Ah, storytelling!

SAIKAT MAJUMDAR

Do the smooth muscles of narrative hold a deceptive appeal? Does the temporality of a story do more harm than good? One of the most intriguing stories in Aesop's Fables, seems to think so – a fascinating story that is a good example of an anti-story!

The orator Demades, having failed to gain the attention of a noisy and distracted Athenian audience, offers a story, to which the audience is immediately all ears. "The goddess Demeter, a swallow, and an eel," the fable goes, "were walking together down the road. When they reached a river, the swallow flew up in the air and the eel jumped into the water." And then Demades falls silent. Impatiently, the audience cries, "And what about the goddess?" Demades' reply comes like whiplash: "She's angry at you for preferring Aesop's fables to politics."

Are stories more seductive than politics? Contemporary South-Asians might differ here from the ancient Greeks. Not least because so much politics around us are like spun yarns in their shine and jazz.

But what is exactly the promise with which the story lures its audience? What is the twist that wrenches suspense from their guts, leaving them hanging breathlessly?

Many writers, I think, remember the childhood recipe of story-making: "Once upon a time, there was a king and a queen. One day the queen died. And then the king died too." "That is not a story," we were told. But how about this? "Once upon a time, there was a king and a queen. One day the queen died. And then the king died of grief."

"Now that," our teachers exclaimed excitedly, "is a story." Howsoever tiny. Events make up a story only when they are part of a causal link, leading up, ideally, to a moment that stages a climax and a closure.

This is the obvious question that looks into our face from the old art-life debate: Is narrative impossible without an event? That is, can we narrate only when something has happened? And what, indeed, is an event? Is an event a necessary departure from everyday life – indeed, is it the very opposite of the ordinary everyday? Is it only a deviation from the repetitive temporality of the everyday that becomes marked as an event? Is narration possible when nothing out-of-the-ordinary has happened? Is the lack of this happening narratable, or does it defy the very fundamental condition of narrative?

The arrival of literary modernity with the Enlightenment in 18th century Europe gave birth to the English novel. One of the unique gifts of the novel was that it showed the ordinary everyday as worth narrating, just the way ordinary people were now to be celebrated as protagonists in literature, unlike the royal and the highborn in ancient Greek or Shakespearian tragedy. Pre-modern prose narratives such as the romance or the travel story narrated the fantastic, the exotic or the extra-ordinary as experienced by kings, knights and heroic travellers; the distinguishing mark of the new art form of the novel (its newness signalled by its very name) was that it told stories of middle- and even working class women and men, and told stories of kitchens and drawing rooms and card-games and afternoon teas. Suddenly the dailiness of daily life became the stuff of narration. A new word became crucial to fiction: "verisimilitude" – life-likeness. While previous narratives were valued for their departure from the ordinary everyday into the realm of the fantastic, the modern novel began to be valued inasmuch as it showed itself as rooted in the very conditions of everyday life.

The fantastic and the extra-ordinary did not vanish but moved into the realm of the popular, while the conscious artistic imagination became committed to the demotic and the quotidian. In the early 19th century, Walter Scott's novels about war and romantic adventures were runaway bestsellers. But it is his contemporary Jane Austen, with her gossipy stories about ladies' drawing rooms and tea parties who is considered a classic today and the then-bestselling Scott has been consigned to a distant second alley of the literary canon.

The Italian critic Franco Moretti reads Austen's Pride and Prejudice as containing only three turning points. Elizabeth and Darcy meet in Chapter 3; she is disgusted by him. Action is set by this disgust. 31 chapters later, Darcy proposes to Elizabeth. 27 chapters later, Elizabeth accepts him. These are the only three "events" that shape the trajectory of the plot. In between, they meet, talk, hear other people, have tea, go for walks, the sort of thing that adds texture and density to the novel, but do not affect the story. Moretti calls them "fillers." Next to 3 turning points, he counts 110 fillers in the novel. The modern genre of the novel, it appears draws more of its substance from fillers than from turning points.

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And then Moretti notices something curious. As the nineteenth century moves on, fillers are on the rise. The background, he says, slowly starts to become the foreground. From simply giving shape and texture to novels, drinking tea and doing laundry became the very subject of the story, thereby violating the assumption that the narratable event is necessarily a departure from the routinized everyday. The triumph of the non-event, one might say, climaxes with modernism, the period when a whole story comes to be made up of staring at a mark on the wall and a door-stopper of a novel outlines a single day where two men wander around the streets of Dublin.

