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Untitled: A NovelAnita Nahal

(Excerpts are presented below from Anita Nahal's just completed novel which is a combination of prose and onegin stanza. The excerpts include some initial paragraphs and then some stanzas of onegin poetry which appear later in the novel. The passages below are not synchronous with as these appear in the novel. The novel is a single mother's journey from India to America with her young son in search of peace and a new place to call home. Trying to distance themselves from domestic abuse, Priya leaves all and everyone. Do they find peace? At what cost? Read some snippets below from the novel.)

I.**Circa 2017 and back and forth, and back and forth**

All morning it had been raining, except for the hour or so when the wedding procession danced towards the entrance of the hotel. Priya's son, Avijeet was getting married. It had been fifteen years since she had decided to leave India with her young son to create a peaceful life for themselves. She could feel her heart knocking as she placed her right hand on her chest trying to calm it, with the left adjusting her sari *pallu* making sure her midriff was not visible. Standing at the tall glass windows on the second floor of the hotel just before the procession began, Priya heaved a long sigh-- relief and apprehension amalgamated like an uncomfortable mixture of tea and coffee in the same cup. Pursing her lips, hugging herself she swayed side to side like a swing in a gentle wind. It was still drizzling, lightly...very auspicious omen...the rain that is... at least that's what India's old wives' tales echoed no matter if everyone got drenched with the bride's make up running and the groom's turban dripping!

Folks were running around everywhere trying to complete last-minute stuff and her texts were endless.

"Do all the men from our side have their turbans tied?"

"Has the second pundit for the wedding ceremony arrived? Did he get some tea and cookies?"

"Did you order an Uber for the pundit who came this morning for Avijeet's turban ceremony?"

"Did you pay the make-up women?"

"Mom, where are you? The photographers want all family members outside. Come quickly." The last text from her blessing, brought her out of her reverie, and she turned and hastened out picking the pleats of her sari. Her gold pencil heels sparkled through glass reflections. This Cinderella may not have found her prince charming yet, but her son could be a shining one for someone.

II.

"Mahima, I think I'm going to sink." Priya said to her close friend sitting at a South Indian restaurant opposite her college. The year was probably, 2000. These two had built a very strong bond since they did their Master's together and then a one-year French speaking course at the Alliance Française in New Delhi...almost twenty years ago.

The server arrived and Mahima asked Priya gently, "Okay...first tell me what you would like to eat?"

"What..." waking up from a reverie, Priya responded, "Maybe a plain *dosa* with lots of coconut *chutney* on the side, and a little bit of *sambhar*. What about you?"

"I'll have a *masala dosa* with lots of potatoes in it!"

"Shall we share a plate of *idly also*?"

"Sure."

As soon as the server walked away, Mahima looked at Priya, and she looked back almost chocking up. "What's going on, Priya?"

"Well you know what's been going on ...has been going on for so many years. We had a huge fight last night. He keeps abusing me on the smallest of things. And then he has the nerve to tell me that I can

abuse him back if I wish. I am not trained to do that...but yesterday I let him have it...told him fuck you and fuck off...both together...can you believe that? He was shocked and of course shouted back at least ten times, "Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you, fuck you..." went on and on with his teeth gritting and face reddening. I thought he'd have a heart attack! I feel one day I am going to be sucked into a cauldron of some murky looking stuff. You know, the kind you might find upon mixing burnt caramel, dirt and oil." Mahima held her hand.

"And the mixture is moving fast, very fast like in a whirlpool, and I am flaying my hands, calling for help, but no one answers before I'm pulled in."

"What? How's that possible? Where was Avijeet?"

"Oh gosh, he'd be the first to jump in to help me. But I don't envision him in my yucky daydreams as I don't want him to be sucked in as well. I want him to remain safe after I am gone."

"No one is going anywhere," said Mahima softly. She tried to make Priya laugh, "And how do you know how yucky a mixture of burnt caramel, dirt and oil is? Hunn? Have you made it? Tasted it?"

"It sounds yucky," Priya said, smiling a bit. "And, yes, I know, I know...I'm not going to sink, really, I know. I will fight it. We both... Avijeet and I... we are going to leave India."

"Good..." Mahima smiled in reassurance.

III.

Go Priya go
Run fast run
Take your son and go
To a place far away and then some
Can't be the moon or the once declared-non-gratis-poor planet Pluto
It's far out... too far out, a bit too
Much...don't you think? But maybe across the oceans
From where at least once they'd settled their emotions
They could fly back to see her dad
Come for a short while... not disturbing anyone
Foreign or home spun
A forced balanced cocktail Priya made, both happy and sad
That's what most folks want... no? A normalcy may come from their journeys?
In that effort they keep writing new, rehashed or retold stories.

