

FICTION

# Myth of the witch



TASNIM ODRIKA

I killed my lover. I killed the love of my life and watched the life drain out of her eyes. Eyes that were golden brown turned pitch black; as if her soul left the body taking away all the colours of life. I wondered for a minute if this soul would go on and enter the life of another poor woman who would be trapped again in this world, cursed to live.

I laid her lifeless body down on the porcelain tiled floor of the bathroom. I had all the necessities laid down around me in a circle. A clean bowl, a surgical knife, the book of Mantra, and candles. The candles were only for the ambience really; a soft glow of light dancing around in the shadows. A lot of

people have this misconception but wizardry does not require the use of candles although most wizards I knew did like candles.

I nimbly brushed my fingers on the cover of the withering book of Mantra and turned to the very end of the book. The book was brown, the colour of faded parchment that had withstood the test of weather. Some of the pages were loose and it required careful handling to turn the pages, lest one of the pages fell off and got lost. I turned them delicately, as precious relics from a forgotten era. They felt like crumbling autumn leaves under my thumb.

The paragraph containing the incantations was barely visible but I had it memorised by

heart anyway. I ran my finger along the thin penmanship one last time. Then, as custom, I picked up the small surgical knife with my left hand to make a precise incision on her throat and drained out the seeping elixir in my bowl. The clear bowl darkened. The only sound in that empty apartment was now the “drip, drip, drip”. The bowl was heavier than usual. This one had lived a full life but it would be my life to live now. I gulped down the inky red elixir as I chanted the blurry words on the pages.

I liked to carry out my enchantment in bathrooms as the huge mirrors allowed me to witness the transformation in grave detail. I felt the warm liquid travelling down my body. My hands felt stronger and my eyes glistened with new life. It took me long enough to find her. I saw now the lines that had formed on my marble-like features. It all became more evident as they erased themselves. As the elixir travelled through my body it smoothed out all the creases.

I had nothing but respect for her sacrifice. I usually leave the bodies in the bathrooms with all the objects as is, except for my book. When they get discovered after a week or two, the headline reads, “Witchcraft gone wrong; another woman dead”.

The crackdown on witches for the past decade has been hard. No woman over 18 is allowed to purchase or use any sharp objects without the written consent of a male guardian. According to the media, the witches drain their blood to remain young but then sometimes these rituals go wrong and you end up dead in empty apartments. They blame the intrinsic vanity of women for falling for such insidious deeds. The world hates the non-existent witches. They say they have been corrupting womankind.

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POETRY

# Meursault rediscovered

FAHMIDA SHARMIN

Mother sold him and he never knew a father; Born adult, as though he never had a childhood. He remembered the fading face of his mother, Fragments from the early years of his life As he smoked the last cigarette from the packet. The memory is still vivid in his mind, He could recall the lullaby that she hummed, “Does it matter?”-the train of thoughts stopped at this, He threw the empty packet of cigarettes and walked to work, He wants to live the moment without a second thought.

Fahmida Sharmin is a contributor.



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

ESSAY

# The once and future bedes & ‘Gypsies?’

JOHN DREW

Szilvia Reif, a student of mine from the (indicatively named) Gandhi School in Pécs, Hungary, wrote a poem that tells what it feels like to be a ‘Gypsy (properly Roma).

Stanza by stanza she reviews what associations have accrued to the word “Gypsy”. Yes, it causes bad feelings. But also, more positively, a unique talent for music, for sticking together and sharing a unique language and for predicting the future.

Szilvia’s complaint is that she is seen only in terms of her community, never as a person, an individual. While the Jews honour a number of brave goys who risked their lives by sheltering individual Jews during Hitler’s Holocaust, the ‘Gypsy poet Bari Károly tells me there is not a single known case of a gadzê sheltering a Roma.

There are obvious differences between the land-based ‘Gypsies in Europe and their river-based counterparts, the Bedes of Bengal, the names of the latter pretending to an origin among the Bedouin of Arabia rather than among the Egyptians. Whether the Bedes, as Rizia Rahman has it in her *Bam Theke Bamla*, are aboriginal to the delta and have a common origin with the ‘Gypsies either there or among the lower occupational “castes” in north India, their lifestyles have a lot in common.

At least the Bedes have not suffered discrimination, as have their counterparts in Britain, for being “Asian”. However, both have suffered persecution on account of their lifestyle, being vagrant, nomadic, outcasts to settled society, a threat to property owners. As Nazrul Islam observes in his play *Baner Bede*, the Bedes do not build homes since the whole world is their home.

Szilvia’s images of her people accord closely with those elaborated in British literature. It is the Romantic era that provides the most romantic but also arguably realistic glimpse of the ‘Gypsies. The most convincing portrait comes in Walter Scott’s *Guy Mannering*. This novel might more accurately have been called, as it was in its dramatisation, *Meg Merrilies*, the name of the main protagonist, a ‘Gypsy woman.

Scott was intimately familiar with the no-man’s-land Border Country between Scotland and England where the ‘Gypsies had first surfaced purporting and taken to be Kings of Egypt. Ben Jonson actually wrote a masque for the king and his courtiers to play at being ‘Gypsies.

Scott’s ballad, “The Gypsie Laddie”, valued by Burns, catches the atmosphere of those origins when Johnny Faa persuades a rich lady to elope with him. While its plot differs, the tragic denouement that follows the social transgression in this ballad has much in common with the equally seminal and popular Bengali ballad on a Bede woman, Mahuya.

Meg, based on a real-life character, is one of the Faas, brooding over the action of the novel (that extends as far as India) and determining its outcome. Scott exposes the stereotypes to which a ‘Gypsy is subjected—she is assumed to be stealing a child just

as the ‘Gypsy in DH Lawrence’s *The Virgin and the Gypsy* is assumed to be bent on murdering the girl when actually both are on life-saving missions.

