

Manjula Padmanabhan's "Three Virgins and Other Stories":

Amazing, Amusing, Disturbing and Dazzling!

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Abstract

"Three Virgins and other stories" is a collection of short stories with unusual and radical themes. Under gnawing and ironical studies of contemporary society, Manjula Padmanabhan displays a wonderful range of short stories in this collection. In every story Padmanabhan brings a surprising turn, a touch of parody, a whiff of criticism, and a tasty undercurrent of dim amusingness. The stories veer between fantasy and realism.

Keywords: Radical, Fantasy, Realism, Parody, Criticism, Amusingness.

Manjula Pamanabhan, born in 1953, is a writer and artist living in New Delhi. She is an Illustrator, Journalist, Cartoonist, Novelist and Playwright and children's story writer. In 1998 Manjula won the 'Onassis International Cultural Prize' for her play **Harvest** and became internationally famous. This is considered the world's richest play script award. She created a comic character "SUKI" which was serialized in **Sunday Observer** and **The Pioneer**. Her famous works are **Lights Out** (1984) **Harvest** (1997), **Kleptomania** (2004), **Hot Death, Cold Soup** (1996), **Getting there** (1999), **Escape** (2008), **The Island of lost girls** (2013) and **Three virgins and other stories** (2013).

Manjula Padmanabhan shows a sense of both genuineness and detachment in the characters of Three Virgins and Other stories. The stories progress or ascend like a skyscraper whose center is established both on the standards of a descent plot and singularity. Each story sparkles with its own specific character and uniqueness. There is one common thread in all the stories, that is, interesting women. Manjula Padmanabhan in her introduction writes, "Alas, the ideas that arrive at my desk top are all rude, unsightly wretches who belch

and pick their noses and expose themselves in public.” (vii) This is somewhat misinterpretation, yet Manjula’s writing does have a refreshingly unrestrained quality.

The introductory story “Teaser” is about Rakesh, an eve teaser, who targets women and girls while travelling in bus. He refers them as “it”. The female who looks slim is his target. Such targets turn out to be angels or goddesses to him. It depends on what it ‘wears’ and tries to touch its bare skin with his forearm or his elbow. That is his ardent quest and his daily mission. He encounters real targets in real life on real buses. Padmanabhan through Rakesh grants us an understanding into a degenerate mind where targets are decoded as demographics. In the end, Padmanabhan gives a master stroke - sees the teaser becoming the teased!

“A Government of India Undertaking” is about someone who wants to discover the place where actually happens the exchange of life essence from soul to flesh, and then back to soul. It is an astonishing metaphysical journey by a woman to change her life without committing suicide, catching a disease, or murdered by jealous relatives. She does not want to wait till her next life, so decides to change her present life. She wants to be rich, famous and absolutely indolent. The woman finds “Bureau of Reincarnation and Transmigration of souls- A government of India undertaking” as the right place to realize her wish. The woman bribes number of government clerks to reach the transmigration department in the Seventh floor. The Peon Gopal takes to the floor’s specific area of her interest - departure lounge to the other world. In this story Manjula encapsulates all the manifestations of corruption in Indian bureaucracy.

One of the best stories in this collection is inspired by the holy epic Ramayana. “The Other Woman” is the story of Mandy (Mandodari), the wife of Ravana. She makes arrangement for an extended journey to the mortal dimension. The reason to visit the mortal dimension is to express her pain, hurt and angry when the whole world says her husband is running after a woman and she is nowhere in the picture! She approaches a famous journalist, Basra to explain herself in inimitable style. Manjula Padmanabhan sets her version to expand the elements of the mythological world, rather than a wholesale re-telling. So she has chosen the least central of the many characters in the entire saga. Mandy wants to bring out her frustration as this is an “Age” where women are free to speak out their feelings!

