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**Bonds And Bondages- A study of “Atheist’ and “Get the bill” in Subhash Chandra’s *Beyond the Canopy of Icicles***

Ritu Kumar

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**Abstract:**

The genre of short story is considered as a small setting, small canvas, straightforward narration which caters to every type of reader. Subhash Chandra’s collection of stories, *Beyond the Canopy of Icicles* is an extraordinary and exquisite study of human passion, perseverance, plight, predicament and psychology. The fundamental quality about the stories is that they are most persuasive and make you pause and ponder, echoing the famous words of Dr. Johnson – A writer only begins a book, A Reader Finishes. The mind is like an iceberg, it floats with one seventh of its bulk above water. Subhash Chandra with dare and determination unveils those hidden attributes of human self, beyond the *compos mentis*, in the inner recesses of mind and studies human psyche in testing and trying times. The present paper is an attempt to study two stories “Atheist” which portrays the conflict between intellect and faith and “Get the Bill” which is a pungent satire on crumbling familial bonds.

**Keywords:**

Genre, conflict, familial bonds, atheism, memories, nostalgia

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E.M. Forster in ‘*Aspects of the Novel*’ defines story as “immensely old..... simplest of literary organisms..... Goes back to Neolithic times, perhaps to Paleolithic” (Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* P. 29).

Since time immemorial stories have been celebrated as repositories of folk knowledge, accumulated wisdom, social critiques to define and detail human temperament and tenor. The genre of story is considered as a small setting, small canvas, straightforward narration which caters to every type of reader. Subhash Chandra’s collection of stories, *Beyond the Canopy of Icicles* is an extraordinary and exquisite study of human passion, perseverance, plight, predicament and psychology. The stories act as maps for society and younger generation to rediscover and reconnect with legacy of reading and serve as wake-up call for restoring the crumbling citadel of falling social subtleties. The fundamental quality about the stories is that they are most persuasive and make you pause and ponder, echoing the famous words of Dr. Johnson – A writer only begins a book, A Reader Finishes.

Each of us is a split personality: what we present of ourselves to people is our shaded and shielded self. We exhibit ourselves as social beings who are all integrity and dignity personified. But what about the hidden self, the latent one, which we don’t want to acknowledge and meet -- the iniquity and villainy in all of us? Words of Sigmund Freud ring in my mind – The mind is like an iceberg, it floats with one seventh of its bulk above water. Subhash Chandra with dare and determination unveils those hidden

attributes of human self, beyond the *compos mentis*, in the inner recesses of mind and studies human psyche in testing and trying times. Our imagination and our capacity to stories combined with our ability to work together, cooperate on any single theme, is the short of one long story of evolution. This precisely and perfectly sums up the objective of the writer in *Beyond the Canopy of Icicles*.

The present paper is an attempt to study two stories “Atheist” which portrays the conflict between intellect and faith and “Get the Bill” which is a pungent satire on crumbling familial bonds. Faith is like electricity you can’t see it but you can feel the light. In Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura*, each and every deity of Hindu mythology has miraculous stories that leave one wonderstruck. Clapping, swaying, inhaling the serenity of spiritual fervor, the people of Kanthapura sing ‘Goddess Kenchamma, benign and bounteous, mother of earth, blood of life, harvest queen’ (Rao, Raja. *Kanthapura*. New Delhi, P.4) Reading it makes one believe how an atheist and a believer are present in each of us. Yet the war between faith and intellect is eternal. ‘Atheist’ portrays this conflict and confusion. After the tragic death of his son, and his wife, Abhay almost renounces the world and wanders in search of peace. His visits to the touristy places do not calm his restlessness and he lands in the land of faith: Hardwar, the land of belief.

But the conflict between faith and doubt continues even here. His words at the outset of the story reflect his doubt: “I know even here I may not find peace because I carry my hell inside me. But still....” (Chandra, Subhash. *Beyond the Canopy of Icicles*. New Delhi, Author Press 2018 P 19. All subsequent references are from the same edition). He spends the days walking along the Ganges, sitting and moping about his happy and fulfilling past life and the meaningless, empty present. He even contemplates suicide to put an end to his agony and apprehensions. The currents, a little away from Har Ki Pauri are fast furious: ‘A jump and perpetual peace’ but his intellect warns him ‘Suicide is for the cowardly.... The weaklings’ (ibid 20). The unresolved conflict is turning him into a wreck.