We cook, we clean
We work, we sleep
We love, we sex, we hate...the latter a word Priya likes to keep unseen
Our mean struggles we don't wanna forget, while desirous to reap
From all that's good and gone by
Like some decisions, some choices, some fleeting magical fly-
byes, or times that'll never come back...
Like many, many milestones, some moved, some stuck...
Missed births, funerals and weddings...
The natural or adopted

Or situations to which one adapted...
Don't you think it's all semantics?
With some feelings thrown into the mix?
Will AI be unique or offer a different fix?

Her life she thought and believed, was going by
Going, going, gone
No need to stay or pry
Going, going, gone like in Bob Dylan's song

She emphasized, “No need for me to pry too much into my own thoughts
 Might be there are too many droughts
 Oh, don’t you feel sorry for me
 For I’ll always will have gusto and oomph in me
 Will not vegetate feeling lonely...
 What lonely, lonely, lonely?! Got my dear ones
 And near ones.
 Everything is my son, friends, and my family
 Those who sit heavy in plush velvet-tapestry-kind-a sofas of the past
 Might not have too many crying during their funeral flower-less repast.”

As she aged, alchemists tugged at her sleeve often
 And gypsies gestured to her
 Come join us in your years of autumn
 With graying hair at your temples, hair
 Graying all over
 Including in the forest, which is normal, not rare
 The aging
 Hopefully maturing
 Her restless travels
 Her restless needs
 Her desires and wants
 Now quietly straddling the times
 Time had not changed
 Only the “times” had changed.

IV.

Priya looked at the neat handwriting on the note left nestled among soft orange roses on one of the side tables in her hotel room. It is from her just married son, Avijeet. She pressed the note to her lips as her eyes filled up with an inner-extremely contended-fulfilling kind of feeling. The wedding celebrations had gone extremely well. While gratefulness sat in her heart, a small part of her filled with inertia and malaise.

V.

Combing her hair strands all back, she took off her jewelry preparing to shower. Despite the air conditioning, she was sweating from the July heat. They had to do the wedding in the summer months as most of the relatives could get leave from work only at that time. Otherwise by Hindu traditions, weddings are generally not held between June and October.

“You think your Gods will be angry?” Rosella asked her when the wedding date was fixed.

“I hope not, and in our defense, we live in the US, so maybe the summer month rule does not apply here,” she smiled.

She shook her clothes trying to fan herself and scratched her tattoo near her left arm pit which tended to become slightly irritable in severe heat.

It was a warm August afternoon ten years before, in 2008, that Priya and four of her colleagues from Pavers University reached U Street in Washington DC to find a good and clean tattoo artist for her. Gentrification had changed much of the U street corridor.

“We’ve got to find a tattoo studio that is neat and tidy with instruments all sanitized,” said Perry, his expression one of grave concern. I hope she doesn’t get an infection, he thought. She’s so keen on getting a tattoo...very surprising for a woman from India...and at an older age. “What’s your son going to say when he sees your tattoo? Or your parents when you go back to visit them?” he inquired a bit hesitatingly.

“Oh...my son already knows...and he doesn’t mind. And my parents... well sadly mom has passed but I think she would have loved the tattoo, and my dad is not going to mind...I think he’ll be okay...he’s pretty cool about most things. Except that he never let me go out with boys and never let boys come home!”

VI.

The police jeeps drove off with the same fanfare as they came. It was becoming embarrassing for them all, and especially exhausting for Priya to prove emotional abuse which shows no scars.

“Why didn’t you go to the police station and file a complaint as the inspector said,” her dad asked later.

“Papa, the inspector was stinking of alcohol. He seemed drunk. I didn’t think it was wise to go the station at this time of the night to file a complaint. Only last week there was this news story about a woman...quite like me...mind you, it has nothing to do with money and education...just that you are a vulnerable woman... was raped by two policemen when she went to lodge a complaint about something at her local police station.”

“Oh...okay...You did the right thing then.”

“Ya...I am so tired papa... maybe I’ll go and visit the Crime Against Women Cell next week to see what recourse I have.” These were departments within police stations manned by women officers. But they also recommended that till she lodged an official complaint nothing could be done. Her visits to a renowned woman lawyer too were becoming repeatedly staid and weak.

“Are you going to file for divorce, Priya? When will you decide? How long will you take?”

“I know...I know...I’m just afraid that he’ll do something.”

“He might do something even if you don’t.” Priya knew she would never have the courage to get a divorce in India...she and her son had to leave the country...that was the only way out.

A year later, before Priya and Avijeet’s next visit, her dad was killed in a road accident...right on their street. He was walking back from the local store in the ascending night. Some of the streetlights were not working and as he turned the corner to their house, a guy in an old dusty Fiat took a fast turn from behind him and hit him from the back. He passed on the way to the hospital.