“Khajuraho” is the fourth story in the anthology. An American couple, Coral and Robert Delaney visits erotic temples of Khajuraho as tourists. The Guide Rajesh takes them

around the temples and gives every minute detail of the stonework. The visitors are surprised at the Pornography on the stones. They are amazed at the young man who is spending six days a week, for eleven years, describing scenes of fornication in solemn detail to the battalions of snickering tourists. This rises few queries in the mind of Coral Delaney- what had this done to him? How had it affected his personal life? What would it do to any human being?

“Hot Death, Cold Soup” is the centre spread famous story of Manjula Padmanabhan. A famous journalist spends two days with 70 year old Sally, an American woman married to Indian man Subhash, who in her old age watches over her dying husband, and plans to commit “SATI”! The story is set in the Udampur of Northern UP. Sally requests the journalist not to tell anybody about it, till it is over. She adjusts to Indian style of dressing, wearing sarees and red bindhi on the forehead. There are three live-in servants in the luxurious house to serve Sally. The meeting point for Sally and the Journalist is at the fashionable dining table in the house. The cook serves soup with ice-cubes floating on it and in contrast the atmosphere in the house appears “Hot” as Subhash struggles with life in his death bed! Manjula Padmanabhan selects an apt title for the story – “Hot Death and Cold Soup!” Sally does not want to endure the lonely years ahead without her husband Subhash and prefers death to widowhood, hence plans for ‘Self-immolation.’ In the courtyard of the house, Sally makes all the arrangements to perform Sati and calls it “Well of Infinity” which is filled with petrol, a modern pyre without wood and pain! Nevertheless, Manjula ends the story with a strange twist - instead of Sally, Laxman sets fire to himself along with the dead body of Subhash in the “Well of Infinity” as he could not bear the truth that his master (father) is dead!

“Exile” is another story which is written with the inspiration of the great epic, Ramayana, in which, the princess Rashmi is banished to a satellite, “The Surface” for 14 years along with her husband Siddhangshu and her sister Laxmi, after a split between her mother and step-father over inheritance. Rashmi is more excited than her sister and takes banishment as being alone. They wear clothes light in weight, climate controlled suits and spend their years in entirely a new planet run by smart machines - fully automated factories, all underground, synthesized nourishment out of the Planet’s raw materials. Rashmi’s husband Siddhangshu is abducted by L-Nka Chief Admin, Raveena and forces him to marry her. But he denies her wish, remains in the prison and drinks only ‘water’ to survive. Rashmi

with the help of her sister and Minibots, invades L-Nka and brings her husband back. After encountering many experiences during fourteen years, the three return to I-Udia, the place they live in. Manjula has reversed the genders in comparison to Ramayana.

In “The Strength of Small Things,” the strength lies in a “key” which saves the lives of a woman and her four months old baby, from the hands of cruel mother-in-law and the husband. A mother finds her US returned son, a bride from a wealthy family with a dowry of twenty lakh in cash and another twenty in gold, also girl’s family promises to pay another fifty lakh in different spells. The bride, qualified in secretarial course wants to earn after marriage but her mother-in-law does not allow fearing the daughter-in-law may get the wrong ideas about life, if she earns. The mother advises her son not to have any female child, hence, he gets his wife aborted twice. Third time, the wife succeeds to resist abortion and gives birth to a girl child at her parental home, and returns with her four month old baby and with a suitcase of money. The control-freak mother lures her son into killing his wife and the new-born baby, and then to get married again for huge dowry. His blind affection towards his mother makes him to plot for killing his wife and plans to leave for Delhi the same day. He receives the ‘air ticket’, keeps it in the money suitcase and locks it. When his wife sleeps with her baby, he sets fire to the room and locks it. He does not leave any particle for investigation. He tries to open the suitcase for the ticket but it does not open as the ‘key’ gets struck in the lock. The wife manages to break the glass doors of the room and shouts for rescue, while the neighbours call police for help. The most dazzling thing in the story is the “key” of the suitcase, and the power of these small things is steady fast, incorruptible and pure in their purpose.

