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## A Requiem for the Living

Kirti Sachdeva

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The sweet cacophonous clattering of the people roared on the streets of Varanasi. The temple bells with a rhythmic incantation filled the hearts and minds of those enraptured souls. The aroma of the burning incense and the euphoric excitement hastened the bodies towards the expanse of the all-consuming and the all-absolving *Ganga*- the mighty river. With the firm belief to transcend the sins accrued in this birth, the people were overwhelmed with the profound emotion of holiness as they resolutely descended the stairs of the *Ganga Ghat* to dip in the holy river- known immemorially to wash off the sins of the people and to release the souls of the dead from the clutches of this material world into a peaceful abode of the heavens.

“For how long can my uncle stay here?” asked a stout middle-aged nephew with a stern countenance. “Two weeks”, replied the indifferent hotel manager at the *Mukti Bhawan* as he reclined on his chair, “and if he does not die in two weeks, he would have to vacate the room”. Apprehension wrinkled on the puckered face of the feeble, drooping, fragile old man, whose restrained and trapped soul narrated the plight of his creaking joints shrieking with pain. He was to check-in into the *Mukti Bhawan* at Varanasi as the family anticipated his demise within two weeks. It is believed that to die on the banks of the *Ganga* liberates the soul from the tribulations of life and *Mukti Bhawan* was the facilitator. Situated in one of the busy bylanes of the city, the hotel catered to thousands of dying visitors each year.

As the crowd navigated through the labyrinthine streets of Varanasi, one could see their lips move, the indistinct murmuring of their low voices, profound details on their faces, and the whispery humming soaked in the sundry aspirations pertaining to rebirth, fear of the ultimate demise, an appetite for upgraded reincarnation, elevation of the soul and spiritual realization coupled with the desperate urge to derive an economy out of the whole business of dying.

The ache of the soul spared none, creating an exhibition of people lost in this interlude of poignancy and plight— rich and poor— some in celebration, others in introspection, yet others seeking spirituality. Some had come to wash off their sins; some sought transcendence; some paid and prayed for the departed. Most booked their place in heaven.

All of this came alive on these very streets in full animation, as I set up my tea stall within the drab perimeter of my life, right opposite the *Mukti Bhawan*. Prosaic were those tragic faces. Every face narrated some tale, as cups would be loaded with tea to the brim and sent to offices, temples, and hotels alike.

In this bustling myriad, the tragic face of an old woman never left my mind - a face with an undiluted fear and with a ghastly and stoic anguish. She inspired discomfort— wild as a mare, growling as if some strange frenzy had overpowered her, the thin muslin over her white grizzled hair exhibited her irregular, savage, discolored persona; the roll of the red bloodshot eyes casting a dreadful gaze; the dark and swollen lips creating a confused babble. The intriguing eyes of the crowd scanned and scrutinized this woman as her visits frequented the streets.

“She was forced to vacate the room at *Mukti Bhawan*”, said Mukesh, the helper at the hotel, as he came to pick tea for the staff. “She had checked-in a month ago and pronounced her own death within a fortnight. More than her pale face, frail body, sickly disposition and constantly deteriorating health, we were stunned by her conviction regarding her own death.”

I looked up while filling out the tea cups. “Her life betrayed our trust; she lived beyond a fortnight. Many a time we went looking for her relatives, but to no help; more than her physical ailments, I feared for her diseased conscience.”

“Is she going to stay on the streets?” I asked. “We cannot help her fate; what if she commits suicide in the hotel? Her conduct indicates self-injury; who will take that risk? Karma has plagued her soul”. Immersing herself in the holy *Ganga*, water dripping from her head to toe, the waves disrobing her body of the only thin white-colored cotton cloth that had loosely draped her, she stayed numb and her nakedness did not electrify her senses. Her battered body exposed the wrinkled skin that synchronized with the patterned waves, at once so aligned and yet so distinct. While the appalled men turned their gaze away in embarrassment, not knowing whether disgust was stronger than pity, the women rushed to cover her body.

The people were equally delighted and diverted by the beating of the drums that emphatically announced the evening rituals at the Ghat; the prayer lamps were lit, the strong fragrance of the burning incense filled the air while the old woman, expressionless, was unable to receive the holy procession. A sight so pure and so profane that my mind was impelled to dwell into knowing what has gone into this tormented soul that even the holy ground of Varanasi does not deliver the much needed succor, the holy water denied her peace thus reducing her into a living death. What crime has she committed that even the cosmos did not absolve her of her sins?

Unconsciously drawn towards the discomfort, my eyes searched for her while my hands would be busy serving the customers. Once she came very close to my shop, desperate for food through the less dignified scramble over leftovers. Since then I would often leave pieces of bread and biscuits in the night and watch her crawl slyly, sometimes lumpingly, walking crouched over, her dilapidated body barely supporting her and leaning heavily on her cane. Leaving food for her became a part of my daily routine, bringing me a little closer to her and I would try to read the scars of plight engraved on her sagging and distraught face. The streets are filled with beggars, rummaging the bins for food, but this was not her lot, for she must have seen the luxury as she was not deprived of material wealth. Seeing her in the midst of the street with the color draining from her face, sweat pouring down her body, and hands shaking in an odd trembling rhythm, every muscle of her body seemed to freeze; she stood paralyzed to the spot as if some living force crept over her, confabulating with an invisible force and terror washing over her.

