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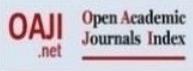
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Page 117-125

Fragmented

Jayanti Datta

The mirror was broken into a zillion pieces, and in each piece, she saw reflected a part of herself. She realised that she was not really asleep. She occupied an alternate reality. She carried her loneliness even in this temporary realm. Finally, after what seemed an infinite, indefinite length of space, she was awake. At least the many gazes were gone.

Rukmini sat in front of the mirror, and her image, with its large, limpid eyes, like that of an intelligent and loving cow, was reflected in the glass which was swimming in the dusk light pouring in from the window. There was no-one else in the house. Her parents had not yet returned from work. And

the old grandfather clock, which had been crowded into a corner along with several other knick knacks and wasted objects waiting for the garbage dump, went tick tock, tick tock, for the one last time, bravely playing out a tune till the very last moment of its life. Instinctively, Rukmini thought of her own grandfather, living out the final days of his life, in a dusty, obscure district town. She had been there a few times with her parents. The approach to the house was dirty and sordid, but the house itself was a neat and cheery little oasis, a place of companionship. She wanted to meet her grandfather again. She wanted his warm embrace, and the smell of tobacco. She wanted to hear stories of his childhood under the large Mulberry tree in Delhi.

The computer was reflected in the mirror as well. The computer was black, and sleek and smart. She walked towards it hypnotized by its lure, switched it on, and in seconds she was drawn into its algorithmic universe, bits of information were minted out of its pages, like leaping sparks of gold. She raced through a hundred 'likes', and then came to that familiar thread of ferocious conversation that had been raging on the cold screen for some days now. Jatin was at the centre of the storm.

It all began with one small intervention. Jatin is a molester. This was the comment Mukti posted suddenly, without warning, on her site.

Whazzat? A joke?

No. Dead serious.

Dead as in what?

No. I'm telling you, it's serious.

You mean Jatin molested you?

Yes. He molests many girls. He has been. For ages. No one has the guts to say anything.

And then, one by one, the voices began to chip in, some with an urgent sense of involvement. Others just for the heck of it, irresponsibly. Just a few days ago this had been a friends circuit where a song had been playing.

“A year from now we’ll all be gone.

All our friends will move away.

And they’re going to better places.

But our friends will be gone away.”

There were crazy guides to Ph.D. seekers, and loony memes on campus interviews. But then this happened, and this gnawed into everyone’s brain like a worm. Everyone included some new topic, according to his or her sensibility, irrespective of whether it was relevant or not.

“What is your definition of molestation?”

“To make it perfectly clear to you, it need not be restricted to groping with sexual intent. That makes things too simple, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, it actually means anything that takes away my agency as a woman.”

“What the fuck was Jatin doing anyway in the front line of a women’s movement?”

“Is this amnesia, Jatin’s organization was invited to participate, remember?”

“So that gives him the leave to thrust himself forward and shout ‘*seena taane halla bol*’, ‘*Sidhu ka beta halla bol*’ and hijack the movement?”

“Yes, we were disgusted by it. Disgusted. Period.”

“And the sloganengineering was an excuse for the groping.”

“Pardon me, but can this be an elitist backlash against a Dalit, daring to be on equal terms of comradeship?”

“Mate, you have peculiar ideas of comradeship.”

“I think Jatin needs to be thrashed publicly.”

“He is a lecherous misogynist who thinks my body is accessible to him because I have protested alongside him. Pseudo – leftist.”

“There’s no difference between these pseudos and the Alt Right.”

“These are the bastards who think there’s only one entry point into a subject. Pun intended.”

While, in the beginning, there had been one or two voices in support of Jatin these gradually faded away as the tide began to turn with irrational ferocity against Jatin. And people who had never seen him or heard of him began to demand that his penis should be cut off or his balls smashed.

Rukmini knew Jatin from a distance. She had seen him several times on the university campus, and that was all, except for one evening when he had recited a self-composed poem standing in the centre of a circle of students. That evening was different because of the quality of the poem. When she returned home, she had translated the poem into English, whatever she remembered of it, perhaps filling in with her own lines.

*My eyelashes burn
But my gaze is steady
Each leaf has woven a pattern
And the horizon is on fire
I would like to live
My life as if it were the last night
Those who die alone at midnight
Those who have lived half dead
Through each dreary day*

*On that last night, the room fades away
Vast spaces stretch ahead
On that night, the truth stands bare
I would like to live my life
As if it were the last night.*

Today when she entered the gates and walked towards the U.G. building, she understood that the broth was thickening. There was going to be a demand for an investigation committee to be set up. There was going to be a demand for Jatin's mother to step down as head of the department of Comparative Languages.

Rukmini entered the building and saw at once that the corridor had changed. The slabs of stone and cement could not be broken down, but the corridor was no longer a normal place. The friends of Mukti and the friends of friends of friends stood lining the walls on both sides. The eyes of some were glinting like waiting for the kill. A student with a man bun, and a stick thin, stern looking girl dressed in stridently flagrant "ethnic" clothes were the ostensible organizers. No one knew much about their origins. The conversation grinded to an unseemly halt, when a slight woman in a starched sari, and a nondescript boy with curly hair walked in. The only thing striking about the boy was the shiny ebony of his complexion. This was the infamous Jatin. The two figures had stopped for a moment in the door way, and had appeared as outlines against the sunlight, with auras surrounding their heads. Having taken in the scene they advanced slowly, superficially defensive, internally pugilistic. The members of the vigilante committee smirked in unison and began a slow clapping of hands that ran down the entire length of the corridor, and pursued the retreating backs of the two, like a corrupted gaze or a fecund smell. A clapping that would not let them be, a persistent, relentless, inimical phenomenon. Rukmini who stood outside the formation indeterminately,

suffered an out of body experience, and the faces of everyone present took on a sinister hue.

