

SHORT STORY

The Somersault

GOPINATH MOHANTY
(translated from Oriya by Sitakant Mahapatra)

The day Jaga Palei of Sagadiasahi defeated Ramlawan Pande of Darbhanga to enter the finals of the All-India Wrestling Competition the sky was rent with the jubilant shouts of thousands of spectators. It was not the victory of Jaga Palei that excited them so much. It was Orissa's victory. Orissa had won. This was the feeling everywhere.

At that moment, Jaga Palei became a symbol, a symbol of the glory and the fulfillment of the hopes and aspirations of the Oriya people. A sea of humanity surged forward to greet him, to meet the heretofore unknown, unheard-of wrestler. The waves broke on each other, there was a stampede. At least twenty-one persons had to be removed to hospital.

The crowd that returned home that evening had among its numbers those who had their shirts torn, watches and fountain pens lost, and their bodies sore. But everybody carried in his heart the Oriya national consciousness. And something else, which may be termed as the intoxication of heroism. As if each one of them was a Jaga Palei! Newspapers flashed photographs of that momentous wrestling match. All the Oriya papers raved in Jaga Palei's praise! 'Jaga Palei—Orissa's glory', 'Jaga Palei—Orissa's honour', 'Jaga Palei, the unparalleled Oriya wrestler'. 'Never-heard-of-before wrestling at Cuttack!' Jaga Palei, Emperor of athletics', and so on.

The week that followed could legitimately be called 'Jaga Palei Week'. In buses and trains, in hotels and in the village *Bhagabat-tuni*, the talk was only about Jaga Palei. This news completely overshadowed all other daily news like the 'Rocket to Mars', 'Man's Flight in Space', 'Death of Lumumba' and the subsequent daily events of Congo's politics, 'Success and Failure in Panchayat Samiti and Zilla Parishad Elections', and many other exciting changes in the country. Since there were no auspicious marriage dates in the coming year, hundreds of marriages were solemnized in the fortnight following this event and in these festivities a frequent subject of discussion was Jaga Palei's wrestling.

'Did you go to see the wrestling?'

'How did you like it?'

Even if one had not gone, one had to answer, 'Oh, yes, of course; it was simply wonderful'. It was almost as if to say otherwise was to do worse than confessing to a hidden guilt.

During that 'Jaga Palei Week', a small five-page booklet could be seen on sale in crowded places. The poet: 'Abid'. The price: Ten paise. Hawkers were seen hawking the songbook in front of the cutchery, railway station, bus stand and big squares. Glass-framed photographs of the wrestling event went up on the walls of photographers' studios, and also at sweetmeat-and-tea-stalls and paan-shops in the town. Alando Mahila Mandali, Olangsha Yubak Mandal, Gababasta Grama Samaj, Bamphisahi Truckers Club, Ganganagar Sanskritika Sangha, Uttarward Kuchinda Minamandali, Ghusuri Abasor Binodan Samaj and many other institutions passed resolutions congratulating Jaga Palei and sent them to the press.

Even though his name had become a by-word everywhere, Jaga Palei of Sagadiasahi still followed his traditional profession of carrying gunny bags in the *maalgodown*. He had done this job ever since he was fifteen; from the day his father Uddhab Palei had returned the bullock carts of the moneylender, had come home, slept on the spread-out end of his dhoti and had never woken up again. Uddhab Palei had got an attack of pneumonia. The Chhotamian of Mohammadia Bazaar had tried to exorcise the evil spirit. Govinda Ghadei of Janakasah, who kept different tablets in his shop inside the cutchery premises, had administered three different tablets, bitter, kasa, raga. For this he had taken one rupee seventy-five paise. Karuna Gosain the monk had prescribed that he should feed eighteen bundles of straw to stray cattle on a Wednesday and then lay himself prostrate on the dust of the street. Uddhab had obeyed this prescription as well but nothing had helped. He died without discovering whether mankind had discovered a cure for pneumonia.

It was thus that Jaga Palei was left fatherless in the big city, with no job, no savings, no help and the greedy eyes of the well-to-do on his two-roomed thatched house and three *gunths* of land. Widowed mother, two minor siblings—Khaga and a twelve-year-old sister Sara. The well-wishers arrived and proffered their advice to the

family: 'Sell the plot of land, build a small house elsewhere and with the balance start some business.' The argument appeared *prima facie* reasonable. The ancestral plot of land may have been in a congested locality of town but a little way down was the main road where a *gunth* sold at 700 rupees. With two rooms on it, it could fetch 3,000 rupees. Wouldn't it be so much cheaper to purchase land and build a house in Tulsipur, Bidanasi, Uttampur and around the Dairy Farm?