Memory plays a significant role in the story. The narrative keeps moving back and forth in time. Abhay, an IIT and IIM pass-out, gets married to a homely and humble Prakriti with ‘a winsome and happy expression in her bright eyes, a Delhi University graduate, meek and steeped in Indian social mores. She effortlessly merges her identity into the tall stature and overbearing persona of Abhay, silence and supreme sacrifice personified, she performs assigned role of wife with selfless dexterity, waiting on him, pleasing him; hence Abhay and Prakriti had ‘Complete unanimity’.

One day as they sit reveling in family bliss, the chat turns to God and religion. She has complete faith in the supreme power of Almighty. He feels she is brought up on Paleolithic emotions and medieval institutions which stand poles apart from his Godlike technology. Abhay’s intellect overweighs faith and makes him believe that world is being run by a superpower randomly without any meaning or purpose. His attitude to God stupefies Prakriti who beseeches ‘Abhay, please don’t say such things.... Promise Abhay you’ll never be blasphemous. You’ll never mock God. I’m scared.... For us” (ibid 22).

Lost in his reveries sitting on Har Ki Pauri, his memories, flash backs, reminiscences are overpowered by the present painful predicament, as an alms-seeking woman

appears and he unthinkingly gives her a hundred-rupee note. But the past pulls him back and he recalls his visit to Birla Mandir with his wife. He had rebelliously questioned the omnipotence of God. His inner conflict can be summed up in the following words: What is truth? Does it signify God or the rationality through which the labyrinths and crisis of life can be successfully negotiated? Is it worth reflecting on truth or a sheer waste of time? Lost in despondent deliberations, he is repeatedly jolted into the present. He notices the dead body of a child, wrapped in a piece of red cloth, floating by. This intensifies his grief over the death of their only son, Ladoo Gopal. But the past takes over again and he gets a glimpse of his glittering home and a glowing Prakriti. The whole scene of their visit to Krishna Janambhoomi Temple in Mathura where she had taken him along for seeking a child plays out. She eats the laddoo given to her by the Pujari and they are blessed with a son whom she names Ladoo Gopal, against Abhay's insistent advice. He tells her the child will be subjected to mockery and teasing at the hands of his peers, but she considers his fears unfounded and remains immersed in the warmth of motherhood. The boy grows up as an introvert, self-centered, 'gentle soft spoken mild child'. Abhay's fatherly cajoling and care can't coax the boy to open up who dismisses Abhay's dreams and desires, wants and wishes by bruising and bumpy words.

"You would become the Lt. Governor of Delhi one day" says Abhay.

The boy responds rather tersely, "Call me Ladoo Gopal. That is my name".

For Abhay this comes as a rude jolt that his son is hurt and humiliated by the name given to him. Again the present intrudes, as he sees worshippers passing, singing hymns in praise of Lord Krishna. Momentarily, he feels oneness with devotees but his grief is too great to be dissipated. A call from IIM Ahmedabad where Ladoo Gopal had gone for higher studies wrecks his and Prakriti's life forever. On reaching the IIM campus, they encounter the inert and lifeless body of Ladoo Gopal. 'He was found hanging from the ceiling fan in his room'. Why did he take this drastic step? Alas! The mockery and myth his name carries prove to be deadly for him. His room-mate's words provide the answer: "Sir, I want to tell you... I mean.... I don't know how to.... Yesterday we happened to run into my girlfriend, Nidhi, at the canteen, where I introduced him to her, she giggled uncontrollably and said, "Are you kidding?"

