people as sovereign. In Shaheen Bagh, which emerged as the epicentre of the movement, women, young students, journalists, and activists harked back to the principles of the Preamble for reinstating the idea of Indian secularism in the public space and building a strong front against state power.

Notwithstanding the power of the Preamble, the question of its authorship has been shrouded in mystery. From the low attendance of members of the Drafting Committee to the sparse references about the origin of the Preamble in the Constituent Assembly debates, has generated a host of speculation among scholars and thinkers. Nonetheless, the common understanding traces the Preamble to the famous Objectives Resolutions of January 1947 moved by Jawaharlal Nehru in the Constituent Assembly, which laid out the ideals and principles to be adopted by the constitution-in-making of India. A deeper historical analysis, however, would take a student of history back to Salt Satyagraha of 1930, the Poorna Swaraj Declaration of 1929, the Nehru Report of 1928, the Non-Cooperation of 1920 and Dadabhai Naorji's and P.C. Ray's economic critique of British rule (1901 and 1904 respectively) as landmark events, inspiring the ideals of the great nationalist leaders. However, revising this commonsensical and linear, but deficient narrative dominated by the Congress and its leaders,Rathore draws attention to Dr Ambedkar as the Chairman of the Drafting Committee and author of the Preamble.

Similar to Rathore's earlier works *B.R. Ambedkar: The Quest for Justice* and Dr Ambedkar's biography, *Becoming Baba Saheb,* this book also reflects the former's peculiar understanding of the latter's mind and intellectual moorings. A philosopher by training, unlike other scholars of Ambedkar, Rathore has an unmatched grip on his subject as an academician, a student, 'forever engaged in study, discussion, and debate' and forefronts the ideological and philosophical influences on Dr Ambedkar's thinking, which other recent works by Shashi Tharoor and Arundhati Roy have kept on the back burner in favour of the studying the more political, radical and anti-casteist Ambedkar (p.xxxvii). Consequently, Rathore reflects on his subject as a dynamic and evolving personality who was 'firm on his principles…' and yet, 'pragmatic about the means and strategies used to secure them'(p. xxxvii).

Till recently, the history of the Constitution was limited to what has been criticised as an excessive emphasis on the great men of the Indian national movement and the deification of the text as a repository of liberal values and citizenship rights. As reflected by one of the

early historians of the Constitution, Granville Austin, who credits the liberalism of the Indian Constitution to those he sees as semi-divine oligarchs leading the Congress – Nehru, Prasad, Patel and Azad. However, signalling a departure from this elitist narrative, the newer works look at the Constitution as a site of 'political negotiations' wherein a host of social actors have come together on issues of representation and power-sharing (Elangovan, 2022). 'Ambedkar's Preamble' is a new addition to the budding histories of the making of the Constitution such as Kanika Gauba's essay, 'Forgetting the Partition: Constitutional Amnesia and Nationalism', which underlines the memories of Partition violence as a definitive force behind the question of citizenship and minority rights and Rohit De and Ornit Shani's articles on people's role in the shaping of the constitution through judicial activism and letters sent to the Constituent Assembly, respectively – among other scholars. Rathore embarks on a similar path of broadening the scope of historical analysis beyond the great men of the Congress and gives space to Dr. Ambedkar, his ideas, his anxieties and the debates that he was a part of during the 1940s and 1950s.

Rathore tries to argue that the Preamble – far from being the progeny of the Congress – was the manifestation of Ambedkar's genius and political thought. He dissects the six central ideas of the Preamble – justice, liberty, equality, fraternity, dignity and nation to spell out the imprint of Dr Ambekar's intellectual thoughts and life experiences on the Preamble. By doing so, he attempts to 'uncover little-known aspects of modern Indian intellectual and constitutional history, and spotlight moment of Dr Ambedkar's revolutionary social, political and jurisprudential thought, hitherto hidden from conventional accounts' (p. xlviii.). In other words, as a philosopher, he attempts to enter Dr Ambedkar's mind to understand these six crucial ideas, their meanings, intellectual origins, and the vision of Ambedkar behind adding these to the Constitution.