VII.

As she lay down on half-raised pillows
And on the sheets cool and light
There was a knock at the misting windows
Might be the wind saying goodnight
Marriages are made in heaven they say
Not all last though in such a way
That can give that effervescent lift
From one old soul to another as a gift
See what some epics bade
Like in the Mahabharat, Draupadi’s, settled in seconds of ignorance
And by her mother-in-law Kunti’s refusal to relent to her own indifference
Or in the Ramayana Sita’s, whose was surely said to be made
We can learn a lot from epics
A great deal from culture and myths, and life’s needs and requirements.

To end this one marriage, mother and son went to a place
Much south of North Virginia
Where the lawyer had his office space
And the day they had to go for divorce in south of Northern Virginia
A close friend of Priya
Was coincidentally out of town. The lawyer fella
Not wanting to change already twice changed date
Said, “Rush to my office, be not late.”
Twice she’d gone back on her decision

The lawyer was not amused
 Not having many to guide, Priya was confused
 And after much debate, her choice came with precision
 Though papers had gone to India before
 This time she wasn't afraid... let her marriage go sore.

"How old is your son, is he eighteen?
 If, yes, ask him if he'll be your witness?"
 "Yes, he is, he is nineteen."
 Her own son was in her divorce, so fearless
 After it was done, mom & son sat in the car
 And Priya let go things held close, and far
 From her roots. It all seemed so unreal
 Not sure which of her lives... Indian or American were surreal
 Her tears came along with stomach sickness
 Bringing also a pain deep in her chest
 She wept for long, as emotions wouldn't rest
 Then a tranquility followed removing her pent-up weakness
 Opening the door of the car, she stepped out
 A different air she breathed. Of hopes, new sprout.

Who would have known,
 Her own blood, would bring her long-awaited freedom and peace
 Who would have known?
 He'd bring her a new kind of lease
 Without conditions or demands
 Like relentless shells on unstable sands
 Be her savior, again and again
 Never to shift when things were in vain
 Avijeet was a wise old soul
 From early on in age
 He'd been her broken soul's bandage
 Sent to her from Heaven's bowl
 Had it not been for him, Priya would
 Long ago have died, on a wretched pyre of wood.

No more fake agendas written by some men
 No more equality diminishing
 No more pendulum shaking Zen
 No more fake standards lowering or raising
 Why some men slouch on recliners, beer in hands?
 Why then they unbuckle their belt, zip open their pants?
 Why such exhibitions don't come from women?
 Are fertility eggs stronger than tasteless semen?
 Is exhaustion an excuse from housework?
 Even pretending not to be emasculated
 Pretending to be in a fool's paradise elevated
 Seems their power egos tend to over work
 Men need to learn more about their tools
 Before smearing those who learn to swim in the smallest of pools.

Priya fell asleep
She knew not when
Holding Avijeet's note she went to sleep
Not counting proverbial sheep to ten
Not thinking too much
Next morning, she felt the soft touch
Of flowers that she had spread
At the doorway to receive the newlywed
A few diyas framed as a slight drizzle fell
And she placed idols and sweets on a thali
And tons of sheen from dried spilt milk, without too much folly
Finally, she scooped some saved Ganga water to sprinkle
On her DIL and son. A new story begins
A new journey begins.

Glossary:

Chutney: A sauce made from fruits, sugar, vinegar or lemon juice, and some spices

Diya: A small cup-shaped (without handles) oil lamp made of baked clay

Dosa: A pancake made of flour and lentils, typically part of South Indian cuisine

Draupadi: Heroine in the Hindu epic, Mahabharat

Ganga: The Indian name for the River Ganges

Idly: Pancakes made of steamed rice

Kunti: Mother-in-law of Draupadi in the epic, Mahabharata

Mahabharat: A Hindu epic

Masala Dosa: Spicy potatoes and onion filled pancake made of flour and lentils, typically a part of South Indian cuisine

Pallu: The end part of one side of a sari

Thali: A stainless steel plate

BIO-NOTE

Anita Nahal is originally from New Delhi, India and currently resides in the US. is a poet, professor, short story writer and children's writer. She has two books of poetry, one book of flash fictions and three books for children. She teaches at the University of the District of Columbia, Washington DC. Nahal's interests are Diversity & Inclusion, U.S. History, African American Women's History, South Asian Women's History, International Relations, and Modern India. She has been a Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence, SUNY, Binghamton, NY, a visiting scholar of Gender, University of California, Berkeley, and a National Endowment for the Humanities summer teacher seminar awardee. More on her website at: <https://anitanahal.wixsite.com/anitanahal>

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