So, Abhay brings back a dead Ladoo Gopal and half dead Prakriti. Faith is shattered, conviction gets shrivelled. No earthly moorings can bind Prakriti to worldly entanglements and soon she leaves to get united with their son in heaven creating a permanent vacuum in Abhay's life. Abhay questions "Was this the punishment God had inflicted upon me for any disbelief in him? Is god real, or constructed by humans?" He leaves home with shredded memories and broken self. The home which was an edifice of bliss is reduced to rumbling ruins. Roaming around aimlessly, he reaches Hardwar and spends time sitting on the banks of the Ganges and moping. At dusk, the clanging of bells for Aarti begins and he walks towards the chiming of pious bells just like Paul Morel in *Sons and Lovers* who becomes a derelict after the demise of his beloved mother and contemplates suicide. But finally he chooses life and light. "But no he wouldn't give in. Turning sharply he walked toward the city's gold phosphorescence. His fist was shut, his mouth set fast. He would not take that direction

to the darkness.... He walked towards the faintly humming, glowing town quickly’ (Lawrence, D.H. *Sons and Lovers*, P 416).

Similarly Abhay walking towards Har Ki Pairi where the aarti was being held signifies, in a subtle way, that he has chosen faith over doubt and intellect. Myth and faith are so intricately woven that separating them is an arduous task. Faith is stronger when it is based on mythology. Once faith and mythology are associated, one rises to the level of existence and veneration. Resentment and regret fall off. Milton’s famous lines are relevant here ‘They also serve those who stand and wait’ (Milton John; *On His Blindness*.....) This illustrates the relationship between myth, faith and intellect. Faith is an inspiration for tapping into spiritual laws. Abhay too seems to ask himself, who is it who can steer him through the darkest road of life, His reason? His intellect? His conscience? But he bows to the selfless supreme power and realizes that spiritual spaces are spread all over the universe, in the holy chanting of Arti at Har Ki Pairi as he had glimpse of Divine Deliverance which affirms his faith. Subash Chandra uses suggestiveness rather than an explicit statement to bring home his protagonist’s assertion of belief.

Taking up the story, “Get the Bill,” the tagline of the film ‘Kabhi Khushi, Kabhi Gum’ was ‘It’s all about loving your parents.’ Parents are your world. True are the words of Jeanne Moreau, ‘Age does not protect you from love but love to some extent protects you from age.’ With loved ones around, old people beam with buoyancy but if left to fend for themselves, they face the brunt of old age. “Get the Bill” is a soulful story about the soulless sons -- a pungent satire on crumbling familial values, which has resulted in nuclear families. Hence, for the elderly, old age brings in its wake isolation and loneliness. Earlier, in the joint family system, parents, children and grandparents lived under one roof. The reciprocal love and esteem between generations held the family together through thick and thin. The social fabric was well woven and elders lived a life free from stress and strain, trial and tribulations. But the present scenario portrays a pathetic picture of the plight and predicament of elders.

In this new pattern, where children leave the nests in search of greener pastures, elders living alone become vulnerable and easy target for criminals and anti-social elements. The story “Get the Bill” portrays the ‘gruesome murder’ of an old woman living all by herself in a large bungalow of a posh colony. The prima facie evidence points to a cruel and deliberate murder as the intruder couldn’t find the expected booty at her place which she had kept intact in bank lockers. The way the investigation of the murder is carried out by the police and the coverage by the hyper-media is done is a critique of incompetent working of police, loss of ethical norms and disintegration of social structure. As usual, breaking news is flashed regarding ‘the security of the senior citizens in the capital, the anatomy of violence, increasing urbanization and crime..... the callousness of police.... Analyzed and debated.” (Get the Bill, P. 69) Umpteen times such incidents happen; newspaper pages are replete with such reports everyday but how many concrete steps have been taken to stop and check such gruesome killings. After a few days of hype these cases are closed, the files are shut, never to be opened; the criminals ruling the roost ruin many innocent lives.