Fortune-telling, being able to foretell the future, is the most commonly observed occupation of the British ‘Gypsies. Most presciently, Scott shows that the prophetic voice Meg speaks in is in fact practical insight based on an awareness of human nature, an ability to see into the heart of things. This image of a shrewd ‘Gypsy female figure, strong and faithful, traduced and tragic, though unique in British literature,

because Clare himself, wishing only to be granted their way of life, ended up being shut away in an asylum.

William Hazlitt, the essayist who traversed every mile of the English countryside, castigates Wordsworth for having no sympathy for the beggarly ‘Gypsies, in one poem regarding an unmoving group of them around a campfire as “torpid”. Not only is Wordsworth himself “the prince of poetic idlers” but he fails to realise the lifestyle of the ‘Gypsies is of even more value to humankind than is his poetry. They are “an everlasting

Matthew Arnold provides a useful hybrid word for such Bohemians in his poem, “The Scholar-Gypsy”. Its story is based on that of a 17th century Oxford scholar who abandoned his studies to go and live with the ‘Gypsies. One of the slogans of the English Revolution at that time highlighted the attraction: “Gypsy Liberty”.

By the time DH Lawrence wrote his novella *The Virgin and the Gypsy* in the 20th century, in some ways a modern re-telling of Scott’s “The Gypsy Laddie”, he posited a stark opposition between the settled, respectable, deadening life of a vicarage and

*Kanyar Kahini*). For them, as for Lawrence, nagas are a principle of energy. This is in contradistinction to Judaeo-Christian Europe where they are generally perceived as a symbol of Evil.

Lawrence’s poem shows him realizing what the Bedes and the ‘Gypsies instinctively know: that instead of destroying Nature, killing snakes no less than raping the Earth for its resources and denuding the seas of fish on an industrial scale, we need to learn to live with it.

Alun Lewis’s short story, “The Orange Grove”, returns us to the ‘Gypsies in India. The driver of a British Army truck is killed by nationalists and his officer must get the dead body back to base. The truck breaks down in a river miles from anywhere and the corpse is taken up by a party of ‘Gypsies. The officer is in the hands of people living a migratory life stripped to its essentials. He doesn’t know where they are going and maybe neither do they. To a pasture, perhaps, or a well.

In the time since Lewis wrote, the stranglehold of urban civilization in the tight little island of Britain has virtually done for the countryside and so for those who traditionally lived in it and off it. ‘Gypsies and their fellow, often New Age, travellers are not welcome to settle and, if they try to camp by the roadside, are moved on.

One ‘Gypsy in my native valley, Levi Smith, observed: “What I thinks to myself what they should do is put us all in some big field about a mile round and then drop a bomb on us”. Bangladesh is now experiencing the urban stranglehold at a faster pace and the glittering city has sucked demoralized Bedes, among others, into its bars and brothels.

For those Bedes who remain on the Meghna the destined bomb is a time-bomb. Thanks to the corporate behemoth devouring Earth’s resources right across the globe, greed trumping need, the Tibetan glaciers, like the polar ice-caps, are melting, as Bangladeshis know better than anybody, the Bay of Bengal rising.

And here is the irony. The great maw of urban consumer society is set fair to consume not only the ever more numerous rural outcasts but the select urban elites themselves in their gated communities. At their gates there will be a land first flooded and then dried up. The universally predominant lifestyle of conspicuous consumption is manifestly unsustainable.

One alternative may be to look again, sooner rather than later, and value, as our literatures have done, aspects of the subsistence lifestyle traditionally practised by the Bedes and ‘Gypsies, whether aboriginal, nomadic or migrant. Getting by—individually and collectively—may be the most viable, perhaps only, way of getting on?



Vincent van Gogh's 'The Caravans - Gypsy Camp near Arles' (1888, Oil on canvas)

is widespread in Bangladeshi literature on the Bedes.

John Keats drew on Scott’s portrait of Meg to write some lively verses celebrating her free, simple life in the country, but the countryman John Clare is the Romantic poet who knows that way of life best. Taught to fiddle by the ‘Gypsies, he saw how the lifestyle that he shared with them was increasingly threatened by the enclosures of common land enacted by the rich.

In poems valuing his ‘Gypsy friends for their common sense and shrewdness, Clare described them in one line as “a quiet, pillering, unprotected race”. It is that final adjective that strikes home, the more so

source and reflection on the advantages and disadvantages of the progress of civilization”.

Hazlitt’s claim is part of an important tradition that highlights the shortcomings not only of a marginalized people but of the mainstream society that oppresses them. Most of the more sympathetic literary perceptions of the ‘Gypsies come from writers who are themselves what Hazlitt calls “professional Bohemians”, intellectuals who have grave reservations about the progressiveness of their own urban societies. In this respect, the pastoralist Jasim Uddin might come to Bangladeshi minds.

the unshackled life of a ‘Gypsy wayfarer. The latter belongs to a more vital, pre-industrial England, uncrushed by industrial-scale war—or enervating domesticity.

Incidentally, Lawrence’s well-known poem, “Snake”, points to a distinctive aspect of the sub-caste of Bedes known as Sapures, snake-charmers, unafraid of snakes, able to cure snake-bite under the aegis of the Snake Goddess, Manasa Mangal. It is in this capacity that the Bedes are most frequently encountered in Bangladeshi literature.

Moreover, the Sapures live by the waters that in the subcontinent’s oldest myths are seen as the province of the serpentine nagas (glimpsed in Tarashankar’s novel *Nagini*

This article, based on John Drew's own monograph, *Images of the 'Gypsies in English Literature*, is indebted for its Bangladeshi prompts to Carmen Brandt's *The Bedes of Bengal*.

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