

Art's Pantheon

SAIKAT MAJUMDAR

Mashrur Arefin's 2019 novel, *August Abchhaya*, is full of moments that evoke the blood-stained memory behind the language of conflict. One such moment arrives in the intense exchange between the narrator-protagonist and Sarafraz Nawaz,

else, he despises the narrator's pantheistic belief of the manifestation of God in all reality, in the manner of Hindu and Buddhist tantric practitioners, not least because it draws in its fold the beauty of women and possibly helps to disguise his "immoral" desires.

"Glory be to God for dappled things –
For skies of couple-colour as a
brinded cow
For rose-moles all in stipple
upon trout that swim"

In mid-Victorian England, a Jesuit priest named Gerald Manley Hopkins fought the pangs of his religious conscience for writing poetry of such Keatsian beauty about the sensuous beauty of the universe. How can an ordained priest take such delight in the senses? His answer was Pantheism. Who else but God can create such beauty? Hence, "Pied Beauty", the poem which thus opened ended with these lines:

All things counter, original, spare,
strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who
knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour;
adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past
change;

Praise him."

Pantheism – the perception of divine beauty in all reality – has historically bridged religions to a range of aesthetic and philosophical visions and lifestyle practices. It involves a broadening of horizons that helps to keep a sense-loving Jesuit priest such as Hopkins in the fold. But it also evokes hostility in the upholders of traditional faith, as evident in Sarafraz Sahib's suspicions.

Is the suspicion about the pluralization of divinity? Of worshipping many embodied gods as opposed to The Great Abstract One? When Rabindranath wrote the line:

"Ami roopsagore doob diyechhi orup
roton pabo bole" – "I have dived in
the ocean of forms to find the formless
treasure" – his pantheism became a
credo for polytheism. One worships a
range of images as the formless God is
too hard to imagine.

Artistic narration needs both kinds. In a famous chapter of *Mimesis* entitled "Odysseus' Scar," Eric Auerbach contrasts Homeric and Biblical narration: the former is externalized, sensory, digressive, while the latter is more obscure and abstract, directed unrelentingly toward a single goal. Unlike the Homeric epics, which take delight in sensory effect and lie and fabricate when necessary, the biblical stories lay claim to the singularity of an absolute truth.

Hinduism shares with Hellenism the sensory appeal of polytheism. It is the beauty of Saraswati, the goddess of learning, sitting with her book and her musical veena; the appeal of the blue Krishna, playing his flute and wielding his fatal weapon, the chakra; the terrifying beauty of the demon-slaying goddess Durga; even the violent rhythm of Shiva's dance of destruction that earns him the name "Nataraj," the lord of dancers. But the beauty of Brahminical Hinduism is also limited to its caste-beneficiaries. As the caste-oppressed intellectual Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd says in his memoir, as a boy in his village, he would wake up in the middle of the night to the nightmare of Saraswati as a ghost, ready to kill him as he nurtured dreams of education, unpardonable hubris for a lower-caste child.

The icons of polytheism can haunt as well as nourish, depending who you are.

But to identify religious faith with a conservative, even reactionary position might be a knee-jerk reaction for people on the secular

left. This has repeatedly turned out to be a false instinct. There have been many progressive religious thinkers, even among those canonized as prophets. But writing in 2002, Ruth Vanita made an observation of curious but pointed significance – unlike the continuing presence of the Islamic or the Christian left, which collaborate with the secular left in different parts of the world, there is no Hindu leftwing in India, none left any more – the pun is unavoidable. Marxist thinkers and writers flock to Durga Puja celebrations on the streets and pray to shrines at home, but very few have tried to integrate leftist and religious thinking in the context of Hinduism. Thinkers like Ashish Nandy and Ramchandra Gandhi, who attempt to do so, are a tiny minority.