This is what the plot of land looked like: at its back a dirty, dark drain, on the right a tank whose rotten water threw up bubbles constantly; on the left a washerman's house and a bustee that extended far; in the front, a lane hardly six to seven cubits wide and the back of the boundary wall of the double-storeyed building belonging to the money-lender Garib Das. Through the chinks in the boundary wall black waters tumbled down into the plot, accumulated, grew, putrefied.

But Uddhab Palei had never sold that small plot of his ancestors, and nor did his wife and son. The advice of the well-wishers remained unheeded.

Another bit of advice from the same well-wishers was that the members of the household should take up service as domestic servants. Or else who would maintain them? At fifteen Jaga looked quite a man. Various offers came: an apprenticeship in driving bullock carts, operating machines in a sawmill, service in shops. A babu suggested he do some domestic service with the chance of a peon's post later. Another person came and told him that Jaga was very fortunate as his sahib wanted him to be his personal valet. No work—Jaga only had to accompany him wherever he went, and there would be no end to the good food, tips and a salary to cap it all! Jaga was given the dream of sleeping on thick mattresses, wearing costly clothes and eating good food. Many would come seeking little favours through him. He would be a strong, stalwart person. The babu had done everything for persons who depended on him. After all for him money was just like earth and pebbles!

Jaga Palei listened to everything in silence. Somebody seemed to whisper inside him: 'Do not listen, Jaga, close your eyes, say "No". No, you will not take to servanthood. However

ferocious a dog with a thick blanket or fur, thick tail, huge body and large teeth—a dog remains a dog at the master's call. It can only lick his boots and lie chained to a post. A dog seen in a master's car staring from behind the glass-panes at the road and licking its tongue may excite the onlooker's admiration. Nobody, however, can ever forget that he remains only a dog.'

To fifteen-year-old Jaga Palei such thoughts came naturally; for in his blood was the tradition of endless ancestors—people who tilled their soil and preserved an unbending tensile dignity which three generations of town life had not corroded.

Jaga turned his back on all the offers and persuasions to choose for himself the life of a daily wage-earner, carrying loads every day. His mother did not object. With the help of her daughter she opened a small snack-shop in the front room of the house. His mother had a knack of preparing good and tasty food. Sales were brisk. Khaga went hawking ground-nut and *bara bhaja*. Thereafter he took a job rolling *bidis* in a factory. Somehow, the family of four members lived on; nobody died, the house was not sold. From the outside everything looked the same. Four persons became of one mind, suffered hardships and privation. Nobody came to know anything of this.

Jaga had one obsession in life. Physical culture. Early inspiration for this came from his father's godfather, the old *khalipha* of Sagadiasahi. Jaga remembered his mango complexion, the body of a young man, the flowing beard, and the green turban. Once he had tugged at Jaga's shoulder and asked him why he did not attend his *akhara*. He had asked Uddhab to hand Jaga over to him so that he could make a wrestler out of him. Uddhab had smiled and agreed. That was the beginning.

The *khalipha* had no wife, no children; nobody knew if ever there were. Only a single pleasure in life, the *akhara*. Early in the morning, before the darkness lifted, Jaga would go to the *akhara* and do various types of gymnastic exercises including practice with the club, the lathi and wrestling. Many joined the *akhara*; many also dropped out. But there wasn't a sunrise when Jaga Palei would not come out from the *akhara* after his exercises.



artwork by aloke

The *khalipha* knew people in the other *akharas* in town. When wrestlers from other towns came he would arrange a competition. Jaga was unbeaten in these competitions. The town people who cared for wrestling soon knew his name. They would praise his iron-like body, the lightning speed of his reflexes and the marvelous tricks he had learnt from the *khalipha*. But rarely were these people from among the higher circles of society.

Mostly they were shopkeepers, tailors, butchers, drivers, carpenters and so on. This lack of fame in all sections of society was in the part due to the *khalipha*'s regulations. No showing off, no publicity. Only during Dussera and Muharram was there a tradition of his team going round demonstrating their skill. Besides this, there would be competitions.

After the big wrestling match that day he found strangers crowding round him. Lights flooded on him from many directions and photos were taken. Then came the rain of questions. Questions, and more questions even before they could be answered: 'How long have you been in wrestling? Who is your guru? Ah, Omar *khalipha*! Whom did you defeat earlier? Please give a list. What prizes did you win? What is your diet and in what quantities?'

Somebody from the crowd shouted, 'Do you agree that vegetable ghee is very conducive to good health? Ah, you have never taken that!'