The writer brings out vividly the horror and tragedy of the elderly living alone in big cities and their grown up children living elsewhere with their families, paying scant attention to the needs and wants of the elderly parents. The irony is that the murdered

woman was the mother of three well-settled sons – two of them busy advancing their career and the third in creating his business empire. They regard the death of their mother as a small event in the universal scheme of life and death. The eldest son's words sum up the attitude of today's generation towards their parents:

“We needn't be sentimental about it; death claims all... Ma was approaching seventy nine. Ripe old age.” (ibid P69)

I believe all memories except parental love fade. What about the care, concern and compassion with which the mother must have brought up the sons? What about her unsaid words, her unfulfilled wishes, her desire to be with her sons, all this doesn't haunt the eldest son who was 'tall and gaunt with sharp features, wearing Tommy Hilfiger specs through which intelligent but doleful eyes looked at the world.’ (ibid P69)

A senior scientist at the research unit of an MNC, he seems to forget that life is short, time flies fast and we are left only with memories of the dear ones whom we have lost. Old age is inevitable, not a choice; sailing in youth, soon one is on other side, “When I was young? – Ah, woeful whom! Ah! For the change's twixt now and then... When we are old; that only serves to make us grieve, With soft and tedious taking- leave. Like some poor nigh-related guest....” (Coleridge, Youth and age P24). How wisely Samuel Taylor Coleridge brings out the woes of the old who become a poor guest for all and sundry. But what about the unpaid debts? None of the sons had the time to sit and mourn; they all had become calculating and businesslike, pragmatic and self-centered. For them she was gone for better or worse. Now their concern was to get over it as soon as possible and move ahead, leaving cupboardful of memories behind. Their attitude brings back to mind 'The Waste Land' where warm memories are given cruel burial.

Assembled at Rietesh Hotel, over a lavish and multi-course lunch, they meet to discuss and deliberate on the murder of their mother. The second son, Bhanu, the 'owner of a large export house, had come with his pretty socialite wife, Manjusha'. Brought up on the toxicity of the materialistic world, his ambition to reach the horizon was the axis on which his life revolved. For that pursuit he was ready to go to any extent. He had forgotten that the creed of human life must retain subtle sensibility.

He and his wife led a life of infamous page 3 parties. He supports his elder brother that there is no point in pursuing the murder case, as it would mean 'a sheer waste of time and money, putting family reputation on stake, making endless trips to the police station, talking to a hundred media reporters and remaining an object of voyeuristic curiosity'. (ibid P70-71) His utterances show the ugly face of the growing elite culture propagating loss of values in society with perverted ethos and distorted attitude. This plebeian approach compels one to ponder: where we are heading to? For these highly educated and elite brothers, avoiding the 'media glare' is more vital than human values. Bhanu's wife is the least remorseful at the tragic demise of her mother-in-law. Her concern is that she should emerge as a smart, intelligent lady during her interactions with the media on the issue of her mother-in-law's murder. Her pouting coquettishly is a sad and shameful antic, whose timing the writer deliberately uses to sharpen his attack on the dehumanization of a particular class.

Alankar, the youngest son, an M.A. in psychology, with an MBA from Harvard used 'all his hortatory skills to achieve higher sales targets for Hennette Motors whose sales

division he headed in Mumbai.” When Manjusha is rambling, he gets ‘lost in the fond childhood memories; mother giving him a lion share in goodies’. He gets swayed by those magical moments, but his professional compulsions make him hold his overwhelming emotions. The writer’s scathing sarcasm is obvious in following lines, “What can I say?.... so sad, our mother is no more, we’ve lost her. The culprit must be caught and punished. But the police are inefficient and corrupt, the judicial system tardy.” (P72). How the blame is shifted on to the police to get away from the filial responsibility.

He finds solace in mother not suffering from any lingering disease and having led a fulfilled life of contentment and independence. He, too, fails to see that living all by herself wasn’t mother’s choice, but it was a compulsion. The question is which of the sons was ready to offer a shoulder to the mother to lean on? The psychologist son who is paid a handsome salary to cash on the psychology of his clients has no time to peep into the mother’s psyche and realize her anguish of having to live alone. This is pertinent comment on our social matrix and disintegration of families.