One night as I packed my belongings to leave for home, I saw her near my shop, vomiting heavily; she had barely eaten the food kept on the pavement. Mixed emotions erupted in me, unknowingly my lips blurted out, “Whom have you killed?”

My body failed me, I could not move, her red-rimmed eyes seized me and her gaze froze my mobility. The sudden howl from her thin sunken throat echoed in my mind and I ran. I had no power left to witness. Even after a safe distance, I could still hear

her wailing and crying. That night, my small tea stall, which had been a place for millions to stop by and pass by, grew monstrously large— large, convoluted and incomprehensible; I, at once, grew so distant and fearful of it.

The next morning, anticipating it to be one of my regular days, I went to my business. What I dreaded had come true. Her recessed body had rendered her immobile and she made her shelter right next to my tea stall. The beaming sun filtered through the complex branches of the trees and shone on my shop. Momentarily, the events of the previous night were coaxed into the dazzling morning sunlight. The mundane reigned on the busy streets of Varanasi. I could not help but surrender to the pleading eyes of the old woman, whose hideous demeanour was coupled with a degenerating harmless body. As I packed the filled tea cups which were to be sent to the offices, I offered her some tea and food.

“This house is mine”, she said with a grave sense of authority emanating from her feeble mouth. “The astrologer had said that she would take it away.” Her babble transfixed me. “Who 'she'?”, I asked. “Surajmukhi, the daughter- in law.” Her veins gained firmness. Determination reflected in her voice. “The astrologer predicted; I warned her that the baby would consume the entire house.” She suddenly burst out. “This house is mine. I warned you and your bastard baby.” Questions poured into my mind, as I listened intently.

“What happened to the baby?” I asked.

She glanced at me, the soft sagging wrinkles on her face hardened. “The astrologer said that the milk would cleanse the deed.”

“What deed?”, I asked.

“The huge tub was overflowing with milk and the baby would fit in it; with these hands I lifted the baby and drowned the new-born in the milk; hahahaha; I can still hear the cries.”

“Why did you kill the new-born?” Horrified, I asked.

“It was a girl! Oh, how much she strived to be released. Such a small bundle, with so much of life pulsating in her veins; submerging her in the milk was not enough, I strangled her; the astrologer said that the milk would wash away the deed.”

She kept talking. She kept sobbing.

“What about Surajmukhi?” I asked, curious to know the fate of the baby’s mother.

“The wretch kept crying and wailing, locked up in the room; she could not give us a baby boy; the astrologer said she was an ill omen for the family and that she would take away the house; she was inauspicious and she must be sent to hell; the astrologer predicted...” she continued to blurt out in bits and pieces.

“We burned her; hahaha, her loud cries roared; we expedited her death. Her burnt body, covered with soot, her skin peeling off; even in her death she was a disgust; she came with no dowry and even in death she was a ruin; what a waste!”

I stood there stupefied.

“Do you see her, she is coming towards me... she wants this house... this house is mine...can you stop the baby from crying? I am fed up of these noises. The astrologer said that the milk would cleanse the deed...I had a tub full of it. Did it cleanse? Oh! Will you stop the dreadful wailing of the baby...” she plugged her fingers into her ears and closed her eyes, motionless with horror.

Was there any respite for the one clogged between an avaricious vocation and a pursuit for redemption. I could see the past along with the procession of sins manifested in this old woman, to whom, the comprehension of her own deed was denied. I, the recipient of this confession, had no mercy left for her; the physical deformity revealed her moral infirmity. Her rotten conscience fertilized her decomposing body. Repulsed at once, I was uncertain of my own judgment. My conscience quivered to imagine this famished old woman scrabbling the bins for food and simultaneously strangling her daughter-in-law and the new-born baby, and I feeding her every day. While more orders for tea poured in, my hands moved mechanically, stirring the simmering bowl of milk, moderating the heat, adding the sugar, filling up the cups, my mind numb. I turned to check on her — she was gone.

Days passed. The temple bells rang. Young smiling girls hushed by their mothers into passivity. Streets merry with the laughter of the kids...

A body found on the banks on the river.

Oh! The souls inflicted with such heavenly rage, and the souls that receive such heavenly justice on the banks of the Ganga!

*Mukti* at last.



#### BIO-NOTE

A simple soul of many hues, Kirti Sachdeva cherishes the cornucopia of intermingling words and worlds. Celebrating creativity amidst critical perspectives, Kirti believes in the vibrancy of stories in ennobling the minds and treasuring the archive of human experiences. A PhD scholar from Guru Gobind Singh University, Kirti aspires to capture the tiny dew drops of life to gain profound insights.

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