The book is divided into six chapters, each discussing one idea. Rathore paints a vivid picture of the past, populated with contemporary debates between the Socialists, the Marxists, the Hindu-nationalists and the Anti-caste leaders to spell out the thought process and inspiration motivating Dr Ambedkar. In doing so, Rathore also spells out the 'secret' meanings that some of these ideals meant for Ambedkar. Furthermore, he does not shy away from broadening the narrative to include the role of global intellectual trends based on the French and Russian Revolutions in understanding the influences on Dr Ambedkar and his Preamble.

For instance, Dr Ambedkar held that true independence and democracy in India required nothing short of a social revolution brought by an egalitarian constitution that safeguards the minorities. In this context, Rathore tells us that Dr Ambedkar's conception of 'Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India', provides the basis of the 'secret' meaning attached to his idea of equality. He points out that by taking inspiration from the Marxist notion of revolutions and counter-revolutions, Ambedkar imagined the rise of Buddhism as a revolution against the corrupt, superstitious, degraded and exploitative Vedic society. In Ambedkar's perception, the Constitution of India marked the climax of the long revolution against caste. Therefore, a simple idea of equality in the Preamble is unpacked by Rathore to bring out the strong meaning attached by Dr Ambedkar.

Rathore sidesteps the perilous pitfall of anachronism that scholars of historical figures too often find themselves stuck in. He refuses to freeze his subject in time as static monoliths with rigid perspectives. His own acknowledgement best states the richness of Rathore's analytical

prowess:

…we need to understand Dr Ambedkar's thoughts as not a static or constant viewpoint, but as a dynamic flow instead. I believe that his ideas evolved in accordance with new information that came in: new facts, momentous events, discovery of new literature (p.100).

In a similar vein, in one of the chapters, Rathore points out that the idea of 'fraternity' that Dr Ambedkar never clearly defined, in reality, held profound meaning in his writings. For him, it was the glue that held equality and liberty together and stopped them from devouring the Indian society and democracy. Yet, he never stuck with a particular usage or meaning, evolving his ideas over decades. Furthermore, in the wake of the bloody reality of Partition, unanimous acceptance of the clause may seem a no-brainer to contemporary history readers. However, for Ambedkar, 'Fraternity' addressed another 'underlying concord' in his mind: 'the contentious and divisive omnipresence of caste' (p. 96). The system of graded hierarchy and violence that was being shaken to the very core by the Constitution and Hindu Code Bill created an urgent 'need for fraternal concord and goodwill in India [that] was never greater…' (p. 97).

Even though Rathore extensively cites from archives and Dr Ambedkar's writings, at times, he depends on conjecture rather than concrete primary material. For instance, the minutes of the meetings of the Drafting Committee are choppy at best, especially around the time when the Committee adopted the draft preamble which supposedly came out of the pocket of Dr.Ambedkar. Consequently, Rathore relies on indirect shreds of evidence to support his thesis.

Ambedkar's Preamble is a powerful intervention in the project of revising our deified understanding of the Constitution as a liberal, nationalist and utopian text only concerned with rights and justice, and underpins the debates, anxieties and power struggles that still continue to transform the document. It is an important book to understand the story of the Preamble and the values and vision of its writer(s). This book not only revises the old linear and Congress-centric historiographical approach to the making of the Constitution but also foregrounds Dr Ambedkar and his struggles for justice as a force to be reckoned with.

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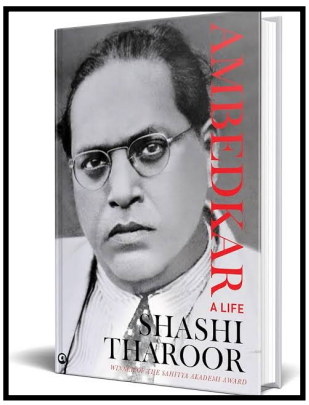
Ambedkar: a life, by Shashi Tharoor, Aleph Book Company, 2022; ISBN: 9391047505,226 pages,599 INR



TANMAY KULSHRESTHA

Shashi Tharoor's *Ambedkar: A Life* is a comprehensive and insightful biography that delves into the life and legacy of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, one of the most influential figures in modern Indian history. Tharoor's work is a commendable effort to shed light on the multifaceted personality of Ambedkar, who played a pivotal role in shaping the Indian Constitution and championing the cause of the marginalised sections of society.

