

SHORT FICTION

Krishna, The Flute-Player

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The earth yawned and stretched, having become stiff in the same position, the tectonic plates shifted, adjusting themselves to a more comfortable posture. The waters heaved and searched for stability, spilling on to the land as the bottom moved and stirred them into a frenzy. The warm moist air rose up from the surface of the ocean and as it left a partial vacuum behind, air from surrounding areas rushed in. The cyclone moved in one direction and then in another, twisting and turning, as per the will of the heaving ocean. Humans quaked in fear as the ground under them moved, the sea rushed in, washing their structures away, and the cyclone threatened to uproot and carry away everything in its way. Nature had taken over, reminding the homo sapiens that the final control was in her hands. She was only patronising enough to let man think he controlled her. Earthquakes followed one after another around the world, flooding startled cities that had never had enough rain earlier, coastal areas faced the onslaught of cyclones. Nature appeared to be livid.

Amidst all this, I was fighting my own battles. Just last year I was struck with a personal loss, losing my sister, my companion of over sixty years in a violent unexpected murder, and immediately after that, before I could recover, I was diagnosed with cancer in the fourth stage. These were two jolts that shook my normal cheerful life, a routine of lunches, movies, travel jaunts and of course small celebrations. What a wonderful life I had led and now it was entangled in knots. I did not know what other shocks lay in store for me. However, the mortality factor

had become very real, the hoarding of material assets now seemed a waste, the petty jealousies and competitions seemed pointless... these two events had changed my complete outlook. I had a strong consciousness that any moment I could drop dead and then this whole world of material and emotional attachments would be a blank to me. I would be deleted, not to be retrieved even from the trash-bin.

Life gives one many surprises. Who had thought that the world would go into a shut-down mode where the threat of the virus would loom over restarting it. All across the latitudes and longitudes of the globe, people started isolating themselves for fear of contagion. Roads were empty, schools and offices shut down, malls and cinema-halls barred, restaurants and cafes prohibited... Where was one to go? What was one to do? Millennials were accustomed to a particular life-style, office for five days and party for two days, and the week was over. Now, restricted within claustrophobic home spaces or paying-guest single room accommodations, how was one to pass time or keep oneself sane? That became 'the' question. But... the human race are a species that can adjust itself to any new situation and need of the hour. After the initial fear psychosis and mental trauma, they found ways of keeping themselves involved and busy through technology and social networking, started communicating, having beer-parties on Zoom, celebrating events across the globe through Google-meet and even getting married through video-conferencing. Ha, ha! They managed to come out triumphant once again while Nature cleaned and preened herself, resurfacing in its pristine aspect with many birds, that had hidden themselves into a frightened extinction, emerging, emboldened by the absence of human activities that had silenced the trills of the feathered species.

One needed to stay positive. There was no point in becoming depressed or negative since destiny had its own curvaceous trajectories, sometimes dropping you over the cliff, at other times taking you trekking up a mountain and opening new vistas to your wonderstruck cognizance, sometimes leaving you floundering under the onslaught of waves, at other times immersing you in a valley of flowers. One has to accept the vagaries of fate, what one can change is one's own attitude. Our confidence and initiative becomes the Zorba ball around us, and we roll along impacted by the bumps but secure within our stance. My life had taken such a turn and, decided to make the most of it, I departed for Mashobra with a friend for a peaceful week of relaxation and introspection.

I needed to do some soul-searching. I was showered with love by all my relatives and friends and yet I missed my sister. I had a long way to go, fighting this disease, not letting myself be defeated, putting up a smiling brave front before my daughters, husband and family. They all praised me for my wonderful strength of will and attitude but little did they know there were nights when my pillow would be wet and I tossed and turned, unable to sleep, thinking about the future. What would be my life now? I had no regrets about the past. I had lived all my dreams. I loved travelling and only in a span of three months had visited Iceland up in the North and the Andamans down South. Would I be able to do such feats in the future, crawling over rocks to enjoy the beauty of stupendous water-falls or jet-skiing in the ancient ocean with the consciousness of the infinite waters below and the vast skies above, and one's own insignificance between them. It was like the three arches in E.M.Forster's A Passage to India where the perspective keeps changing with the distance till the human race is seen as specks in a much greater world, the world of Nature. Having lived such a wonderful life, ticked off everything on my bucket-list, why did I feel a malaise sucking me into a vortex? In spite of my efforts, the feeling struck me again and again. I needed quiet and solitude to sort out my emotions, my submerged fears, before they surfaced and drowned me.

