

Pratibha Basu's "Golper Golpo"

The Story of Stories

TRANSLATED BY: SARWAR MORSHED

Once an inquisitive reader asked me, "Could you please tell me where do the fiction-writers get so many stories from?" "Why not?" I beamed with confidence. "Listen, please. Suppose it's evening – home time for the office goers. The Chaurangi area is buzzing with the crowd. Trams are sardine-packed with exhaustion-consumed people. White Sahibs along with their wives and children are enjoying themselves in the Gorer Maath. The Madrasi ayahs draped in saris and the red-oval faced Nepalese nannies are indulging in unending chit-chat while pushing the perambulators. The departing sun has still its gilded aura at the apex of Saint Paul's dome. What a splendid series of mundane yet electrifying, fleeting pictures arrested through the windows of a journeying tram! This ephemeral collage is, as if, the cautious attempt of an invisible Master-artist to create a perfect

ambience before the commencement of the performance or exhibition. Now, notice please, the creative artists treat this serene environment as the *tambura* of their story. Against the backdrop of this sonic canvas, enchantingly musical with tones and overtones, all on a sudden a brewing conversation from behind reaches my eardrums – "It's YOU, I see," the soft voice of a young lady. "You can RECOGNIZE me, then?" – A young man replied in a serious but depressing tone. "What do you think?" "I think what I should think." The emotion-soaked exchange compelled me to turn my head and heart nearly 180 degrees but unfortunately my attempt to trace the unyoked beau and beloved met its Waterloo in the dense, non-porous forest of

passengers. "What happened after that?" the curious reader quizzed. "Nothing," I responded. "Carry on, please." "I need to cook a story to carry on." "Then spin a story. That's the job of your kind, writers." "Now, I'm sure, you can understand where we get so many stories from," I replied with the air of a conqueror.

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POETRY

Minefields of Memory

BATOOL SARWAR

(this poem is dedicated to all the loved ones that I and so many others have lost in this pandemic that has claimed thousands of lives)



Ceaseless the struggle to comprehend how
Such cataclysmic upheavals, such seismic seizures
Altering the landscape of lives,
The very topography of trauma
The entire rhythm to which millions would
Eat and sleep and breathe
Could be heralded by the unlooked for arrival
Of dread droplets of invisible pestilence,
Spreading like a phantom army to lay siege to the world.
Eternity beckons with the hope of reunion
But in this realm temporal of tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow
The silent spinning of the sun
Dances its mechanical measure,
Marking the paralytic passing of empty pain filled days;

Meanwhile the minefields of memory
Lie strewn with unexploded grenades
Ready to explode at the slightest touch—
The faint smell of perfume lingering in the air,
An empty chair, a turn of phrase used in casual conversations,
The most mundane debris of shattered lives once shared together
Can cause the shrapnel of timeless moments,
Glittering like glass in the reflection of teardrops
To scatter in a shower of rainbow crystals
Forming patterns in the dappled
Sunlight and shadow land of love and loss,
And the fertile phantoms of the past
Then dance in now silent rooms
Once peopled by love and laughter.

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REVIEWS

Shada Beralera: Nitu and the spectre of a landscape

REVIEWED BY MUSTAFA ZAMAN

Rashida Sultana's first novel entitled *Shada Beralera* (White Cats) comes in a slim package of 80 pages and is coloured by a passive discontent. The weather thus remains gloomy, but without any affectation forced upon the narrative which threads the course of events in a matter-of-fact way. One witnesses an unfolding of a stream-of-consciousness narrative, minus the epic intentionality, as the author trails how a woman's disenchantment leads to a complete detachment from the knowable world.

Written in the first person, the novel is cast around the female protagonist whose life eventually slides into irrationality.

A Bangladeshi scholarship student in Japan, Nitu, at the outset, finds an entry into a world of 'enchantment' when a beguiling landscape affords her a retreat only to draw her into its mystic abyss at the end of the novel. At Excelsior, or the hostel building where on the seventh floor, the balcony of her room No 412 assumes an ominous presence. For Nitu and a few others, the balcony appears as a black hole bored into the surface of the Earth where time stands still and selves are dissolved.

White Cats leaves one wondering as to the source of nature's uncanny ability to trap Nitu and others in what can be defined as a landscape-induced obsession. The condition that emerges (call it an aesthetic overdose or eco-mania as the real cause is only but a mystery) finally leads to the protagonist's "downfall," or "liberation," depending on how one interprets the end in the context of the developing narrative.

In sum, *White Cats* is about a fatal attraction. It could have been a story of passion if it described a tumultuous relationship between two people. One could even call it a tragedy if that relationship spiralled out of control leading to disastrous ends, or even if it was a tale of unrequited love tracing the downfall of an obsessed lover.

No such conventional treat is on offer here. It is rather a story of a haunting, in which no ghost appears, or even sensed by its inhabitants. What haunts in this first novel of this young and established writer is the irrational relationship between a human and a place, which, in the end, leads the protagonist into what appears to be a catastrophe, be that interpreted as natural or neural.