Why this lacuna? The reasons, Vanita argued, has much to do with the shame heaped on polytheistic Hinduism in the 19th century. This was essentially the work of British colonialism, which successfully labeled idol-worship as savage and backward. The British were confounded by Hinduism, which they found harder to understand than Islam – which was, like Christianity, monotheistic and based on a single text. Hinduism, with its textual and iconographic plurality, was much more like ancient Greek and Roman religions that Christianity had wiped out centuries earlier. Though Hinduism, which proved resilient through many centuries of attack on its temples and idols, was not to be wiped out easily, the modern method of attack was quite insidious: it took the form of shaming English-educated Indians regarding Hindu rituals, especially those relating to idol-worship. "The best evidence of this shaming," writes Vanita, "is the way new Hindu organizations, such as the Arya Samaj, who rightly embraced such causes as women's education

and the eradication of untouchability, felt compelled to also renounce polytheism and idol-worship." Liberal and educated Indians continued to internalize the shame of polytheism; not long after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, whom Vanita calls the last left-wing Hindu, the Hindu left got lost between the stridency of the Hindu right and the shame felt by the secular left regarding Hindu polytheism.

The literary intelligentsia, especially as it has been forged through colonial modernity and the resistance to imperialism, has gradually moved further and further away from religious iconography, donning a secular mantle. The disenchantment with faith that in Europe energized the Enlightenment and forged the secular form of the novel found its way to India too, through anticolonial movements no less than through movements of colonial modernity. From the Bengal Renaissance to the Progressive Writers' Movement in Urdu, Hindi, and other north Indian languages, this disenchantment has gained pace, nowhere more so than in the English language literatures of India, produced almost exclusively by the urban, English-educated bourgeoisie.

But it would be madness to deny the tremendous aesthetic and emotive power of religion. Literature, and all art, have lived ancient lives enabling – and being enabled by – the beauty, emotion, mystery and terror of religion till secular modernity pried them apart. Subsequently, this has become a reality all across the subcontinent, across all religions. We are left wondering: can Arefin's narrator and Sarafraz Sahib even find a common language in which to voice their differences?

Saikat Majumdar's novels include *The Scent of God* (2019) and *The Firebird* (2015).



prominent local citizen and the head of the local Mosque and the Madrassah committees. The liberal, artistic protagonist knows that the conservative Sarafraz sahib disapproves not only of his uninhibited lifestyle, but more importantly, of the ideology that supports it. More than anything

NONFICTION

Say "Hello" to the Skunks

SOHANA MANZOOR

"Have you met Mr. Skunk? In case you have not, he is a short black and white fellow that you might often see at the bottom of the stairs, or near the dumpster." Joe paused for breath.

I gaped at him uncomprehendingly, my mind racing fast. I wondered if Mr. Skunk was one of the housing assistants. Did he smell that bad? So, yes, I had a vague idea of what a skunk was.

Joe ploughed on, "If you see him, please keep away. If he sprays on you, you are as good as dead. Nobody in the civilized community will accept you. And it's difficult to get rid of skunk odour. Keep a large bottle of tomato juice at home, will you? If you do get sprayed, wash yourself with it."

Before I go further, let me demystify you. Joe was a caretaker at the SIUC graduate housing in Carbondale where I had just arrived in 2009. He came by to explain the rules and show the geyser knob and a few other things. As he was about to leave, he suddenly asked me about Mr. Skunk.

I nodded slowly, comprehension dawning on me. "I know about skunks. But I didn't realize you have them around here too."

Joe laughed. "Wherever wilderness and human beings live side by side, you'll find skunks."

"What's that thing about the tomato juice?" I was curious.

"When I was growing up, our dog Willy used to chase skunks, and often he got sprayed. My mom used to douse him in tomato juice-- the only way you can get rid of that smell."

"Oh!" I could find nothing more to say.

That was my introduction to the skunks of Carbondale. Within a few days, I learnt that skunks were something to be avoided at all costs. But in a small university town surrounded by vast expanses of woods and greens it was next to impossible not to come across them. As it happened, I spotted my first skunk on an early morning in September, as I was standing outside my apartment building to catch the bus. A

small dark creature was foraging near the large metal dumpster. Someone had been careless in throwing the garbage and there were vegetable stalks lying around. The animal was furry and blackish. I wondered if it was the fabled racoon who had been seen around the housing by quite a few people. Then I noticed the white streak and my heart skipped. Right then, Emmanuel, a Nigerian graduate student who lived in another building, came out. He had not seen the little furry fellow at all and was singing along with whatever he was listening to on his earphone. He stopped about six yards away from me and his eyes went wide in shock.

