

## book review

# A Fundamental Collection

by Vishwapriya L. Iyengar

KATHA PRIZE STORIES — VOLUME 3  
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**K**ATHA Prize Stories Volume 3, "a collection of short fiction published during 1991-93 in eleven Indian languages, chosen by a panel of distinguished writers and scholars." is reading of depth and concentration in the slow unfolding wisdom about the human predicament. In many ways it is a fundamental collection.

"Salam America" by Paul Zacharia is about a young Malayali husband of a nurse in America. He is young, restless, an exile who thrives on alcohol and fantasizes about car rides. The wild open space that the mythology of America propagates and his own claustrophobia in an apartment are in an aching contradiction. His spirit rebels against his dismal irrelevance alone in an apartment as the nation soars in space. It is cruel to the spirit of the trapped outsider. He is a Malayali and does not speak English. To have a spirit of oneness be kindled and yet be the mute alien in distress is a special scenario, both portraying dignity and calling for sympathy. Paul Zacharia does it well.

The vivacity of a civilization is hastily blurred in quick dregs of alcohol. The nervousness, the desire, the restlessness to comprehend, communicate and create an environment to sustain the wandering spirit in its languagelessness. He begins: "I had a great time in America. Johnnie Walker in

huge bottles with handles. Jars of Royal Salute for the asking... I like it neat in the morning. I pour a double large Johnnie Walker into a glass. The Johnnie prowls around in my mouth, stinging and tickling every where he touches. When two mouthfuls go down, my insides feel cool. I can feel him creeping all the way down into my empty tummy, as if he's walking down a flight of steps." He is unable to tame himself in America, cannot keep peace with his wife and has to return. The story ends in his lonely soulful wanderings in his original village, a beautiful and peculiar saga of the journeying man.

"The Verdict", an important story by Maitrei Pushpa, sweeps into the threshold of a family, the justice of power. The man has been in power in village politics. He is used to the callousness of undermining other's authority, the shirking of conscience and responsibility, he moves with the herd of decision-makers in a prong of absolute certainties. He sees his wife's victory in village politics as an event that will facilitate his ruthless bent. However, his wife plays her political role with sympathy, consideration, sentiment and healing. The people begin to veer around to her, empowering her with petitions that require astute argumentative abilities. They begin to trust her and she grows from quiet sensitivity to passionate articulation. Her marriage frays at the edges. Her husband sees the process, a fluid female convergence of power, as something incomprehensible which he must destroy. He becomes distraught and temperamental about her political interventions and sees her as a tree that must be

hacked off on all sides.

But soon there is an election in which the husband loses by one vote — hers. His buoyant and zesty political career finished, he is at a dead end. She is shocked, alarmed that her decision may have brought about this calamity. She weeps for him but then remembers an instance where his cruelty had been politically warped, inhumane and impetuous.

In "No Regrets", a minor epic of a wrestler's traumatic world, Prabha Dixit has created a mellow but captivating milieu in which a child drops out of school to become a wrestler. His temperaments is allowed to grow robust, brave and compelling. He is audacious, demanding and vindictive. The story opens with Batasiya, his lover, having been beaten and thrown out of the house. The romance of their tryst is then opened out in the narrative, a sequence that sets the foundation of the story.

Like a marauder, he steals another man's wife, Batasiya. After the sheer exhausting anonymity of domestic life, she revels in being an erotic flame in his poetic nobility. She is the strain of passion lilted the shadow life of waiting for the communion of erotic fervor while her mate performs skills of strength in a man's world of important feats.

Their world has magic, lustre and romance. They even appreciate the cultural bonds which had to be broken to allow them this intimacy. There is a deepening of the silence of desire. The atmosphere of these days is rich and varied in the music of fulfillment. She sees him as a vision and he sees her as a

gift.

