



FICTION

A Grey Torment

ABDULLAH RAYHAN

After a long day of work, Selim was returning home, tired and disgruntled by the unalterable toils of his life. He longed to reach home, take a lengthy shower, have a good meal and sleep like a log for the next seven hours. He took the train. It was only a 30 minute journey. He got on the green-white train, held on to a handle as the train started moving and tried his best to stay awake. Today was a hard day, maybe more so because of the heat. The sun was burning more fiercely than ever and he sweated like crazy. But at least, he was returning home where there is no heat and no pain. This thought made him a little happy, a little hopeful and then a little sad. He didn't have the energy to cook his meal. Maybe he will buy something today. It's been a while since he had a decent meal from a fancy restaurant. The thought made him even happier; he heaved a sigh of relief and thought of lighting a cigarette. Then he suddenly became conscious of his surroundings. It is forbidden to smoke on a moving train. But when he looked around, he could not see anyone. It was only him, holding on to the yellow handle of a desolate compartment. He searched



PHOTO: MANJUMAN MOU

A lot of anxiousness and anguish began to accumulate in his empty mind. All of a sudden, the world around him seemed very strange, he felt alienated by the thought of it all. He experienced a force pulling him from beneath as if the ground

his pockets for the packs in delight and suddenly a strange thought crossed his mind. What was he doing here? The whole compartment was deserted when he got in and still is; so why didn't he sit down and instead, decided to stand? Why did he choose this particular handle to hold on to as he stood while there are ten others before him! He thought why he did, of all other compartments, choose to be on this particular one! What was wrong with the others? But why does he have to be on the train in the first place? Why couldn't he take a bus or walk the whole way? Obviously, it would have been troublesome, but what if it was, what difference does it make? In the end, he would have returned home sometime. But why return at all? Why couldn't he have just wandered off under a different sky, among crowds and lights and places he never explored or observed?

Why? Because he had to go to work the next day. But what is the point to his work? He goes to work, works like a slave, returns home to eat with the money he made by working and goes to sleep to wake up the next morning to work again. Why in the world does he have to be involved in that cycle? Why can't he live with things that don't need to be worked for? Because it will be unfair to those who do work? What if it is unfair? What is the point of all this and what is the point of life! He will die eventually like everyone else. He doesn't have anyone attached to him. Everyone has a life of their own and nobody can change its course no matter what they do. It is miserable, desperate, daunting, disgusting and pitiable at the same time. "What could, what should be done with all the time that lies ahead of us?" Anything 'could' be done, but what

'should' we do? Is there anything that we 'should' do? No, there clearly isn't because our existence doesn't have anything to do with the world. No matter what we do, the world will move on and continue its flow. So, to Selim, all of his works, all of his efforts and pain turned out to be worth nothing. A lot of anxiousness and anguish began to accumulate in his empty mind. All of a sudden, the world around him seemed very strange, he felt alienated by the thought of it all. He experienced a force pulling him from beneath as if the ground under his feet suddenly disappeared and a deep hollow formed that stretched toward infinity and it dragged him into the realm of eternal isolation and dreamless existence. His head felt heavy by the sudden eruption of many agitating notions of existence. Only moments ago did life seem so splendid and exciting but now it was nothing but a dull, meaningless empty void of emotions segregated from anything he could ever hope to experience with any of his senses. The feeling was nauseating and ghastly, thus it was a feeling of truth. He suddenly felt weak and stumbled to the floor of the moving train like a broken wooden doll. The train moved on despite his fall and he moaned like a child scolded for an unattended deed. The train moved, Selim wept. He groaned like a wounded beast and threw up all over himself. After half an hour, the train reached the station, waited for ten minutes and started to accelerate again to reach the same locations it left million moments ago. People got off and nobody got on, but Selim was still on the train, lying on the floor covered with his own vomit. He laid there with his knees close to his face, his face hidden behind his clutched hands, as if floating inside of his mother's womb. He was silent like a ghostly parade of memories that goes through the mind like déjà-vu. Maybe he fell asleep, or maybe he died. No one cared, and no one should have.

Abdullah Rayhan is a dreamer, a reader, an eater, and of course, a sleeper.

White Tears: A New Look on Life

REVIEWED BY SYED MAQSUD JAMIL

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White Tears is the fifth novel of Hari Kunzru who is a promising writer of the time, easily distinguishable for his consummate writing skills and imaginative boldness. Born in London, Hari Kunzru is of Indian origin and currently lives in Brooklyn, New York. Among his most popular works, *Impressionist*, *Transmission*, *My Revolution* and *Gods without Men* have been translated in twenty four languages altogether. Also a recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the New York Public Library, and the American Academy in Berlin, this prolific writer focuses on the beautiful minute details of our life that make a human what he/she is and can potentially turn out to be as time passes them by. Placed among the best sellers of 2017, his *White Tears*, likewise, portrays a combination of fear and revenge regarding an individual's unusual fixation with some blues record collection recovered from the long lost past. The pivotal character in *White Tears* is a young Seth from New York, who rides a bike and carries a recorder with him all the time in order to be able to record whatever he finds interesting, living in the fancy world of the NYC. His favorite subjects are New Yorkers playing chess, lovers quarreling, drug dealers singing and ranting. His mother died leaving two sons and their father behind. His father teaches Mathematics and Physics and his younger brother, a drug addict. From a native's point of view, Seth appears to be an aimless typical young American with no particular goal to achieve in life mostly because of a dysfunctional family background and the unfavorable circumstances his close ones occupied. But of course, for Kunzru, it is the ordinary that becomes the extra-ordinary as the plot progresses in a smooth and effortless stream of events. Carter Wallace, on the other end of the economic spectrum, is a scion of a New York business baron and happens to be a close