Sarah, Rietesh’s wife represents that class of women for whom any personal ties have no place in life. She thinks about ‘heat, the filth.... The devouring males whose lustful gaze traveled from her face to her breasts and got stuck there’. The metaphorical use of ‘filth’ refers to her own low thinking about India’s ugly face of stereotype patriarchal society, and of lustful men. But this ‘filth’ is there in Sarah’s thinking also who is dead to emotions, is an emblem of burial of blissful bonds representing the lost generation of post-modern society.

Manjusha shamelessly boasts of her flirtation with DCP Bhanot telling everybody how he tried to ‘kiss her at a dance party’. She phones him to get the case of murder of her mother-in-law closed and shamefully declares ‘Take my word! He dare not say ‘no’ me’. The three sons, sitting in a posh hotel ‘drank Scotch, while the ladies daintily sipped Sherry or Gin before grilled chicken, mutton, kebabs and roasted partridge arrives on table”. The outward spread of splendour sharply contrasts with the inner squalor and shamelessness. The funeral fires of mother’s body hadn’t dampened their high spirits; they seemed to be celebrating the occasion. A pathetic and painful sight indeed! They seem to pay their homage to the memories of their mother by savouring apple pie, fruit salad and pista Kaju Kulfi. But yes, Manjusha has her share of diamonds and gold in her mind. She feels she must be the sole inheritor of this huge legacy as she is the one on whose behest case is being closed. They all thank their lucky stars that the case would be closed without facing the ‘crass and cocky’ policemen. This way the story deliberates on and debates various social issues that ail our social structure and serves as a satire, a critique. The writer presents the characters and their attitudes, and lets the readers judge them.

The final closing ceremony on mother’s demise ends as Manjusha imagines herself in glittering diamonds and her friends gawking at her and a gleaming burial is given to father’s legacy also as his ‘collections of life time’ -- the valuable antiques are sold. The loss of a parent consumed by sickle of time never haunts them. They start discussing the contemporary politico-economic scenario in the country. Alankar speaks with élan and panache to rapt listeners about the Government’s policies, projects, plans, possibilities for economic growth, etc. The punch line by the writer beautifully sums up the perpetual business-like approach of society in general where grief must not

hinder growth. The concluding words in the story, “Get the Bill” underline the crumbling epicentre of the unit called family. Both the stories traverse a vast canvas of human relationships in the present times and offer a deep insight into human psyche.

Subhash Chandra’s seamless and sprightly writing style and astute analytical observations are commendable for immediately captivating the reader’s attention and navigating through the network of relationships with great aplomb and aptness. The narratives have a tinge of modernity about them and are deftly weaved with vision of Indian culture. The highly functional language with telling economy that the writer uses is his asset as a story writer. The plots in both stories are intricate, tightly woven with all the threads firmly placed; detailing is impeccable whether it is unraveling the mind of Abhay in “Atheist” or the three sons in “Get the bill”. Their character portrayal is executed with precision and poignancy. The messages are perspicuous and profound that make the reader ponder in an endearing and arresting manner. To conclude, we can say that the two luminous stories are testimony to the writer’s remarkable craftsmanship and social sensitivity. The vision of vicious humanity and value-bereft fabric of life gets etched in the minds of novices and connoisseurs alike.





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### BIO-NOTE

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Dr. Ritu Kamra Kumar is working as Associate Professor in the Post Graduate Department of English, Mukand Lal National College, Yamuna Nagar, Haryana since September 1987. She did her M.A., M. Phil. from Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra with distinction securing 2<sup>nd</sup> position in University Merit List. She got her Ph.D. Degree from Dr. K.N. Modi University in the year 2016. She has to her credit, several articles and research papers published in the leading National and International Research journals and anthologies published in India, has delivered extension lectures in various colleges, guided M. Phil students for their dissertation. She has published several write-ups/critical reviews on articles and poems in leading National daily News Papers ‘The Tribune’, ‘The Daily Post’ & ‘The Hindustan Times’, including magazine ‘Women’s Era’. Her areas of interest are Feminism, Gender Studies and Post-Colonial Studies.

E-mail: [ritukumar1504@yahoo.com](mailto:ritukumar1504@yahoo.com)