"E-ew!" He croaked. "That's a skunk!" Emmanuel refused to come any closer to the bus-stop and shouted, "Run, Suhanna. If he sprays on you, they won't allow you anywhere near your office."

I did not know what to think and started running alongside Emmanuel. Both of us sped away from the place and went to stand at the next stop.

During my graduate studies, apart from discerning the various tools of research, I also learnt to cook. Cooking was one thing I was awful at back home. But I had to master the art during my stay in the US as I realized that apart from a few selective dishes, I could barely eat what I cooked. It was one of those times when I made a disaster with my cooking venture. The burnt smell of chicken was so bad that I opened all the windows and then went to throw out the trash. Instead of the regular scent of wet grass of autumn evening, there was a stench of something wild and sulphuric in the air. It was quite strong and I wondered what it might be. On my way back to the apartment, I saw the animal again disappearing behind the bushes and I realized that this was the infamous smell of skunk-spray.

A few weeks later, I hurried into the English Department Office early in the morning and smelled the same stench. Joyce,



one of secretaries, sat at her desk with a beatific smile.

"Good morning, Sohana." Joyce nodded at me graciously, her special way of greeting the nervous first year graduate students.

"Morning, Joyce," I replied back. After a bit of chit-chat I asked, "What's that smell? It's as if a skunk had walked in here before me."

Joyce rolled her eyes and said, "Oh, that was Bryan. He got sprayed by a drasted polecat on his way and came to inform that he has cancelled his morning class." She paused and chortled, "And his office mates refused to let the fragrant fella in. . . . The number of skunks is surely on the rise. . . ." Joyce trailed off into one of her stories of skunk meeting as another graduate assistant joined in. I could not wait as I, too, had a class to teach.

In summer 2013, I met a whole brood of

skunks. That year, I was living in Evergreen Terrace, the other graduate housing of Southern Illinois University. Toma was a young graduate assistant of Engineering and we were having a lot of fun roaming through Carbondale. We used to take long walks around the park every afternoon. Since it was the month of Ramadan, many of the middle-eastern students used to sit with their family members on the grassy area in the middle of Evergreen Terrace and enjoy their elaborate iftar. During summer, the housing had fewer staff and hence there was nobody to monitor the activities in the park. So, children would scatter quite a bit of their food. And as soon as darkness descended, small furry black and white animals would creep in to enjoy the littered food. Toma and I did not want to be anywhere near them and both of us would be in a hurry to return home.

One late afternoon, however, we were

detained by a neighboring bhabi and as we stepped out of her house, Toma whispered, "Apu, see, the skunks are out. Don't you think their number has increased?"

There was an entire family of six to seven furry creatures creeping through the grass.

"Let's walk around the other way," I whispered back.

As we tiptoed to the opposite direction, we heard a shrill cry. Surely, that was not one of the skunks! Another bhabi was yelling at us from her balcony, "Sohana Apa, Toma, why are you going all the way round the park? Are you afraid of the skunks? They are harmless really and skunk-spray is not as bad as they make it sound!"

"Since when did Himika bhabi become a skunk-keeper?" Toma asked as we pretended not to have heard her and walked our way.

Clomping along the pathway, I looked at the lush green meadow where the skunks were bumping with chocolate wraps, boxes and food items that were scattered about the grass. In the dying light of dusk, the five smaller skunks looked rather cute. Living around human beings also meant easy food for them. Even though we tend to avoid them, they seemed pretty happy with the leftover food. Toma was right -- in four years they certainly had grown in number. Up until this point, I had not seen an entire family of skunks roaming together so close to the human hub. But then, our habits really were at fault. We had been careless and failed in keeping a clean environment and calling out to the creatures of the wild. I recalled that I had seen squirrels tugging at McDonalds boxes with discarded fries and chicken wings at the bins behind the Student Centre. We surely were contributing to change animal food and habits. With a big sigh I hoped that the housing office would be fully staffed soon and they would clear the space and chase the skunks away.

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