They have a child, Lachhmi. The wrestler becomes obsessed with the child. He wishes to do everything for her. And it is then he expresses the mistrust that begins to eat into his soul. He tells Batasiya that she had effortlessly left three children for a lover and therefore is not to be trusted. His space with the child becomes so large that there is no more erotic communion and loving communication between the couple. She is on the edge of painful loneliness, feeling her sensuality wither in the air of sad evenings. Her soul becomes mute in the silence of joking, laughing, sharing. The father and child become a picture of shared intimacy and secrets, she is the outsider. She is constantly berated by neighbours, shopkeepers and others for having left her husband, children and home for a whimsical thing called love. Now her mate has put the deadlock of distrust on her. He becomes indifferent to her as his soul warms up to the tender dependence and enchantment of the child. Yet the beautiful and poignant scenes of him with the child are an expression of the warmth and joy in the wrestler's heart. He comes alive as passionate, bold, dependable. But he exiles Batasiya from this lagoon of his innocence. She withers in her distance. His distrust of her loyalty banishes her from the fragility of his innocence. He shares Lachhmi with none.

Then suddenly Lachhmi dies of brain fever. He collapses in spirit, mind and body. His will to go on becomes nerveless. He does not eat before fights and loses what he should have won. He becomes vituperative and loud in cursing

Batasiya's morality. He begins to beat her and finally throws her out of the house. In the cycle that these recur the story is told. Perhaps it is not surprising that the wanton romance of seductive intensity is turned to hysterical distrust in the psyche of a wrestler who never nourished his childhood but cherished the fight. He throws her out and gets a job as a bus conductor. He dies one day and they find he has left a will leaving everything to Batasiya, a haunting revelation of the search for his most intimate when he had lost the language of love. The story closes: "In the end, the wrestler any abuse, without that hard shameful touch which expressed his shame by lodging itself in her bones. On the wall in front of her, his smiling face with its red lips looked at her."

"Ashoka" by Sarah Joseph is about the loneliness of a dismayed Sita after the downfall of Lanka. The loneliness in a sea of death symbols wilt her soul to crumbling despair. The descriptions are lyrical and hauntingly evocative. "Vibhishana's women took her by his hand and led her forward. They dried her hair and anointed her body with sandal paste. They adorned her with jewels. But when they began to line her eyes, their fingers jerked back, burnt by the heat that reached Sita's eyes from the pyre blazing in her heart. They stared at Sita. Who had committed the sin and who was to suffer the consequence? Was nature, that filled the animal body with desire, the sinner?"

Sita wilts in the fading valour of a war won, the majestic honour of victory, but she is left wasting. All around were hacked trees, bruised garden patches. "The women comforted her. They

moistened her eyes with milk from their breasts and held her in a caress that came like a cradle song to her heavy heart. They held her on laps which were large enough to hold the whole universe."

Sita has the misfortune of the anguish of erotic rejection, she wilts from the fire within... Rama as told her, "It is not to take you back that I won this war. It is so that the shame that has been brought on my family... she feels snakes, sees crows, as he speaks leaving her in the whirlpool of ravaged human defeat: "As for you, you stand before me facing the suspicion that you are not chaste. You have become as unsuited to me as light is to a person with diseases eyes. I feel nothing for you now. Therefore, leave me and go away."

Sita burns her fury in the first of the earth. "Earth's daughter stepped into the fire, right foot first. I am Sita, the earth that can destroy fire! She who carries in her womb the rains that have always fallen over earth. She whose mind is fixed and steady on the thought of future rains. She who must receive rain and seed, fuse them with fire and lay them out a fresh living green."

Sita's humiliation and her erotic rejection make for a powerful story. Sarah Joseph has, with never and sensitivity, profoundly rewritten a myth in the saga that will never cease to amaze.

Katha Prize Stories Volume 3 is an important collection. There are seventeen stories in the book and, while I have been able to touch only a few in this review, all have a quiet vivacity in dealing with the human predicament. And many of the stories are literary paradigms upon which a whole social milieu rests.