friend of Seth. He has blond dreadlocks and intricate tattoos on his hand. Seth and Carter met in an upstate liberal arts college, where Carter had a celebrated status as a DJ, getting on stage and constantly being mobbed by the students. At one part of the novel, Seth was found to help him setting up and trouble-shooting the sound system in a significant gathering when nothing else was working out and no one was willing to help. Though most of his classmates sought his friendship, for that particular incidence Carter chose Seth to be his closest companion. Constantly on the wheels, Carter is depicted visiting Detroit and Cleveland and other places in his '67 Ford Galaxy, driven by the sole purpose of collecting vinyl records, particularly those of the old country music, demonstrating almost an audiophiliac fetish for analog equipments/sound systems and a pure disdain for computerized 'fake' music. In the middle of the story, Seth starts living in his studio on Carter's insistence, hinting on a strong budding friendship between the two. As a part of his fanciful drifting in New York Park, at one point, Seth happens to record the song of a random chess player who was singing to himself at a far end of the place. It fascinates Carter when he comes across it through Seth but instead of complimenting the rap star and closing the deal, he continues tapping on his knees and humming along with the chess player's blues: *Put me under a man they call Captain Jack Put me under a man they call Captain Jack He wrote his name all down my back* After that, he goes to a frat party humming the song and on the spur of the moment, thinks of setting up a recording studio. He goes to a recording executive, and everything proceeds just the way he wants, making the rising music producer a very happy man. The first song he records is the one he listened from Seth and we are given a flashback of the



moment when Seth stood before the musician for the first time, awestruck and stupefied at the sheer beauty of the lyrics as well as the vocal. As Carter plays it on with Seth standing in front, the street noise fades, even the dogs. There is only the sound of the guitar and the instrument seems to be wailing and moaning. The sound is clear and vivid like crystals bathed in a river. Seth feels like standing in front of the guitarist himself. To his amazement, the chess player's vocal seems deleted over the guitar alone. But Carter tells him to wait for it, and then there it was:

Believe I buy a graveyard of my own Believe I buy a graveyard of my own Put my enemies all down on the ground

Put me under a man they call Captain Jack Put me under a man they call Captain Jack He wrote his name all down my back

Finally after recording the song, Carter uploads it online:

Charlie Shaw Graveyard Blues
Tag(s): 78 rpm old-time

It was like someone has dropped a bomb as there are inquiries from all over the world, Germany, Australia and even one from Japan! Carter feels exultant about it being hailed as a masterpiece, but Seth, on the other hand, resents for the unforeseen mass attention it is attracting with the vocalist himself lost in oblivion. And ultimately, the unavoidable happens when someone from the audience named Jumpjim questions about the source of the song and strongly urges to contact him. Carter deems it funny and a hollow threat, paying no attention to the confrontation that was to follow him soon. Eventually, Seth meets the fellow, an old man with white hair, worn out blue glasses, and an unpleasant scab on his head. He feels rather disappointed with Seth and asks for the copyright of the record. Seth learns that he is none other than Chester Bly, a formerly known old record collector who very logically, wants recognition for the voice he lent to his own recorded track. However, a tragedy awaits as near the Hunts Point of Bronx, Carter is brutalized by unidentified thugs, leaving him unconscious. Carter's sister Leonie comes over to the studio and demands to know about Seth's association with her brother. Skeptical about it all, she takes Seth to the hospital to be identified and see the unconscious Carter. However her parents and her other brother Cornelius are dismissive of Seth. Amidst it all, Seth keeps on meeting Bly where Leonie keeps on visiting the studio and even spending nights there. Seth tries his best to socialize with them but to no avail. Cornelius is in command now. But in time,

Leonie's relationship with Seth begins to normalize and with everything comparatively settled in place, he visits different places with Bly in search of clues as to identify those who brutalized Carter, but for Bly only old records matter more than anything, at least more than someone he hardly knows or has even heard of. The rich Wallace family, however, looks on Seth as a scavenger and Cornelius throws him out of the studio. More tragedies seem to follow as Leonie dies of an overdose of sleeping pills in Jackson, Mississippi. To compound it Chester Bly dies in a heater accident! After that, Seth is found visiting Chester Bly's room inside a dark old building. The room is damp with red bricks jutting out of their places here and there. He hears quick steps coming up, and the cops take him away for questioning. He is interrogated, punched badly, and beaten up without a cause. With no evidence of him being linked with Leonie's/Bly's death, He is set free, though badly mauled. At last, Seth goes to the St. James Hotel with a knife in his hand. Seth tries to put his enemy down, his tormentors, the Wallaces. But the vengeful project ends rather abruptly with him being lost without a trace. In essence, *White Tears* is a cultural satire, indictment of the rich man's society. The Wallace family like Carter himself, is engaged in fanciful pursuit that in reality matters but little. Tragedy follows each of the characters with Carter and Leonie gone. Tears are shed as Seth is lost. What is left is only the sound from the old record of Bly duly kept in Carter's collection. In lieu of the song, it was a terrifying laughter that came out of the vinyl, a laughter that the modern times of self-reflexive complexities constantly discover and rediscover...ha ha ha!

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