We left Delhi early in the morning, taking the Highway NH1 and stopped at Murthal at the famous 'Sukhdev Ka Dhaba' for breakfast. It was a heavy meal and saw us through right up to Solan where we took half-an-hour's break and had Pizzas before heading for Shimla. The drop in the temperature after Chandigarh indicated that we were approaching the hills and after Solan, we lowered the windows to let the cool mountain air blow against us. On reaching Shimla, we took the road leading to Victory Tunnel, and going through the tunnel, we entered Lakkar Bazar. It had been a long drive, our chatter was exhausted and we relaxed our backs against the seat, only keeping a lookout for the signages. Beyond Lakkar Bazaar, the furniture market, lay Chota Shimla and going further we reached the small town, Dhalli. Immediately after the town, on the road to Kufri, we took the left bifurcation with the signage Naldhera. Now we sat back as this road would lead us to Mashobra, and our destination, Golfers' Village, lay off the main road somewhere after Mashobra and before Baldiyan. We were exhausted by the day's drive, it had become dark, and there was hardly any traffic on this stretch. It was like driving into nowhere and in my present low mood, the darkness contributed to my despondence and misery. We had just one landmark, Hotel Simran from where we had to take a U-turn to the left and drive down into the cluster of cottages. When we reached Golfers' Village, our mood immediately changed as we discovered a charming snug cottage, with a row of bright roses and a cheerful caretaker to welcome us.

The Cottage number ten we stayed in was enchanting. It was on the edge of a valley overlooking the falling sweep of greenery that further ahead climbed up into hills with white peaks of the Himalayan ranges in the far-distance. A shining white ribbon meandered through the vale, reflecting the sunshine on its sparkling waters. Sitting in the small garden fronting the valley was like being in Eden. It was the month of May, just the right season when Winter stands at the threshold, saying good-bye and Spring is stepping in with a trail of fresh variegated flowers blooming all around. Our morning cup of steaming tea with the shawl thrown around our shoulders or the lavish English-style breakfast of eggs, bacon and toast on a tray were immensely enjoyable amidst Nature, as we sat surrounded by bright flowers, the view of the valley in front and the chirping and whistling of birds as a backdrop. Nevertheless, the screech of monkeys invaded our Paradise at times but the caretaker was on guard to chase the unwelcome guests away.

Later, we drove up the steep short climb to the main road, fearing the car would roll back any moment, but reached safely and visited Shimla, Naldhera, the colonial houses in Craignano or even driving down further on the main road to Baldiyan and crossing the bridge over the river Sutlej to visit the sulphur springs, Tatta Pani. We explored places for lunch, ranging from the charming super-expensive gourmet dishes at the Terrace in Wildflower Hall, an Oberoi's property, to a simple lunch at a roadside Dhaba, from the English cuisine at the Chalets Naldhera to the Punjabi favourite Chole-Bhature at the famous Kwality in Shimla. Our evening cup of tea was again back at the Cottage, watching the sunset and getting enveloped in the mantle of twilight that slowly deepened into a purple embrace. The late evenings can be gloomy and depressing in the hills but we had found a solution...Scrabble. We played Scrabble till dinner-time and never realised how the evening flew by. The week passed only too soon and it was sadly time to return to Delhi before we knew it. We wished we could have stayed on a little longer.

A day before our return, we visited Naldhera Golf-course a second time just to rest in the glade of tall pine trees at its entrance. The place was empty. One or two dedicated golfers could be seen at the rooms but no one else. We sat down on a log and, looking up, I felt the trees were trying to reach out to the sky. I was feeling low-spirited but, as I looked at those high branches, my thoughts took on a life of their own, flitting from one branch to another, different phases of my life-journey passing before my eyes at each branch... my childhood of peace, love and

security, my soul imbued with a religious fervour unusual in children... how I would dream of feeling threatened amidst dangerous beasts on some unfamiliar outpost and suddenly Lord Krishna would be flying down in a chariot and sweeping me away, safe and elated... we travelled across the sky and viewed such awe-inspiring wonders of natural landscape! At the next branch came the death of my father, a period of insecurity, hardships and sorrows through my school-days. Following years were challenging but friends were islands of happiness to see us through those turbulent times. Real joy came later in my youth when, with my Mariner husband, I sailed the deep seas, crossing and re-crossing the Atlantic, from Germany to Brazil, from Brazil to Belgium, entering the Mediterranean en route to Algiers or crossing the English Channel on our way to the North Sea to anchor at Poland. I was mesmerized by the gleaming White Cliffs of Dover as we crossed the English Channel in the grey cover of early dawn. Gazing at the Canary Islands as we sailed up the Atlantic Ocean on a bright sunny afternoon, at such close quarters that we could distinguish vehicles on the roads and houses on the streets was a thrilling experience. The enrichment of our lives as parents in the pleasure and travails of bringing up children as they discovered their own identity and later flew away to establish their own nests. I had reached the topmost branch... what now... where do I go now... I feel lost...all I can see is the vast emptiness of the space beyond the end of the branch...

