

The Return of the Repressed

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SAIKAT MAJUMDAR

As someone who writes novels, writes about them, and generally works in the medium of prose, I've always had an unspeakable envy and admiration for literary forms that take on the moving body of performance. That envy has energized my fiction in important ways. My second novel *The Firebird*, which rooted in a young boy's fascination with his mother's life as a theatre actress, tried to import the ancient force of theatre in the modern realism of the novel. Likewise with poetry – how torn is it between the realities of print and performance? *The Middle Finger*, my most recent novel, has been driven by the anxiety of this question. But this anxiety, I've come to realize in different ways, also indicates a serious crisis of liberal modernity, rooted in the bourgeois gentility of print.

This became clearest to me when a few years ago, I spent a couple of days at the Mumbai Film Festival. I was invited to speak at the author's corner, which I did, and had a fine time hanging out with several other authors, publishers, and a wide range of people from the



entertainment industry: producers and directors, architects of platforms such as Netflix, Amazon, SONY, Star, and then soon-to-be launched venue by Reliance Jio, over two days of dining and wining under the ambitious arcades of the Juhu Marriott. All right across from Jalsa, the Amitabh Bachchan residence, which no driver in Mumbai ever fails to point out while driving past.

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There were also some strange things happening there. Over the two days, I kept hearing about something called

"content," which apparently writers were supposed to produce – one of the many ingredients that went into the making of a web series or a film, along with costume, set, make-up, location, cinematography, the whole nine yards.

I had never thought of writers as producing "content," which appears to be some permutation of story, character, and context to which the film or web series was to give corporeal body.

Some writers and publishers shared discontent, in hushed whispers, about being seen pregnant with content. Others seemed very content and stepped up to bridge the gap, pitching books through prepared videos and other digital material. Was that a blueprint of work to be done, or a kind slice of the labor of the cinematic producer who was being seduced to adopt it? Who could tell? In this world, probably the most generous imagination of books was as sheet music, a promise of something that is incomplete till made visual.

I'd never seen literature reveal the anxiety of performance this way before. Literature was now content, deeply discontent till given the legitimacy of a film, TV show, or web series.

We have finally arrived at a moment when literature needs to reassess its relation

with liberal modernity. The economic and technological embeddedness of literature in the rise of print and a large middle-class with the means, leisure, and literacy to sit and read in private is again, the (crucial) scaffolding of the story here. No less important is the spirit of literature as a modern art form, with its preoccupation of authorial subjectivity, artistic interiority, creative originality, and with its relationship with realism and verisimilitude, none quite possible to imagine before the European Enlightenment of the 18th century, whether in European culture as well as the non-western cultures that came under the purview of this modernity through the global spread of colonialism.

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Today, much of the world feels restless with this modernity. The modernity within which both the idea and practice of literature is still embedded for the most part. Writers, and champions of books everywhere, must take serious notice of this restlessness – one that fuses political reality with trends in cultural consumption.

The anxiety of performance that haunts literature today is merely the return of the repressed.

It is a reminder that the time is ripe for literature to embody the rhythms and patterns of art forms that predate the modern – those that appear far less

affected by its current crisis than the culture of writing and reading has been. I'm imagining literature that is more musical, more rhythmic, more visual, more theatrical, more performative. Poetry, for several decades the neglected stepchild to the mainstream publisher, has renewed its vibrant micro-lives across South-Asian cities through a culture of performance, be it in cafes and galleries or in informal social collectives, and now on YouTube and Instagram. Poetry, vibrant long before modernity, was communal, religious, ritualistic, and performative before it became a new art form in print and the culture of private reading. Even as we continue to delight in the modern genre of written poetry, it is heartening to see poetry reclaim its old premodern life, which is also its new postmodern one.

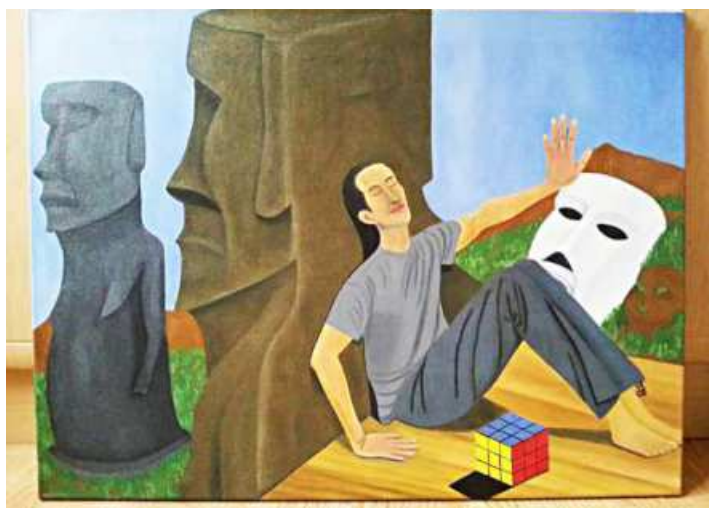
It is prose, and especially prose fiction for whom the challenge to disrupt or transcend modernity is the greatest. Prose fiction, particularly which hinges on the invented story to be read in private, is the special child of Enlightenment modernity. The material body of this genre faces a crisis today, in that neither print nor the culture of reading is what it used to be. At the same time, the expanding appetite for the creative reworking of mythical stories indicate an affinity with premodern audiences, who had no expectation of an original story but looked for retellings of stories shared by the collective memory of the community.

Fiction's disruption of modernity, in many ways, must be a disruption of its own origin, creating prose that pushes to the limit its own literariness – its containment in the abstract artifice of language, its capacity to be anthropological, its embeddedness in secular reason. Fiction that is variously performative, musical, rhythmic, visual.