If the poetic is understood to be an immersion in the experience of a moment and the narrative is imagined as a temporally activated account of causally linked events, modern literature comes to demolish the binary opposition between the two.

But this is the story of the West, right? The common claim about South Asia is that it is, and remains forever, a storytelling culture. It is the land of epics, orality, folklore, mythical tales embedded in communal memory – all the way from the ancient sages to the prolix politician in the modern parliaments and election campaigns. The South Asian Demedes, according to this imagination, would plunge into a story right away, not bother with abstract theories of the state. No conflict between the statesman and the storyteller in these lands, none at all!

It is curious how the English novel from the Indian subcontinent has become a visible venue of this claim, especially since the 1980's; how it has been constructed as an alternative to the realism of the modern western novel. Polyphony, the mistrust of reason, a privileging of orality over literacy, all were by this time part of the West's anxiety about its own project of rational modernity. These were gestures through which the West was questioning its own Enlightenment that now conveniently found simultaneous celebration in non-western cultures of irrational, magical storytelling.

Sure, stories have always played a key role in the South Asian imagination – if the latter can be imagined with any kind of unity. But to construct the playful, prolix, fantastic storytelling culture of South Asia as an alternative to modern western rationality and its literary values – now, that too, is a new kind of orientalism, isn't it? What else but a new version of the taxonomy that classifies the West as rational and scientific and the nonwest as irrational and colourful?

It is, in the end, impossible to dismantle storytelling as a magnetic force that has held our imagination in thrall over centuries. Nor is it desirable that we do so. The important question to ask is: are there other elements that claim artistic attention? Have we left them on the wayside in our fateful march of globalization, which is one of the most powerful and inescapable stories that run our lives today?

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Saikat Majumdar's novels include The Firebird (2015), The Scent of God (2019), and the forthcoming The Middle Finger (2022).

A BalkanTale

MAHMUD HUSSAIN

I was then working as a military observer in Sarajevo, and visiting Zagreb for some official purpose. Jean Marc, one of my French colleagues wanted me to do a favour to a Serb woman. Her name was Tania, an interpreter in the UN Headquarters. Initially, I was reluctant as rules disallowed peacekeepers from acting as a carrier of any warring parties. But Jean Marc seemed to have developed a strangely innocuous feeling for her as one develops for his or her loved ones in inscrutable pain. But on hindsight, it was more than his insistence that convinced me not to fail in my duty to another human being merely on grounds of institutional absolutism.

"Will you carry for me this letter to my friend Samir?" she asked and handed over a brown envelope strung with a silk red ribbon whose ends were cut in the shape of neat triangles with a missing base, and the middle was designed into a floral pattern evoking 'the symbol of love.' Samir was her fiancé and both of them had studied together at the same university, but the Balkan War came as a fateful violator to their happy life. Samir was a Muslim, and had to leave Zagreb for fear of being arrested and prosecuted. His religion became a logo of striking manifestation of his "otherness" in a country which for forty years under the iron-lid of Marshal Tito's communist rule prospered as a single state. I often wondered aghast at the telling of a Serb 'that the Muslims had no place in Yugoslavia, that they were brigands who murdered and pillaged their country under six hundred years of Ottoman rule, and that they should find their place outside the soil of Europe.' God's greatest gift to man is 'Reason.' If reason fails to make man understand the universality of his individual soul, philosophy painfully retreats into a terribly miserable experience.

"What is inside the envelope?" I asked Tania. "Just words," came the reply. I noted that Tania had applied some perfume on the envelope that gave some hint to its passionate spirit.