More questions. 'How many cups of tea do you take per day? What tea? You never take tea? Couldn't you please tell us the truth, sir? Which party do you support?' And all the time, more jostling and pushing about. The waves were breaking. And that solved many questions, for the questioners could hardly remain in their places. Jaga Palei felt suffocated. He stood in grim silence, then turned and ran away from the crowd.

First he went to his guru and fell at his feet. The *khalipha* embraced him, his flowing beard touching his chest and back and said: 'That's a good boy; you have preserved my name.' Jaga hardly noticed that praise from other quarters. He knew somebody always wins and somebody always loses. Just as in this contest he had won and the other man was defeated.

From the *khalipha* he went to the temple and listened for a time to peaceful music sung to the accompaniment of the tambourine. On the way back he heard the radios blaring forth news of the wrestling. A little later the newspaper vendors, carrying bundles of papers, were shouting the same news. His head was reeling. Instead of

returning home directly, he went to the Kathjuri embankment. Returning late at night, he found an elaborate meal awaiting him: rice, dal, mashed potato, fried brinjals, fish curry. His family members embraced and patted him and praised him in their own way. Excepting a few neighbours, no one else came to look at him. He was relieved.

Before dawn the next morning he was back at his exercise and then the daily carrying of bags. He did not say a word to anybody about his profession and his private life. Newspapers gave out the fact that he was a labourer. He was not aware how news about him had spread; but news of his achievements also circulated in that area of the *maalgodown*, and people would stop him on the way to congratulate him and ask him about his wrestling. They would tell him about his high place in the world of Indian wrestling and how he had raised the prestige of Orissa. They said he would have a great future if only he won the last round.

For this future, he had only to win the last round of the All India Wrestling Competition.

And there was a lot of useful advice! He should take greater care of his diet, health and practice; he must take fruits, mutton, milk, vitamins; he ought to be careful. This flood of advice made him sigh wearily; his

budget rarely permitted him more than half a seer of *chura*.

A few days later a large number of unemployed labourers came to town from down south. All they wanted was to earn some wages and somehow exist. The wage rate went down. Then his younger brother, Khaga, met with an accident while returning home from the *bidi* factory. He had fractures and multiple injuries and was carried to the hospital. This added to the woes of the family and Jaga's daily worries.

And yet Jaga Palei persisted with his wrestling. His diet came down from half-a-seer to a quarter seer of *chura* and fried rice and one coconut in three days. He would fill his stomach with some rice and whatever green leafy vegetables were available. Hunger would burn fierce in his stomach. When there was no work, Jaga could be seen sitting in grim silence, lost in thought. He would feel how lonely he was, how friendless, forsaken! Everybody had forgotten him a few days after the wrestling match.

Three months passed. Then came the fateful day of the final test: Dilip Singh of Punjab versus the Jaga Palei of Orissa. When it was over, the newspapers flashed the report along with an analysis of the match. All were agreed that the wrestling, the artistry and skill which Jaga had applied against the heavily-built, massive Dilip Singh were superb but the odds were heavily against him. It appeared that Dilip Singh would fall flat, but ultimately he won.

Dilip Singh's life-sketch appeared in the papers. All the great men in the wrestling world were his patrons. There was also information about the variety and quantity of his diet, and many other facts about him. Jaga Palei was again in the wilderness. Fresh discussions started in trains and buses and in crowded corners. Some people even expressed resentment against the man who had soiled Orissa's name; many were unhappy and crestfallen. Even that was quickly forgotten. But the day after the wrestling match, like any other day, Jaga Palei quietly went back to his exercise and the carrying of bags.

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Introducing South Asian Poetry in English: Derozio

KAISER HAQ

Few in Bangladesh are acquainted with the substantial body of English verse that has been produced in our subcontinent. In order to remedy the situation I shall, over the next few months, provide brief introductions to the most prominent South Asian poets in English down to the time of the departure of the Raj.

The earliest of them was the Eurasian poet Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-31), perhaps best remembered today as the guru of "Young Bengal." In a historic stint at the Hindu College (now Presidency College) he fired these *enfants terribles* with iconoclastic zeal, with so unsettling an effect on Hindu society that its patriarchs had him drummed out.

The shaping spirit behind Derozio's intellectual development was a freethinking Scottish poet and polymath, David Drummond, in whose school he was educated. At fourteen Derozio was put to clerking. Two years later he left for the more congenial atmosphere of an uncle's indigo plantation, close to romantic Jungheera, a rocky isle in the Ganges, then a favourite haunt of holy men. He began placing poems in Calcutta journals and was persuaded by an editor to return to the city and put together a collection of his work. *Poems*, privately published in 1827, made him a local celebrity, and was followed a year later by *The Faker of Jungheera, a Metrical Tale and Other Poems* (Calcutta: Samuel Smith). Meanwhile, in 1826, he had been appointed Master in English Literature and History at the Hindu College; he was hardly seventeen. In the five years Derozio taught there he radically altered the cultural map of Bengal.