That evening, Rukmini once again sat and watched the ever expanding deluge of comments, and suddenly felt that she must climb out of her non-committal shell. She climbed out mentally, and stood nude and rough and raw at the edges. Then this passive onlooker made her little intervention.

Hi, this is Rukmini. Excuse me, what are we all doing? Why are we doing this?

Sorry sister. Can't understand.

I mean why are we shaming him? Why are we judging him?

Uh-uh. Here comes one of those. Welcome. Post-truth, alternative ethics shit poster.

Rukmini or whatever, am I to take it you are validating molestation?

No, no. I mean we haven't heard his side.

Why would a woman expose herself on social media if she didn't feel insulted?

I think the age of liberal toleration is fucking over.

Yeah, given the fact that we live in a patriarchal society with unequal power relations between men and women, we cannot simply present 'versions' of the incident.

No, no. You are misconstruing me. I don't belong to the post truth party. I do believe we need to come to some sort of conclusion, but

Oh God, these are middle class yuppies mouthing tiresome platitudes.

All I'm asking for is some rational investigation

The assertion of rationality is banal. Look Rukmini or whatever, this works for us and sweaty donkey balls to anyone

who makes us feel bad about it. Leave your shit stain somewhere else.

Rukmini, who had never entered a controversy on social media before was not prepared for this voiceless, faceless disgust. She withdrew from the turgid whirlpool which was spinning with gathering ferocity and irrationality, until it had arrived on the shores of vastly differing topics and links to huge, erudite articles, interspersed with sudden vicious comments, lightened from time to time by some kind soul.

Somehow, though this incident was not personally important to her, it became a kind of symbol of her mental state. She lay on the bed feeling mauled and battered. It was as though she had been made a leper on social media.

When the verdict came out, there was jubilation and smug satisfaction all round. Several girls had testified to feeling uncomfortable in the company of Jiten during the students' movement. He would bang into them on purpose, or trampled over their feet as though he had not noticed. He would laugh incomprehensibly when they objected and say that someone had let an elephant into the garden. Sometimes he would ask a girl out for coffee and would glower at her from a distance on being refused. He would tie a blue ribbon around his head, and be laughed at for his scrawny figure when he tried to dance in front of the women. But with Mukti he had crossed acceptable boundaries. He had actually come up very close to her and held her hand.

Jatin was publicly indicted and suspended from attending classes for the next three months. According to some, it was a very light sentence for someone who was a stalker and a potential danger. He should have been expelled from the campus.

That evening she came across him sitting on a cold bench under the shade at the Jadavpur 8 B bus stand. She had come to catch a bus. He was there aimlessly. Behind him could be

seen a dilapidated house with a shattered aquamarine window. A dirty plastic bag was fluttering along merrily. There was chaos on the streets. She said hi! to him and sat down on the bench beside him. She was inclined to believe that he was innocent. He didn't speak a single word. There was a caramel coloured sun in the sky. It softened the dazzle of his ebony.

After a while she moved out of the shed. The sky was now abruptly hyacinth. He startled her by coming up behind her unexpectedly with a panther like movement. His eyes glinted in the dark of his face. "Did you come to show me sympathy?" he asked. He flashed a smile, the meaning of which was inscrutable. "Look! Look! Look at that predatory bird piercing through the sky! Can you see it flying through the abyss? Well, sometimes the sparrow holds a magic wand in its claws and shazam! It flares its big eyes and turns upon the predator and says "don't give me life advice type of SHIT" and pecks the big bastard bird all over. No sympathy, right? No sympathy from you."

She is walking away from Jatin. Tears are pricking her eyelids. What is she to make of this morass of information? What is she to make of the sludge of her emotions? Were the butchers of Facebook justified in their rant then? Why was he picking on women? Didn't he have the balls to take on men? Where exactly was his perversion coming from? Did being a Dalit excuse him? But what had he actually done? Held the hand of a woman? No, held the hand of a woman against her will?

She sat down at a streetside tea stall to calm the hot flushes of her anger. Gradually her breathing became regular. She felt the restlessness subside. The tea lady did not disturb her. She kept stirring her pot on the fire. The canvass over the makeshift stall was torn at one place. Through it she could see a patch of navy-blue sky. On it was embossed in brilliant calligraphy some simple words from Rumi.

*Out beyond the ideas
Of wrongdoing and right doing*

*Is a field
I'll meet you there
When the soul lies down in that grass
The world is too full to talk about.*

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She works as an Assistant Professor of English Literature at Sivanath Sastri College, Kolkata. Her novel “Yearning” was published by Writers Workshop and was nominated by the publishers for the Commonwealth Prize for first time authors.

Her translation of Bani Basu’s Bengali novel, “The Enemy Within” was published by Orient Longman. She has a published collection of short stories (Leadstart), and her latest novel “Until the Rains Come” (Avenel Press), has been recommended by Sanjukta Dasgupta and Ramkumar Mukhopadhyay (Sahitya Academy). Her articles on Underground Rap music in India have come out in prestigious journals.

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