The route from Zagreb to Sarajevo was winding and tortuous with splendid spectacle of mountains running down to the plains where villages stood out at respectable distances from each other, the red tiles of brown brick houses on roof shone in the scintillating glow of a brilliant sun. My vehicle was wearing a UN flag and fortunately had a free pass through numerous barricades. But all the time, an eerie apprehension was gnawing at my heart; if a local gunman at these check points forcibly wanted to inspect my briefcase, he would have located the envelope by its peerless fragrance, and that could be the end of my story. Many peacekeepers faced deaths for seemingly sympathizing with one of the weaklings that belonged to the other group. I could recall a similar situation in 1971 when the Pakistani military and their turncoats unleashed the behemoth of vengeance on our soil ----- killing, rape, hatred, destruction --- is no story telling but a living nightmare. Despite all those ideas affecting my spirit during that long meditative journey, I reached Sarajevo with the hope of redeeming the separation of two young couple through the help of an envelope.

> In Sarajevo, I took the help of my interpreter Radia to find Samir. Tania gave me some hints where I could find him and deliver the letter; she had given me the address of his house. But to my utter consternation, when Radia told me the story of Samir, I was completely disarmed.

In Sarajevo, I took the help of my interpreter Radia to find Samir. Tania had given me the address of his house. But to my utter consternation, when Radia told me the story of Samir, I was completely disarmed. He had joined the Bosnian army, and was killed by the Serbs in one of the skirmishes at Mount Igman. In the course of the Balkan conflict (1991-1995), Mount Igman became an area of major strategic importance. Serbs had executed a siege of Sarajevo from 1992-1995 with Mount Igman encircling as perimeter. Strategically, Sarajevo is a defender's nightmare, and attacker's paradise, if the control of the mountain is lost. The siege of Sarajevo (1425 days) is the longest siege of a capital city in modern warfare. The blockade of Sarajevo has become a part of the UN tragedy that took the lives of US diplomats when their UN Armored Personnel Carrier (APC) rolled down some 400 meters into a ditch while carrying the UN Peace Mission headed by Richard Holbrooke; because of the blockade, the Mission had no choice but to take narrow route through Igman to reach Sarajevo.

Next day, Radia took me to Samir's house; I had not disclosed anything about the letter to her. It was a two-storied house which needed repair at places where frays had come off the wall. Samir was survived by his old Bosnian mother and a young sister. His father was a Serb, a mechanic who had joined the enemy Serbian army during the conflict, and was killed in the front-line by Bosnian bullets at Mount Igman. Beginning of the conflict, he had left his family to perform a moral act of uniting with Serbian nationhood.

After introductory notes, the first thing Samir's mother asked me was, "How is Tania?" "She is fine," I replied. For a moment, there surged an indestructible anger in her eyes. She exploded, "She is Serb; she is our enemy; my son's greatest sin was to fall in love with an enemy. Imagine how peaceful his soul would have been if he had a Muslim wife to visit his grave." Suddenly, my head started to spin and I felt giddy. She forgot that her own husband was a Serb whom she as a Muslim had married in an act of pure love.

Next day, I decided to visit the war cemetery to bury the letter in Samir's grave so that its words could reach his departed soul. Radia accompanied me but had no idea of my resolve. The Muslim cemetery dedicated to the victims of Bosnian War is one awe-inspiring sight of sepulchral gloom penetrating the forbidding rocks of the distant hills that shielded Sarajevo. Each grave had an epitaph suggesting the irony of a senseless conflict where both men and women, young or old, could be sacrificed in the name of crazy xenophobic ideals. On our walk to the graveyard, I told Tania the story of my country which gained independence at the cost of million lives. Both of our countries shared a common destiny whose remarkable feature for someone was to be true to one's own land.

I placed a few stray flower stalks on the grave that I had bought earlier from a local floral shop, and stood before the grave of this young man whom I had never known or seen. My vague relation with him was through Tania who wanted me to hand over a letter to him. I asked Radia to leave me for some time alone at the grave. She was a bit startled, and then realizing that the solemnity of the evening had overwhelmed me, she started towards the gate with her back towards me. As I was out of her sight, I gently stooped over the grave and dug out some earth with my fingers. After laying the envelope which still smelled of the sweet fragrance, I overlaid the torn surface with the gentle and sad caress of my palm. The letter was now in the safe custody of a dead man.

At night as I lay on my bed, I saw through the window the blue sky with stars looking down upon Mount Igman re-creating retrospectively the battle hymns of young soldiers ready to die at the call of a nation.

Few years later, Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia became independent states through international intervention. I never met Tania again, and do not know if she ever came to know the truth of Mount Igman and Samir's death.

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