Besides his assigned work as a teacher Derozio conducted a conversazione and organised the Academic Association, which the Scottish missionary Alexander Duff compared to Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum. Sadly, Derozio's lectures haven't survived; among them was a critique of Kant that drew eulogies from a distinguished audience. The Academic Association's dissemination of Enlightenment ideas, criticism of religious bigotry

and advocacy of reform had the force of a new faith with the students.

Parents complained that Derozio was corrupting the morals of his pupils; the College authorities decided that it would be expedient to sack him. Referring to the calumny heaped on him by adversaries, Derozio wrote to a friend: "That I should be called a sceptic and an infidel is not surprising, as these names are always given to persons who think for themselves in religion." Derozio now launched the *East Indian*, a daily newspaper of the Eurasian community; it is noteworthy that he exhorted fellow Eurasians "to unite and co-operate with the other native inhabitants of India."

Derozio was only twenty-two when he died of cholera. His intellectual influence remained potent till the emergence of Hindu revivalism in the 1870s. Since then he has become a hero of Bengal's radical intelligentsia; there are probably more books on him in Bengali than in English. His poetry was reprinted in a volume published in Calcutta in 1907, and in a selection, *Poems of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio: A Forgotten Anglo-Indian Poet*, published by Oxford University Press in 1923, with an introduction by F. B. Bradley-Birt. The most substantial biography of Derozio is still the one by Thomas Edward, *Henry Derozio, the Eurasian Poet, Teacher and Journalist* (Calcutta: W. Newman & Co., 1884).

Byron and Thomas Moore are the presiding influences on Derozio's poetry. The more ambitious pieces, including the long verse tale *The Faker of Jungheera*, unfortunately, are also the least successful. Contemporary readers are likely to find the shorter poems, many of them sonnets, more congenial. "The Harp of India," despite or perhaps because of its curious (mis)appropriation of a Western musical instrument, is a justly famous expression of the ethos of the Bengal Renaissance. The sonnet to the students of the Hindu College is likely to make Bangladeshi teachers wistful. "Sister-in-Law" shows that there was something distinctively Indian in Derozio's sensibility; the poem is rooted in our kinship ties.

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SISTER-IN-LAW

A SISTER-IN-LAW, my sister dear,
A sister-in-law for thee?
I'll bring thee a star from where angels are
Thy sister-in-law to be.
For thou art as pure as the lights that burn
In the palace of bliss eternally,
And thy sister-in-law must be like an urn,
Containing the essence of purity.

I'll borrow fleet wings from the visions of night,
And when with storms the heavens are dim,
Like a thought or a seraph, I'll shape my flight
Until I have reached the rainbow's rim.
And thence I'll bring, my sister dear,
A sister-in-law for thee,
A hue from that bow I'll bring here below,
Thy sister-in-law to be.

I'll shoot like a beam from the golden haired sun
Down, down to those bright coral caves,
Where the mysteries dark of old ocean are done,
And the mermaid her amber locks laves.
And I'll bring thee a gem from the rich diadem,
On the brow of the queen of the sea;
That jewel so rare on my bosom I'll bear
Thy sister-in-law to be.

On the hippogriff wing of that moon-stricken thing,
Wild Fancy, to whom it is given
With its flight to describe round all nature a ring,
Will I mount up to heaven, to heaven.
From the amaranth beds that are there I shall bring
An odour immortal for thee:
For it is but meet that nought but what's sweet
Thy sister-in-law should be.

BookReviews

Transmission, Hari Kunzru, Penguin India, 2004, 281 pp.

MANISHA GANGOPADHYAY

Novels written by South Asian immigrants or about the South Asian diasporic experience tend to centralise issues of immigrant/postcolonial identity and history. They are made of the stuff that South Asian deshis like me dig because of their previous marginality or complete absence from 'mainstream' English literature. Reading such literature has more often than not been liberating, educational and thought-provoking.

Transmissions by Hari Kunzru is nothing quite like these books. Though the main character in the novel is Indian, his impressions are not essential to the storyline, which traces the path of global havoc - via a computer virus named Leela, who dances on screens while "real action was taking place in the guts of the code: a cascade of operations, of iterations and deletions, an invisible contagion of ones and zeros" - caused by the protagonist's struggle for self-preservation.