Almost all the "sentient beings" inhabiting

the space between the two covers seem half-awake, or half-asleep while the novel tries not to bask in their loneliness and alienation it apparently harnesses. It only dishes out in a near-disinterested tenor of writing the shards and shells of the existential realities Nitu's life are spun around.

The writer never attempts to describe the psychic landscape of the characters independent of the "spectacles" and "emotions" the landscape sparks. Nitu's trance-like state enters an extreme phase when she becomes inert, given to procrastination, sulking and even hallucination – the same ingredients that once made the lives of modern romantic poets opt out of life.

The novel begins underlining Nitu's romantic agony and reflecting on the

husband), relatives, neighbours and friends."

If the protagonist seems possessed, the author keeps her cool as she dispassionately threads the main obsession into small events, regular mishaps and fragments of anomalous reflections and visions that make up the world of Nitu and others. Thus, one can say that the novel sets an objective lens, well almost objective, on all the goings-on.

The men in the protagonist's life appear as emotionally-spiritually anaemic. Among them, Shuvo appears as a shadow of a failed love affair and Ankuj, who is the last occupant of room No 412, occasions some important Platonic moments. The latter reveal all his secrets to her despite his brooding temperament, perhaps because both were broken inside and were behaving unnaturally.

Romel, the man she was married off to before Japan and the landscape happened to her, was a self-controlled, formal type with a focus on career. His snootiness irked Nitu more than anything when she was married to him, the afterdolor of which never waned.

estrangement she cultivates. As one reaches towards the end, one experiences how Nitu's musings mutate into visions. Stemming from the hazy hillocks afar, they steer her towards a psychedelic state and she finds herself amidst prowling white cats. They are first seen milling around in the sky like clouds and then are found everywhere. As a reader, at this point, one wakes up to the fact that the landscape itself emerges as an entity to reckon with in this novel.

However, Nitu does not become fully dysfunctional as a student, nor as a service holder afterwards. But she starts to behave almost like a junky. Her alienation can be traced back to her early life. While in Japan, "what she enjoyed most is the fact that she was far apart from her father, mother, Romel (her



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The conjugal life she began with Romel "was all a sham," Nitu thought during her stay in Japan when communication with home collapses into a series of reluctant exchanges of text messages with her husband. Every time Romel wrote back, she felt that her "mobile phone was weighed down with his 'personality.'" Between the words, she saw his grave visage tinted with conceit. In her interpretation, her husband appears as a man who never responds to emotional endearments, let alone getting involved in family affairs.

"A Balcony has made me feel lonesome," Nitu's expository remark right at the beginning of the novel signals what awaited the reader. The balcony of her room No 412, its haunting presence she could not resist, though the spell later proves fatal. What first seems like an "axis mundi" between the real world and the world beyond, which affords her a retreat – an exit point from the mundanities of life – soon turns her into an emotional invertebrate. The locus of solace begins to feel like a trap, giving rise to a pathological aesthetic obsession.

The author lends "agency" (though it turns diabolic in the end) to only one particular landscape. One becomes sure of this as when Nitu moves to Darfur, where her job requires her to work at Internally Displaced Persons camps, she finds herself again amidst nature.

is an attempt to overturn the age-old subject-object dichotomy, which makes us either believe that everything is in the head or espouse the materialistic view that all things lie outside the head. Through the disavowal of the separation of the psychic world from the phenomenal world, the novel, perhaps, makes a case for an aesthetic existentialism that turns Sartre's concept of existential aesthetic on its head.

Rashida's new brew does not necessarily approve wholesale of the "autonomy" that finally imperils the human-nature bond in the novel, the author never implies that behind the aesthetic understanding of the world there lies the assumption that such act is unrelated to other phenomena, especially Nitu's state of mind. Rather her framing of the pathology, Nitu's urge to remain under the spell of nature, while she is unaware of what danger lurks beneath it all, speaks volumes for a unitary wholeness between mind, body and the phenomenal world.

The novel subjects the reader to what one may be enticed to call a post-human condition, in which everyone has lost interest in everyone else. They are either caught in the tangles of their minds, as is Ankuj, or given to an unnatural obsession the novel so meticulously brings into view.

In the absence of a significant end, or telos, the presence of which usually helps us transcend the given, Nitu and others around her, save for their parents, fall through the holes of reality. What happens on the last visit to Excelsior is really telling.

With Ankuj gone, she is denied entry to the room she once occupied and when the current incumbent files a complaint about a woman badgering her to give a chance to sit on the balcony, Nitu is asked not to go near the building by the university authority.

But, desperate as she is, Nitu defies the ban. She takes the emergency exit stairs of the building to get to the seventh floor. What happens next is the end, though described in the most laconic terms. It goes as follows: "The sky suddenly moves closer to the earth, giving it a thorough shake from one corner to another. The ten-storey building begins to collapse and sink deep into the earth. She plunges herself in."

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