Ambedkar's life and work have been the subject of numerous books, academic studies, and popular writings, reflecting his towering stature and enduring legacy in Indian history and politics. In the realm of scholarly works, authors like Christophe Jaffrelot, Valerian Rodrigues, and Gail Omvedt have produced comprehensive and in-depth analyses of Ambedkar's thought, his role in the Indian freedom struggle, and his contributions to the Constitution and the Dalit movement. Tharoor's book occupies a unique space in this landscape, aiming to present a comprehensive yet accessible biography that appeals to both academic and general audiences. While not a work of original scholarship, it synthesises existing research and primary sources to provide a cohesive narrative of Ambedkar's life and times.

The book is divided into two sections. The first half is dedicated to chronicling the factual details of Ambedkar's life, beginning from his birth and spanning until his passing. It covers his early years, the completion of his double doctorates from Columbia University and the London School of Economics between 1891 and 1923, followed by his transition into an activist until 1930. The chapter titled 'Scaling the Peak'(1930-1935) delves into Ambedkar's confrontation with Gandhi, his participation in the Round Table Conferences, and the subsequent Poona Pact. The next chapter, 'Top of the Mountain' (1935-1946), explores Ambedkar's ascent to the national political stage, culminating in his monumental role as the chairman of the drafting committee for the Constitution of independent India, and his eventual conversion to Buddhism, portrayed as 'Triumph and Disillusionment' (1946-1956).

The second half of the book examines the phenomenon that Ambedkar represents, both within India and globally. While Tharoor does not present an entirely novel perspective on Ambedkar's life, he infuses the narrative with interesting viewpoints and draws references from previous biographies, including those by Dhananjay Keer (1971), M.L. Sahare (1986), Nanak Chand Rattu (1995), Nalini Anil (2016), and Gail Omvedt (2007).

Authoring biographical works on prominent public figures, who have already been extensively chronicled and discussed within public discourse, can be a daunting task due to the pressing inquiry: what novel insights can one contribute to the existing body of knowledge? Tharoor's attempts at writing, however, keeps up with the interest of the reader. Tharoor's writing style is engaging and accessible, making the book appealing to both academic and general audiences. He skilfully

weaves together historical facts, personal anecdotes, and political insights, creating a narrative that is both informative and captivating. The book's chronological structure allows readers to follow Ambedkar's life journey from his childhood in a small village to his emergence as a prominent leader and scholar.

Moving beyond Ambedkar's personal life, the book also provides valuable insights into his political struggles and the mental fortitude he displayed in mobilising people for important movements like the Mahad Satyagraha. Tharoor delves into the challenges Ambedkar faced in not being able to voice his views publicly, including instances where he was denied the opportunity to speak. The book also sheds light on Ambedkar's participation in the crucial Round Table Conferences, where he was one of the few Indian representatives to attend all three sessions. Additionally, Tharoor explores the behind-the-scenes efforts and lobbying that took place to bring about the Poona Pact of 1932, which ultimately led to the end of Gandhi's fast unto death. While these pivotal events and experiences are well-documented, they are rarely discussed or taught in detail, making Tharoor's account a valuable addition to the existing literature on Ambedkar's life and struggles.

However, the book is not without its flaws. At times, Tharoor's admiration for Ambedkar may lead to a romanticised portrayal, overlooking or glossing over some of the more controversial aspects of his subject's life and decisions. Additionally, while the book provides a comprehensive account of Ambedkar's public life and achievements, it could have delved deeper into his personal relationships and inner thoughts, offering a more intimate and humanising perspective. Another area where the book falls short is its treatment of the broader social and political context of Ambedkar's time. While Tharoor does provide historical background, a more in-depth exploration of the interplay between Ambedkar's ideas and the prevailing societal norms and power dynamics would have enriched the reader's understanding of the challenges he faced and the significance of his contributions.