The strains of the flute are balm to my heart and I am back in the present moment, sitting on a log under the pine trees. The floating notes of Krishna's flute enrapture me as I drift away into a sea of solace and serenity. I close my eyes, assuming that the music is playing in my soul. There is a flutter in my heart responding to this ethereal consciousness of Krishna's presence.

"Now, who is this?"

My friend's query shakes me out of my reverie and I open my eyes to see a man in his forties, dressed in yellow bermudas and a peacock-blue bush-shirt, with a flute to his lips, walking towards us, down the path from the Golf-course. In a daze I look at him, his round fair face, brown hair shining golden in the dappled rays of the Sun, light brown-eyes fixed on mine as he walks up to me and stands before me, playing on his flute. I am mesmerized. Oblivious to everything around me, I gaze at him in astonishment... where has he suddenly materialized from? It seems to me as if he has come to give me assurance, a shoulder to rest my head on, a hand to lift me up... I have no words, lost in my world of association of memories of past visitations of Krishna... in my childhood... in the terrible winter storm in the North Atlantic... in a cold foggy night driving alone on an empty road at midnight... Krishna was always with me,

holding my hand, guiding me, bringing me safely out of those calamities. Now too he has come... at the time of my need... when despair would have engulfed me...when my strength and positivity were ebbing away! He has come to save me from the swirling whirlpool that threatens to subsume me... now I am not afraid... there is a strange peace washing over me...

The music stopped and I came to reality with a thud. I watched him closely to ascertain that I was not hallucinating and then I saw the disapproving look on my friend's face. I smiled. Yes, definitely, I was not fantasizing.

"Hi! Never seen you here earlier."

"Yes, we just came this week," I replied.

"And we are leaving tomorrow," my friend added.

"Oh! Is that so? I was hoping that you could have visited us. My mother and I stay here, just down this road."

My friend and I smiled politely as we excused ourselves.

"Why don't you come today? I am on my way home."

My friend was courteous but quite firm, "No, we need to get back and finish our packing since we will be leaving early tomorrow."

He stood there undecided for a moment then stretched out his hand, "Madhav. Though I should have introduced myself earlier." He had a crooked smile.

We shook hands with him and gave him our names. He asked us whether we were career-women and we responded that we were Professors teaching at the University of Delhi. We learnt that he was an engineer but had left his job to be with his widowed mother since he had no siblings, he felt duty-bound to devote himself to her rather than to material pursuits. Then he enquired about our visit. "How are you liking it here? A quiet place for city-dwellers."

"Oh we are loving the peace and silence of the hills. I think we needed a break and this is a perfect get-away to be alone with our thoughts."

"True. Sometimes the world is so much with us that we lose ourselves."

My face drooped as I realized the truth of those words. In a small voice I replied, "Yes."

Immediately, he looked at me, his smiling shining eyes gazing directly into mine, and spoke in a slightly sonorous voice, "Look for happiness within yourself. Don't look at material benefits but at meaningful relationships. Think of Krishna, He will guide you and bring you to peace...with yourself and with others... lose yourself in Krishna consciousness and everything

will be alright. Let Him lead you to happiness that resides within yourself... just go into your own depths. Your heart is like the ocean, vast and deep, immerse yourself into its very immensity... let yourself go... let go... let go..."

"Excuse me, I think we should be going back now."

I had almost gone into a state of semi-hypnosis, his eyes holding mine, leading me on with words that appeared to be the answer to what I was searching for. Listening to him, speaking as if only to me, lost in the depths of those brown eyes, the whole ambience of his appearing out of nowhere, playing on the flute, everything was leading me into a trance. My friend's interruption broke the spell. I looked at her, trying to orient myself to the present, and then at him. She understood the state of my mind and put her hand on my arm gently.

"Should we leave now?" she asked softly.

Before I could respond, Madhav stopped her.

"No, not just yet. Let's sit for a while before you leave. I haven't played my flute for you and let me tell you, when I play my flute the birds and squirrels come to listen to me." He turned to me with a smile, gesturing towards the log on my side, "May I sit here?"

"Yes, of course. It would be lovely to hear you play your flute."

He sat down beside me and closing his eyes, started playing the flute.

The lilting music slowly filled the space and I saw birds perching themselves on rocks and stumps of cut vegetation and squirrels sat on their hindlegs, with their front paws together. A stillness pervaded the glade. Listening to him, my eyes slowly started drooping as I drifted into the depths of my soul. The music filled me with its vibrations and I felt a certain harmony invade my heart. My emotions overpowered me and I sensed tears roll down my cheeks. It was a strange spiritual awareness that I was experiencing.