Padmanabhan’s provocative story in the collection is “Stains”. It is about traditions and customs of two races. An African girl, Sarah loves an Indian based American, Deepak and decides to get married. She visits his home to stay for three days. His old-fashioned, traditional mother Mrs. Kumar lays many restrictions during her menstrual cycle and asks her to wash the floral bed-sheet which gets stained in the ice-cold basement. Mrs. Kumar treats her as untouchable. Deepak supports his mother. The gap between the two generations of women, past and present, is much focused by Manjula Padmanabhan. In primitive communities, menstruating women sit separately, sometimes in a special hut to avoid contamination and the unclean magic of a bleeding. The idea of “unclean” makes Sarah

feel a current of power through her and she concentrates on fashioning something positive out of her natural pain.

Deepak humiliates Sarah by saying that everyone of his family in India might reject her as she belongs to a different race and her traditions and culture are different as well. This ignites as yet another sign of her inferiority on the scale of traditional values. She feels insulted for being treated as untouchable and invalid. Manjula through Sarah provokes everyone to think, how a menstruating woman can be penalized for being in that “state”; the correct condition, of course, is to be pregnant or nursing. Older women like Deepak’s mother, who have lost their own fertility, add a reason for wanting to punish younger women. Sarah moves out of Deepak’s house and from his life without informing. She decides there is only a level of culture to care about, the kind which makes her own life reasonable and intelligent.

In “Feast” a vampire from Europe, Morton (Martin Payne) visits New Delhi and hires a cab to take him to the hotel. He invites the driver Satish to come up to his room to accomplish his deed; sucks every drop of blood from his body and transfers the body into sea labeled bag and dumps it in the garbage. To avoid attractive attention, he assumes that he looks like a shrunken frame of a scavenging beggar, complete with matted hair and dirty, swarthy skin. Every day he gets success in getting his food. His deeds are traced by another vampire, Cindy. She describes, to acquire supernatural privileges such as immortality is highly tough in India. She brings out the divinity of Indian culture with different rules of faith: “There is no immortal soul - not in the sense we understand it - and there’s no single divine authority. Instead, there are infinite births, infinite deaths, and infinite divinities” (225). The system is directly opposite to theirs. Instead of a single life and single fate, there is a raging torrent of lives and fates, truth and death. At the both the vampires lose their powers and remain as mortals in the present life.

“Three Virgins” is about a young woman’s physical relation with her friends at different ages. The narrator engineers her own journey with virginity as a conscious activity and wants to choose rather than be chosen. When she is in her teens, finds a friend’s brother, Gai as her physical partner. She identifies that only physical body works with over-flowing desire by leaving their social history aside. Her experience with Gai confirms that her mind is an absolute domain that could never be invaded or colonized except with her consent.

During her mid-twenties, one of her college friends, Ork sends a note in code expressing a carnal interest in her. She flabbergasts by knowing that even he is not interested, like her, to get married each other after their physical bonding. She agrees for that and they enjoy the 'physical event' with great pleasure. After a few months, Ork marries another girl, but the marriage ends within six months. He meets the narrator after a decade, blames himself for approaching her and blames her even more for behaving like a professional courtesan! Later, the narrator meets Om, a friend during her teens and gets attracted to him. Om is already engaged to a girl who studies in USA and plans to marry her after few months. Under the heading "Research and Exploration" the narrator's mind sanctions a physical encounter with him. But the narrator feels impenetrable emptiness after his leaving and the event remains in her mind, as a memory, irrefutable and unchangeable. After two decades, Om gets in touch with the narrator once again. Lives of the both, by now have changed in a dramatic manner with well established financial status. When Om reminds her of the "physical event episode", she realizes "Om as user and she as usee". The narrator concludes, "Virginity is invisible. It has no mass or atomic number. It means nothing to those who do not seek truth."(250)

Conclusion

Manjula Padmanabhan in an interview said that she finds themes for her stories by taking real-life issues, various disguises and shadowy references from her family, her friends and the locales in which she has lived or grown up. That is crystal clear in the collection of "Three Virgins and Other Stories. Every story in the collection is freak amazing, amusing, exasperating and shocking- the trademark of Manjula's style.

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