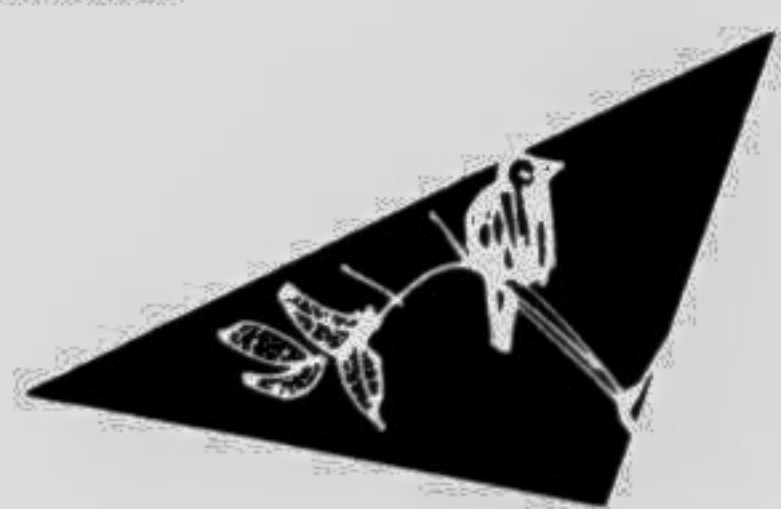
## fiction

# The Abandonment

By Saeif Morshed

Continued from last week

**O**NCE the penguin had been cleansed of its acidity and cremated to ashes — with sunglasses crushed and winning smile saddened — smoke fumes would start to arise from the discarded carrion, commencing their trip to the rigid unspectacular thinking mind: the banal thought provider, the rational, sensible thinker and the palisade against the unknown.



The prolonged waiting for this key to the unknown — to access a flight to victorious lands — began to tire Susan and her companion who was mentally drained and feeling lethargic to the point of sleep with her eyes beginning to close their shutters.

Involving conversation with the serene student of Rotherhithe made one feel on the verge of certain lunacy. It was like conveying thoughts with an unclothed mannequin: untouched and unadorned with an identity and a personality by a dressmaker, but instead let to debase in a poorly lit warehouse with other faceless, lonesome front window debutantes.

Without too much adulation and the need for approval, the two now drug experienced teenagers concluded that this Saturday night was not the intoxicated ebullience they had predicted. Instead the night possessed the banal dullness of staying at home which they both decided to head for. Exiting the house of the discontented, the wrath of two acid-tongued females could be heard through the grey streets of Rotherhithe cursing a student who was not even handsome enough to try and swoon.

Taking the East London Line Tube, they headed for New Cross in order to catch a train to Sidcup, their home place. The tube train had an alarming stench filling the carriage resulting from discarded litter which lay in between cloth-worn chequered seats.

The putrescent state of the tube train seemed to imitate the surrounding area's environment of greyness and dilapidation, with concrete tower blocks standing motionless in the night-sky, like the statues of Easter Island having to face a torrential abuse of cold winds which seemed to howl like wailing banshees. However, the people commuting on the tube train portrayed more aliveness and variance than this melancholy scenario. There were a group of

black youths all dressed up for the night, in loud banter with one another. A crowd of Bengali teenagers-casually dressed up in baggy jeans and hooded jackets — were discussing the latest Bollywood blockbuster, mimicking the stars in exaggerated movements and voices. A tattered old man was clutching a can of extra strong beer with sore red eyes, no doubt revivifying some distant memory of a better time, while a Chinese couple were eloping with each other, cooing constantly in a sickly sort of way.

On the train to Sidcup the clientele were mostly white people travelling from the city to their suburban abodes. The atmosphere was more subdued and docile but Susan and her alarmingly swaying companion were doing their best to try and reverse this process. Both were rapt with laughter about the lack of hallucinatory powers that they had attained. They put it down to the fact that the acid-glazed penguin probably lay inebriated in their hooch-spiked paunches. Susan then proclaimed that the mammal was too drunk to unleash its incantations and was instead kneeling in a toilet facing position,



waiting to vomit. Passengers ignored their rantings by looking straight ahead in the same manner when walking by a beggar or a person in need of help (their ears nevertheless would be aware of the situation but would choose to overlook it believing it to be someone else's problem).

Their came a parting of ways at Sidcup Station as both headed for their suburban refuges. Susan's journey consisted of muttering to oneself and grinning like a possessed maniac with eyes so illuminated that they seemed to bulge out of her skull. Her alcohol smile would have to be saddened before she reached the front door, due to her father waiting by it in order to inspect the remains of his beloved daughter.