There is prose that performs but is bereft of the anxiety of performance. That is performative on its own terms, without looking for performative legitimacy in another medium. Merrier if that act of translation happens – but it is complete without it, and yet miraculously disruptive of the complacency of liberal modernity in its subversive performativity.

As Arundhati Roy once said about *The God of Small Things*, that it is a deeply visual but stubbornly unfilmable book. Literature that performs, but on its own terms, not on those of others.'

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



The Locksmith's LUCK

In half a minute, this too got boring and she began bouncing on all fours, leap frogging, tumbling and bouncing in every way until she had begun jumping and dancing on the bed as if on a trampoline and cackled with joy. Azhar could hardly understand what was happening. But then curiosity got better of him and he peeped through a thin shaft between the wardrobe and the door.

MARJUQUE-UL-HAQUE

Azhar was a forty-year-old bachelor and an expert locksmith. He also owned a hardware store. He was generally considered to be a good citizen even though fifteen years ago, he went to prison for stealing jewels. But since then, he has been very careful about not getting caught. The stolen money helped him travel around and enjoy the small luxuries of life.

This time, he chose the two storied house of a rich businessman, Alimuddin. For some odd reasons, the local burglars avoided the house. Someone mentioned something about an insomniac aunt who never slept. But Azhar did not care. He studied the house carefully for a week. The house was old and not difficult to get in. So, when the family went to their village home for the Eid vacation, he decided to make his move.

The two security guards were glued to the TV screen enjoying some farcical Eid program when he climbed to the roof of the house. He entered the master bedroom hoping to get quite a lot of cash and jewelry from the steel wardrobe. Between him and the treasure, there was only this double lock.

Right at that moment, someone switched on the light in the adjacent room. Azhar quickly hid behind the door. He was just able to have a glimpse of a girl in a red saree.

This was something he had not anticipated; he had imagined that he would be climbing into the house, pick the wardrobe lock and make way with the valuables. As far as he knew, Alimuddin and his entire family had gone to their village home on vacation. Was it possible that Alimuddin had hired a caretaker to look after the house while he was away? But now what

was the best course of action? Should he go back the way he had come in, or should he wait until this girl went away? He could wait until the girl left and then quietly pick the wardrobe lock and leave with the valuables. This idea again was a daring one. An even more daring thing to do



ILLUSTRATION: FARZAD

would be to wrestle her down, tie her up and gag her with a towel. But he could then take whatever he needed without her raising an alarm.

As he was contemplating the next course of action, the red sari came into the room and turned on the lights. For a moment, she stood where she was before going to the bed and plopping down on her back like a starfish on the ocean bed. She lay down for a bit staring at the ceiling, apparently enjoying the softness of the bed, but after a while, she began to bounce up and down on the bed cooing and squealing, seemingly enjoying its comfortable bounciness. In half a minute, this too got boring and she began bouncing on all fours, leap frogging, tumbling and bouncing in every way until she had begun jumping and dancing on the bed as if on a trampoline and cackled with joy. Azhar could hardly understand what was happening. But then curiosity got better of him and he peeped through a thin shaft between the wardrobe and the door. What he saw seemed strange. There was something quite unnatural about her that he couldn't put his finger on. Her cackling made his skin crawl. Who was she and why was she wearing a gorgeous red saree and jewellery in the middle of the night?

Was she perhaps mentally imbalanced? That would explain her unnatural behavior but the mystery of her identity was still confusing. Who was she exactly? Alimuddin's daughter? Things didn't add up and finally he decided on a course of action.

Just as he had made up his mind, footsteps came up to the door and she was peering at him with wide-eyed curiosity. "How long are you going to stay in there?" she asked. Azhar was stunned, he stood rooted to the spot struggling to reply, unable to utter a single word. "Well, why don't you come out now, haven't you been in there long enough?" she giggled, held out the door and pulled him out from his hiding spot. She looked like a young

girl of seventeen but Azhar could not remember the last time he had been so bewildered.

"Okay, here's the deal – we're going to play and after we are done, you can take whatever you want," the girl said with a charming smile. Azhar decided to test his luck. The girl after all had not given him away. "I'll play," he said with some difficulty. "Okay" the girl said brightly "let's play jumping on that bed, it's so much fun." Once he and the girl climbed onto the bed, he was about to pounce on her to put her on a choke hold, but the girl dodged him and began to giggle into convulsions. He was incensed having fallen flat on his face. His plan was to quickly wrestle her into submission, tie and gag her before he opened the wardrobe. For the next ten minutes, the two of them were jumping around on that large bed, he constantly trying to catch her and she continually eluding his arms and bursting into giggles each time he failed or fell down trying to grab her.

Azhar began to breathe heavily. He was not as young as he once was; he had tripped over too many times. "I know a way to have even more fun," the girl exclaimed suddenly. "Azhar use the entire house." Azhar felt that this was too much; he might as well get caught. He was already starting to question his own sanity for doing what he had been doing. "Listen," he tried to find a way out. "I need to drink some water, also I think we've played long enough. Why don't I leave today and maybe we can play another time?" he suggested wearily.

"No, you can't leave, you agreed to play and not to leave until I said so!" she said with a mean smile. It was at that point, Azhar began to suspect of some great abnormality. He looked carefully at the girl, her chiseled face and flawless skin. Her laughter and her eyes. His knees wobbled as he suddenly recalled an old story of the woman who was killed in this very house many years ago. Wasn't she an aunt of Alimuddin? Azhar fell down on the floor, his eyes frozen on the rapidly changing form before him.

Marjuque Ul Haque is a graduate in English Literature and Cultural Studies. He loves to explore the intangible and the imaginative.