Kunzru's novel grows fresh ground in that it is not so much a South Asian story as much as it is a story that happens to have a couple of Indian characters in it. The novel's anti-hero, Arjun, is a shy computer engineer who comes to America with high hopes of making his family proud. Faced with the possibility of losing his fancy American job in the increasingly volatile IT job market, Arjun unleashes a fearsome computer virus, hoping to impress his boss by "discovering" the solution.

What follows is the convergence of the three seemingly disparate lives of a cyber hacker, a British marketing executive and a leading Bollywood actress in a sometimes philosophical/legal adventure plot. It's Milan Kundera meets Tom Wolfe (need one point out here that neither author is South Asian?) with a little Bollywood cheese on the side.

Transmissions takes us inside the heads of people about whom it is safe to say that South Asian readers will not, or more accurately, cannot, generally identify. The novel's 'mix', its milieu, is far removed from what we have come to expect in novels written by South Asians, and which can only be a healthy trend. One could read the novel as an escape from reality (how's that for a first in South Asian novels?). The problems are real, but not those we can relate to... sort of like those in a sci-fi novel about intergalactic spy activity.

It is the secondary characters, like Arjun's friend and ambassador to the New World, Chris, or the South East Asian kids hanging out in video parlours, that give the novel its organic appeal. Kunzru puts in these 'marginal' people and centrally locates them in his 'Western' reality. By incorporating them, he brings different lifestyles of the present, with all its varying ethnic experiences, into the action.

However, don't expect this to be a racially uplifting book that demystifies the South Asian experience. At one point, a line in the book starts with "As an Indian mother," - a clumsy authorial intrusion - and continues, "Mrs. Mehta's prime directive was to ensure that her first-born son was never more than ten feet away from a source of clean clothes, second helpings and moral guidance."

No skin-color pride either. During Arjun and Chris's first sexual encounter, the main character's skin is described as sallow and unat-

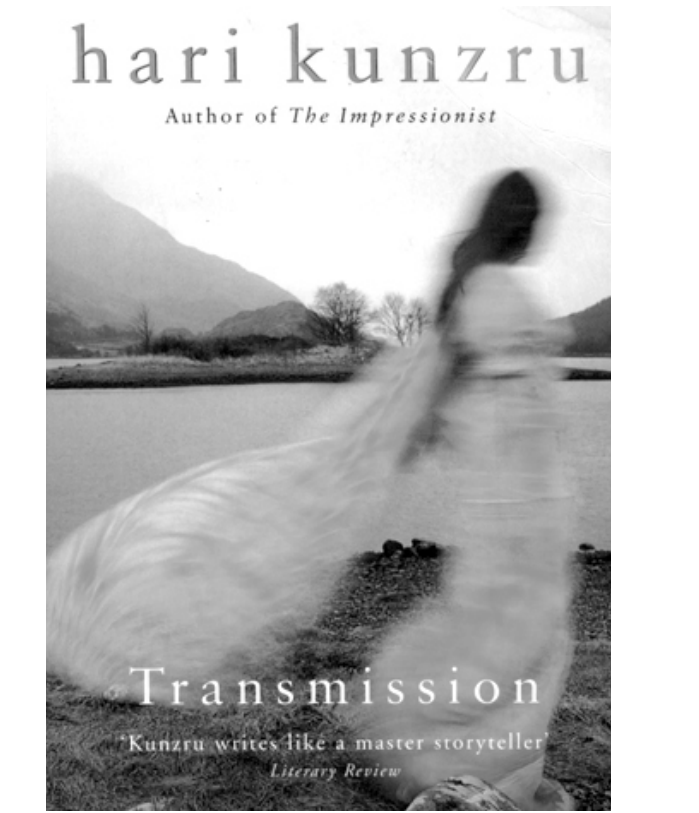
tractive. This symbolic postcolonial East-meets-West experience blows up in this scene, with East coming out the worse for the wear..

The message for the postcolonial era seems to be: the East is East and the West is West, and never the twain shall meet. Or, rather, if and when they do, they are doomed to farcical encounters. Though the novel is often funny and sharp and original in ambition - the writing weaves in e-mail exchanges between and among characters into the dialogue - ultimately the reader is left with the impression that Kunzru tries too hard and does not quite manage to pull it off.

That said, one can still be amazed at his ability to capture the purely existential moment. As in:

"... a chemical lift would grow as he checked in, blossoming in full presence as he stepped into the dimensional portal of the metal-detector... Surrounded by people on their way to other places, he would feel cocooned in the even light and neutral colours of a present that seemed to be declaring its own provisionality, its status as non-destination space."

Even an everyday scene at an airport, a minute or two in the life of a Johnny Bravo-esque character, can read like poetry.



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