Time had come for Susan to transfer into a sober mode by straightening her walking pattern, keeping her alcohol-lacquered mouth shut and dipping her head in order to conceal her floodlit eyes. A short conversation piece would be then be pre-programmed into her voice pattern to limit drunken drivel and ensure a quick passage to the safety of her bedroom. The communication filler would be designed to link with her father's questioning over whether she had a good time or not, giving the re-

sponse that everything was fine in a spurious, joyful tone. Proceeding this came the ascent of the staircase which felt like climbing up a descending escalator and was done standing up as unwavering as possible, to avoid suspicion of being intoxicated. Finally came the prosaic swagger to her parents room, murmuring some reassurances to her concerned mother before finally entering her own room.

With the fortress door closed and the shedding of clothes to reveal undergarments done, the production of slipping into bed and putting on the picture box via remote control was performed. Susan's brain was now beginning to swirl around in a drunken haze while her month was grinning in a Cheshire cat manner, feeling a radiating and tingling presence — the alcohol buzz — which was making her face feel like an illuminated torch.

Through her own naivety she believed this to the now resuscitated fiery penguin taking hold of her blissed — out mind. Alas if only the penguin had such little revivifying ability. The baneful minstrel was now sober and just itching to take control of its unsuspecting victim. A victim who could be as frightened as a child trying to sleep alone in their bedroom, too afraid to close their shutters and let go consciousness in case of a brooding, satanic blood — exalting menace — created from the imagination of the mind-appearing, just craving to transport the infant to a pernicious world full of ice-hockey masked serial killers, gothic-lit, axe wielding dwarves, brutally-stained teenagers of the going down into the cellar variety, and naked, hanging parents with eyes

punched out of their vault beam crushed red-resin faces. In her youth, Susan was also forever unable to sleep. Her imaginative fear though occurred only when she lay her head on her pillow with one of her Dumbo-like ear pressed firmly onto it. The pillow would start to transmit waves of sound in a slow rhythmic manner which would echo into her fearful mind and form the image of angel-winged, skull-faced ghosts with black vacuums replacing the eyes and nostrils. They would be flying in formation with the sole intention of gliding through her window and maiming her in Stephen King fashion on her Simpson quilted bed, blood-staining their comically drawn winning smiles.

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To be continued

## lecture

# Cultural Pluralism

Indira Gandhi Memorial Lecture

by Anisuzzaman

**I**would like to express my deep sense of gratitude to the Asiatic Society for having asked me to deliver the Indira Gandhi Memorial Lecture for 1991. To be invited to deliver a lecture in the Asiatic Society, the oldest academic institution in this part of the world, is, indeed, a great honour. It is more so when such lecture is named after one of the most illustrious children of India. I can well remember the days when I first came to know of her through the remarkable letters that Jawaharlal Nehru wrote her from the confines of prisons. One sentence in the *Glimpses of world history* that at once revealed the love of a father and anguish of a political prisoner left an indelible mark on my adolescent mind: "Priyadarshini, dear to the sight, but dearer still when sight is denied." I had the privilege of meeting Indira Gandhi for the first time in 1964 when, in her capacity as Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting, she came to address the faculty and students of the University of Chicago on Contemporary India. She was as eloquent in her speech as she was hard on some of the Indian students who had put uncomfortable questions on situations obtaining at home. Afterwards, Professor Susanne Rudolph and Professor Lloyd Rudolph, who had organized the lecture, gave her tea, when I had the opportunity of exchanging few words with her. I found her extremely polite and patient. Years later, in 1971, I called on her in New Delhi, as a member of a delegation of Bangladesh teachers and some of our colleagues from Calcutta, to draw her attention to the need for making some institutional arrangements to provide education to the children from Bangladesh who were living in refugee camps in India. She was kind, sympathetic and understanding. I met her for the last time in Dhaka in 1972 when she paid an official visit to Bangladesh, for the independence of which she had showed great vision and resolute courage. This time she was exuberant, but made every effort not to show it. For many of my compatriots and myself, her contribution to our liberation struggle overshadows her other achievements and limitations of which, like most other statesmen, she had had her share. As I stand here today, I recall with gratitude that role of hers and offer my sincere tribute to her memory.