I could see my mother in her last moments, suffering and in pain, my brother in the last throes of the agony of death, my father carried away by the strong currents of the Ganges and my sister being strangled by two hefty men... all the sorrows of my life floated up as the flotsam on a river... and I had a flash of intuition... whoever has come into this physical material world has to go one day, the body made of the five elements of earth, water, fire, air and ether, must return to those essential elements but the soul lives on... that is immortal and keeps meeting us in different

forms in different lives...this body is just a garment that needs to be discarded. This oft-heard truth dawned on me in its veracity and as I absorbed it into my inner being I recalled so many instances when I had the impression of their presence, the lingering fragrance of incense that surrounded me at such moments was an indication, the feel of a caress when no one was around, the utterance of my name in a moment of utter silence...how often had I felt the proximity of their spirit... the body was just the scum that was cremated and sent back to its elements, but the soul remained... so too will I leave this body behind and go into bliss, into eternal happiness.

I opened my eyes and surreptitiously wiped my eyes. Madhav put the flute aside and smiled at me. It was a strangely comforting smile, reaching his eyes, and through them, touching my heart. Was it my imagination or could I see a peacock feather somewhere behind his head... I do not know but at that moment I felt enriched, at peace and no longer in fear of what the future held.

“Come, we must leave now otherwise we will get late,” my friend was getting impatient. She held my arm and pulled me up. Madhav stood up and bowed in a gentlemanly manner. We said goodbye and walked down to the car and drove off. As we crossed the place where Madhav had indicated he lived, I saw a small ancient Krishna temple.

I was in a daze through the drive. I could hear my friend and the driver speaking of Madhav in derogatory terms.

“He looked a drug addict.”

“Imagine, not doing any work. Whiling away his time playing the flute.”

“I am telling you, Ma’am, he is a drug addict. Did you notice the unnatural glitter in his eyes?”

“Yes. It almost frightened me. And his unkempt hair and messy clothes. Oof! I was just thinking how to get rid of him. Thank God we’ve come away.”

“Oh, I’ve seen plenty like him. Luckily, he didn’t ask for money. Otherwise, after all that sweet talk of philosophy and detachment, they end up asking for money.”

I sat quietly, letting their words wash away as a wave strikes against a rock and falls away. It was all a matter of perception, how one viewed things, people, situations. No two persons would respond to an incident in an identical way. We are all unique in our own thinking, emotions, perspective and response. That is what distinguishes our species from the others populating this world. I was looking out of the window at the beautiful landscape of trees reaching up to a height

of eighty feet and yet each one growing erect on the slopes of the hills. I saw the eagle flying high up, barely a speck in the blue sky and then swooping down, hurtling straight down into the valley at a mouse that it had glimpsed from above. I watched the river flowing beneath, meandering but sticking to its own route. I realised there is a law and regulation in Nature, a pattern, a kind of discipline and when that discipline breaks, there is chaos — floods, storms, earthquakes, calamities over which we have no control. How does one explain such a control over everything? Was there any justification? No. Even I had no validation for what I was experiencing, no clue as to why we had met Madhav and who he actually was. It was all so surreal. I only knew for certain that nothing in this world happens without a reason, there is nothing as coincidence. The term ‘coincidence’ is only our way of rationalising events that appear absurd to a logically programmed mind.

I knew in my heart that it was destiny that I should meet Madhav just a day before leaving for Delhi. Perhaps, this trip to Mashobra had been planned with this purpose. Anyway, my muddled thoughts had cleared. The recent events in my life now appeared as if I had been sailing comfortably on a calm river when a sudden storm had up-tipped my boat, flung me out, and I was sinking to the bottom, my lungs full of water, unable to breathe, choking and sputtering... and then someone had pulled me out of those murky waters, pumped the water out of my lungs, resuscitated me and I found myself back on firm land, able to breathe again. I took in big gulps of air to fill my lungs with good oxygen.

For me, it was Madhav who had pulled me up and out, placed me firmly on my feet again. It was not necessarily the words one spoke, verbal communication may or may not convey the right message. Often it was what was left unsaid that transmitted the message. Words could be a maze where one lost one’s way or came up against dead-ends but silence left you to your own awareness and comprehension of the meaning and its significance. That is what I had gained. A personal message for me, myself alone, that could not be diluted or negated by anyone else.

BIO- NOTE

Dr. Devika Khanna Narula is Associate Professor of English (retired), Delhi College of Arts and Commerce, University of Delhi, with a doctorate on South Asian Canadian Writers and her book, *The South Asian Canadian Diaspora: Summer Blossoms in Winter Gardens : History, Memory and Identity in the Works of South Asian Canadian Writers*, is based on her thesis. Her area of specialization is postcolonial studies, gender studies and cultural studies and she has given presentations extensively at international and national seminars and conferences, in India and abroad. Some of these are published as book-chapters in critical anthologies and journals.