Another point to that effect is that Tharoor picks quotes from his secondary references instead of contextualising the original source material. Cherry-picking quotes from secondary sources without the context jeopardises the authenticity of the quote itself. Its usage by Ambedkar and the context he was in left space for a misrepresentation of an event. A quote given in a certain context and represented in the text in another context allows for trivialising the quote itself. For instance, at one place, while talking of the burning of Manusmriti in the year 1927, Tharoor pieces together an interview given by Ambedkar in the year 1938. The narrative then jumps back to the Chavdar Tank march in Mahad, which took place in 1927, quoting Ambedkar from secondary reference material published in the year 2019 (p. 38–40). This is just one of the many examples in which Tharoor teeters back and forth to prove an argument already set out at the beginning of the text. In other places, Tharoor makes certain claims without citing his references. For instance, one of the lines in Tharoor's book reads,

in the process, he [Ambedkar] attacked the Congress socialists led by Nehru, adding to the profound cleavage between him and all sections of that party. (p.92)

A common thread that runs throughout the book is that there is a lack of clarity for the reader as to whether a statement in the book is a fact, an opinion, or sourced.

While Tharoor's portrayal of Ambedkar as the embodiment of caste discrimination and Dalit identity struggle is a compelling narrative, it presents a risk of oversimplification and contains a universalising bias. The issue lies in the

assumption that readers' understanding of Ambedkar's views on caste is conclusive and requires no further examination. Errors in interpretation are possible, and the consequences could be significant. The challenge arises from the fact that when a public figure has been extensively written about, separating factual accounts from perceptions perpetuated in public discourse becomes arduous. Tharoor, therefore, faces significant caveats in writing about Ambedkar, whose life and work have already been extensively chronicled. However, Tharoor does not undertake this task alone. For the first two-thirds of the book, he heavily relies on secondary sources of information. This dependence on existing literature could potentially explain why the book may not live up to the acclaim one might expect from a comprehensive biography.

Tharoor deserves credit for accurately depicting the numerous obstacles and indignities Ambedkar faced for being born into a stigmatised community. The author also makes a concerted effort to avoid transforming his writing into a hagiography by offering an even-handed critique of Ambedkar's personal and political decisions. A recurrent issue throughout the book is the lack of clarity for the reader in distinguishing whether a particular statement is presented as a fact, an opinion, or is sourced from other materials. This ambiguity can make it challenging for readers to discern the basis or reliability of certain assertions made by the author.

Despite these minor shortcomings, *Ambedkar: A Life* is a valuable addition to the existing literature on Ambedkar and Indian history. Tharoor's engaging writing style, coupled with his extensive research, makes this book an essential read for anyone interested in understanding the life and legacy of this remarkable figure. It serves as a reminder of Ambedkar's impact on Indian society and his tireless efforts to uplift the downtrodden and promote social justice. In a country grappling with issues of social inequality, caste-based discrimination, and the need for inclusive development, Tharoor's book offers a timely and compelling narrative that underscores the enduring relevance of Ambedkar's vision and the imperative to continue his unfinished work towards a truly egalitarian and just society.

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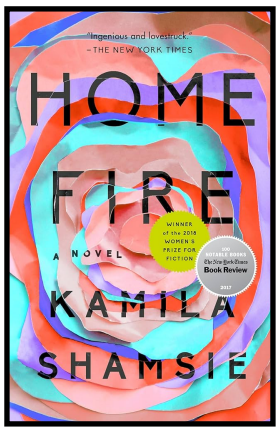
Homefire by Kamila Shamshie, Riverhead Books, 2017, 288 pages, ISBN: 9780735217683, 389 INR