**I** have been asked by the Asiatic Society to speak on Cultural Pluralism in the kind but misplaced confidence that a student of Bengali literature, such as I am, shall be able to do justice to such a complex subject. I must warn you that I am going to belie their expectations and yours. The only defence I can offer is

that the invitation of the Asiatic Society was too tempting for me to refuse.

The notion that diversity is the rule of nature has been suggested by many thinkers throughout history. This is the seminal idea around which the concept of pluralism in its philosophical, sociological, political, social and cultural manifestations have developed. Many scholars have traced philosophical pluralism to Leibniz who maintained that the divine order of the universe is reflected in each of its parts, the smallest unit being the monad. He argued that everything complex must have been made of simple and indivisible parts and, therefore, everything extended could be divided into such parts. The monads are infinite but each is distinguished from the other. In sociology, pluralism acknowledges the existence of more than one principle that determines the course of history. Political and social pluralism refer to the idea or fact of coexistence of various political, ideological, cultural or ethnic groups without the predominance of any group in particular. It also calls for the transfer of political power to self-governing intermediate bodies capable of countervailing both an atomistic and a totalitarian state. This concept grew out of the premise that individuals are voluntarily affiliated to one or all of a variety of reasonably independent groups — cultural, educational, religious, professional and economic — which add up to make the society that people live in; that such groups stand between absolute individualism and rigid statism; and that a diversity of such homogeneous groups could be accommodated within the heterogeneous state. Taking a step forward it asserted that sovereignty is divisible and allegiance to the state contingent and qualified, and that it would also be legitimate to side with the group in the event of its coming into conflict with the state and to bring in something described as contingent anarchy. Later on, however, the idea was modified to recognize primacy of a unified purpose above and beyond the will of plurality of groups, to expect the state to satisfy the needs of the groups, on the one hand, and to maintain the natural equilibrium of competing group-interests, on the other, and to underline the need for protecting the individuals from oligarchic tendencies of groups.

"Culture", according to Raymond Williams, "is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is so partly because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought." We may, perhaps, agree that culture refers to all the accepted and

patterned ways of behaviours of a given people and includes their material achievements, intellectual activities and spiritual ideas. Williams cites the argument of Herder that it is necessary to speak of cultures instead of culture: for there are "the specific and variable cultures of different nations and periods, but also the specific and variable cultures of social and economic groups within a nation." This indicates to the plurality of cultures. The concept of cultural pluralism admits of many cultures in the world and their right to develop their own way.

The idea of cultural pluralism leads us to several other questions: how does one view the plurality of cultures; how does the interaction of cultures work; how is the social and political fabric of a nation affected when it includes in its fold more than one culture; and, finally, does this view of plurality of cultures run counter to the concept of unity and universality of the culture of mankind? We shall now try to address ourselves to these questions.

## II

One can obviously see that there is, and has been in history, a variety of cultures. Some cultures produce something which may not be known to others at all. The Maya, Aztec and Inca Indians excelled in architecture and metal work, weaving and pottery, but basketry was developed to unusually high levels by California Indians. Mexicans and Peruvians developed settled cultivation at about the same time. Yet, potato became the principal foodstuff in Peru while it was unknown in Mexico. The life of the early cultivators was very different in many ways from that of the early nomads. The early Sumerians had no horses while their Semitic contemporaries were riding on horseback to move from one place to another. Tragedy represented the highest level of Greek literary creativity, but Sanskrit playwrights never tried their hands in this form. Even today what is taboo in some society is widely practised in another. Making noise while eating is normal with some people, but others disapprove of it strongly. Some people prefer to sit on chairs while others like to sit cross-legged on the floor. Some people do their work standing while others kneel or squat for the same purpose. We find people defining for themselves what is proper food or appropriate dress. Indian classical music hardly appeals to the uninitiated and, similarly, many fail to appreciate western vocalists. We may say that each society has a culture of its own and sometimes, as we have already noticed, there may be cultural difference within a given society while several societies may also share a common culture.

To be continued