JIGEESHA BHARGAVI

The poststructuralist feminist scholars of the 1980s undertook a significant project of critiquing the patriarchal undertones in the Western canonization of Greek tragedies. In the same paradigm, there was a simultaneous feminist reclamation and rewriting of the tragedies by female writers and directors who used characters like Antigone, Medea, Clytemnestra and Electra to make a powerful statement about modern society. Edith Hall in *Why Greek Tragedy in the Late Twentieth Century* (2004) while explaining this phenomenon says, "Greek tragedy was first and foremost rediscovered by women because it appeared to be honest about the opportunities life offered their ancient counterparts, particularly with regard to the relative importance of affective ties with parents, siblings, and children compared to those with lovers and husbands. Modern viewers seem to connect with the portrayal of 'feminine excess', maybe as a result of the difficulties they raise regarding gender identity and marital relationships.."(p.13)

One may find Kamila Shamshie's 2017 adaptation of Antigone to be a responsible postcolonial bequeathe of the same tradition. Homefire is a brilliant intersectional feminist granddaughter of those suffragette grandmothers.

In her Women's prize for fiction winner, Shamshie tackles too many themes at once and wonderfully so. To call it layered would be an understatement, because the basic anatomy of layers is that one piece comes beneath another. Rather, *Homefire* is a montage art, a collage that binds a number of political and personal issues in one frame:immigrant dilemma, Islamophobia, female choice, twin sibling relationships, de-globalization post 9/11, South Asian gender roles, terrorism, the surveillance state.
For me, most importantly, it is a story of abandonments. Abandonment by sons, abandonment by the young of their old, abandonment of citizens by the state, and abandonment of the dead by those living.

WHO IS BRITISH?

When asked about the title, Kamila Shamshie in an interview said,

for me, there are two meanings of Home Fire: it can mean welcome and warmth, as in 'keep the home fires burning' or it can mean a house on fire. I wanted both those meanings in there since this is a novel that has within it both intimacy/love and conflagration. (Jaya, 2017)

Thus, the specificity of the two homes in which the story takes place are of Pakistani-descent British families: the Pashas and the Lones. Pashas are survived by three members and one shame. Isma Pasha, the eldest daughter, and her twin siblings Aneeka and Parwaiz since their mother died at a young age, live with her at the family home bearing the family shame–their father Adil Pasha. He had joined ISIS to fight in Bosnia, Chechnya and Afghanistan and died after being captured by American forces exposing the whole family to a lifetime of scrutiny and suspicion from the British state. The Lones, on the other hand but metaphorically and literally live on the opposite side of the city and belong to a different social class, are a nuclear family of 'liberal' Muslims. Karamat

Lone, the first ever Muslim Home Secretary of the UK, his Irish-American wife Terry Lone, their son Eamonn 'with an Irish spelling to disguise a Muslim name – Ayman became Eamonn so that people would know the father had integrated' (p.16)) and their daughter Emily.

Home for both these families -like all immigrants- is a forever burning trial by fire to prove their chastity of faith every day. One may be seen as more loyal than the other, yet, none is as loyal as a non migrant, native English citizen. In *"Unwilling Citizens? Muslim Young People and National Identity"* (2011) Paul Thomas and Pete Sanderson introduce a dichotomy between the concepts of Britishness and Englishness in the post-9/11 world (p. 1028-1044). Dwelling on the discursive power of the Bush state, the authors explain that if a citizenship holder who follows Islam does not categorise oneself as a *jihadi*, they are considered a moderate Muslim which consequently translates into not just being a dutiful British, but also a stalwart of Englishness. As US President George Bush exclaimed at the launch of his War on Terror "Either you are with us or with the terrorists". It is in this dichotomy that the two families interact. Karamat had to sabotage his 'Muslimness' and his community to serve Britain. Or as justified by his son, " had to be more careful than any other MP, and at times that meant doing things he regretted. But everything he did, even the wrong choices, was because he had a sense of purpose. Public service, national good, British values. He deeply believes in these things. All the wrong choices he made were necessary to get him to the right place, the place he is now" (p. 53). On the other hand, Isma, who dons a hijab is stopped at the Heathrow airport for a detailed inspection, 'He wanted to know her thoughts on homosexuals, the Queen, The Great British Bake Off, the invasion of Iraq, Israel, suicide bombers, dating websites'. (p. 6) While Pashas are limited to Britishness, the Lones have transcended to Englishness. One is questioned, and another is defended. One is wrong, another right. Dichotomies, hence, stalk the lives of both these migrant families.

(UN)STEREOTYPICAL CHARACTERS

The book is divided into five parts each from the station of the main five characters: Isma, Eamonn, Parwaiz, Aneeka, and Karamat, in that order. This decision, to let each character borrow an active intimacy with the reader within just 288 pages, marks the brilliant depth and deftness of Shamsie's writing. The multi-point-of-view narrative tricks the reader into the constant making and unmaking of their hatred (or love) for any character. Finally, you end up saying something like, what Shamshie said about Karamat's character 'I won't vote for him but I might not mind sitting with him for dinner'. (Shamshie, 2019, 40:24)

While Isma goes to the USA to pursue her PhD in Sociology, finally getting her life back, history repeats itself and abandonment creeps into the house again with Parwaiz fleeing away and joining the media wing of ISIS in Syria. Isma, being the parent figure that she was, informs the police about him in order to protect the rest of her family–Aneeka. From here the rift between the two sisters began and also the second abandonment. Aneeka abandoning Isma. At this point, the novel seems to be urging upon the need to explore the strategies that ISIS employs to draw young, mostly teenage boys like the nineteen-year-old Parvaiz into such extreme radicalization. It is mentioned that the young Parvaiz, "had begun to idolise the father who fought with Britain's enemies" (p. 201). Farooq, the ISIS recruiter disguised as Adil Pasha's friend, plays on the young Parvaiz's yearning for his father and narrates to him stories about "the great warrior Abu Parvaiz… Superhero" (p. 127). Going to the war front is somehow linked with manliness and is identified with the process of a young boy's maturity into 'manhood'.

POLITICS OF ANEEKA'S GRIEF

Shamshie's pen and politics are unleashed in all its glory during the final part of the story. A grief-struck Aneeka heads to Karachi forsaking Isma and her homeland forever, where the body of Parwaiz was sent by the Pakistan Consulate in Turkey once the UK government denied his right to be buried in Britain. 'We will not let those who turn against the soil of Britain in their lifetime sully that very soil in death' (p. 193). What follows next is not an emotional display of grief but a political statement of dissent. Butler in *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable* expands on the performativity of mourning and how mourning practices are socially constructed and regulated. She argues that the recognition of certain lives as grievable is performative and contingent upon dominant cultural norms and ideologies, but the only way to subvert this is to ensure a political instrumentalization of public grieving for the 'ungriveable'. Shamshie is unflinching in inserting these ideas of Butler, as Aneeka is seen at a park in Karachi with her brother's dead body. There is an eerie patience and stillness in the whole scene, Aneeka does nothing, she just sits alongside a person she loved who was the enemy of the state. Yet, her mere existence is a threat because through the whole scene, Aneeka brings the public to grieve.

Adaptations, though providing a fertile ground for inquisitive receptions, are also limiting endeavours, as Nilianjana Roy writes in their review of *Homefire* "It takes nerve and a steady hand for a writer to adapt a classic…The adaptation must have its own inner strength and spirit, and a sound reason for reaching back through time to the original." (Roy, 2018) Hence, like Antigone's suicide in Sopcohole's version, *Homefire* had to culminate into a theatrical end for Aneeka, and in this urgentness Shamshie falters. Aneeka and Eamonn, the young couple made out of passion and subterfuge, are neither victims nor drivers of circumstances, but are rather the circumstance itself. Shamshie uses them as tools for the plot, assigning them a stereotypical problematic- a South asian brat fell in love with a forbidden girl is ready to die in the flush of youth and a manipulative beauty only has her body to make her way in the world role.

Our author here, then, makes her moving ending from the same mould of prejudices she engineered to subtly break all through her story. This criticism takes us to a pertinent question: Can a subaltern author, for their craft to flourish, not borrow from the dominant narrative? Or does their politics burden and limit them to just drawing an alternative reality?

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