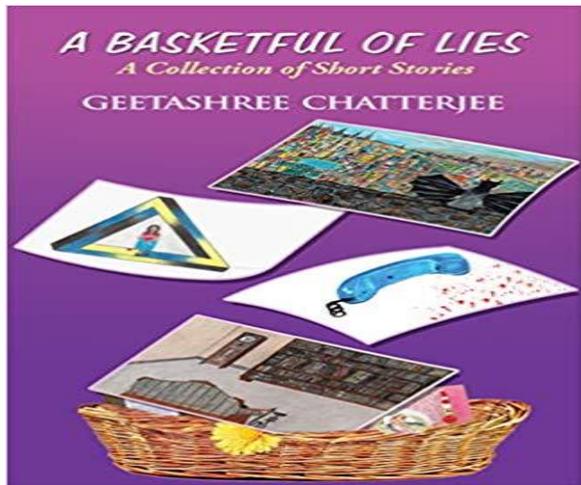


Book Review on Geetashree Chatterjee's *A Basketful of Lies*

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In the middle of the festive month of October last year, I had received a special gift in the form of a book- *A Basketful of Lies*- which was warmly sent by the author, Geetashree Chatterjee, herself. It was a surprising and delightful coincidence as I had just finished teaching Henrik Ibsen's play *The Wild Duck* to my postgraduate students. In the classroom we were baffled by Ibsen's notion of "life-lie" even as we pondered over the themes of illusions,



deceptions and life shattering revelations. Chatterjee's debut collection of fifteen short stories triggered a chain of thoughts along those same lines since "lies" can be as convincing, powerful and mysterious as those many unspeakable and unspoken truths of life.

The book as a metaphorical basket holds, captures and brings out the myriad shades and complexities of life especially in the context of a contemporary, urban setting. The tales create and imagine a world inhabited by misfits, loners, dreamers, poets, betrayed lovers and silent rebels. The narratives oscillate between reality and fantasy, loss and redemption, strength and stoicism, mystery and magic. The stories depict extraordinary moments, encounters and experiences in the lives of ordinary people where a paint brush animates images with life; where a victim of domestic violence seeks solace in chocolates; where a wife decides to bury her husband's secrets through her silence; and where a writer confronts her life through a love story which is narrated over the phone by her boss. These narratives are full of surprises and shocks, unexpected twists and turns. Chatterjee's unique style of storytelling in a poetic- prose language makes the reader relish the tales offered in this literary basket. A sentence such as "*The leaf had travelled light years and felt excessively tired*" (p.12) which appears in the story "**When It is Too Dark**" clearly illustrates the author's mastery over the use of evocative imagery while describing the intense emotional anguish and exhaustion of a suicidal protagonist. Similarly, in the story "**Maamone**", the

author attempts to capture the tussle between flux and stability both at the personal and social level through this rich description *"Mammone sitting quietly by the corner of the four poster bed was the quintessence of an era long gone by- an era whose tattered fragments could still be found in parts of a country..."* (p.17)

It is interesting to see how each of the short story has been carefully titled in order to grab the attention of the reader. Some of the titles contain a single proper name ("**Maamone**", "**Amaresh**") while others emphasize certain objects, places and spaces ("**The Paint Brush**", "**The Retiring Room**", "**The Old Book Shop**") which acquire metaphorical and symbolic significance. They are suggestive of how the stories elevate the ordinary and the mundane into the realm of the extraordinary. They shine the spotlight on people whose struggles and sorrows remain otherwise unexplored and untold in the hustle and bustle of everyday life. In this regard it is noteworthy that the short-story titled "**The Interlude**" has been placed at the end of the collection. Through this paradoxical gesture the author perhaps is trying to remind us of the fact that there are no definitive beginnings or endings. In fact, life is experienced as a grand interlude or interval caught between transient phases and moments. As a tale of love, deception and manipulation, "**The Interlude**" revolves around Probir who offers a significant interlude in the life of Bashobi and her husband Pranjal. The readers witness how this metaphorical interval shapes and changes the lives of the three characters forever.

The readers would be able to identify a set of recurring tropes and themes in this collection of short stories. Chatterjee explores the relationship between art and life in "**The Paint Brush**" which happens to be the first story in the book. As the paint brush signifies artistic imagination and expression, the story offers a thematic entry point to plunge into the book as a whole. It deploys a magic-realist style while portraying the aspirations, emotional insecurities and inadequacies of an artist. With her animating brush, the protagonist manages to collapse the boundary between art and life. She exclaims with delight and wonder "*They were just remarkably true to life, nay, they were as though live, captured on the pages of my drawing book.*" (p.4) The tension in the story unfolds when our ambitious protagonist attempts to create a portrait of her deceased father. Will art triumph over death? The readers would find an answer in this profound story.

The fusion of fantasy and realism emerges as a significant feature of Chatterjee's fiction. This brings us to one of my favourite stories in the collection- "**My Twilight Friend**" where the protagonist befriends a woman with vampirish features while travelling in the metro. In a surrealistic manner, it depicts a world where the paranormal co-exists with reality and where bizarre occurrences are incorporated into the fabric of everyday life. The story is interspersed with dream sequences and hallucinatory scenes which further underscore the mood of subconscious fear and horror. Similar themes of unexpected terror and dreadful co-incidence are

expressed in stories such as **"The Eerie Echo of Death"**, and **"The Retiring Room."** In **"Eerie Echo of Death"** a wrong telephone number unleashes havoc in the life of the protagonist while **"The Retiring Room"** portrays an inner psychological space where the narrator experiences a frightening nightmare of death and murder.

Another crucial theme in the collection has to do with how the characters constantly negotiate with memory and nostalgia. In **"The Old Book Shop"**, the narrator laments the loss of a bygone era where a pristine book shop is sacrificed at the altar of modern-day commercialization. The tension between memory and reality is expressed poetically through these words *"Somewhere under the debris lie buried the relics of the past silenced by the madness of the present and the impatience of the future."* (p.84) This theme can be compared and contrasted with the story **"Operation Dead Rat"** that deals with the erasure of memory or amnesia. It portrays a husband's desperate attempt through a ritual of storytelling to cure his amnesiac wife. Similarly, the narrative in **"Miles Before a Promise"** projects Kriti's remembrance of her failed marriage in contrast to her former mother-in-law's growing dementia.

Finally, a major concern which is shared by most of these stories (**"Amaresh"**, **"Maamone"**, **"The Linguist"**, **"Miles Before a Promise"**, **"Dark is the Devil"** and **"The Interlude"**) is the complexity of human relationships especially the ones that are sealed through the institution

of marriage. We come across female protagonists who are torn between their conventional social roles and their quest for individualism. Chatterjee endows them with vivid and diverse shades of personality. Some of them rebel against oppression while the others choose to suffer. Some of them decide to forgive while the others choose to manipulate. In the story "**Amaresh**" the metaphor of the "cat and the mouse game" has been aptly invoked to criticize the matrimonial battle. Similarly, Nalini in "**The Linguist**" attempts to reclaim her life after a failed marriage by engaging in linguistic games. This also reminds us of the domestic violence victim, Sandhya in "**Dark is the Devil**" who finds an illusory comfort in chocolates.

A Basketful of Lies records such myriad moments of dream and disenchantment, struggle and stoicism, revenge and redemption. I once again thank the author for this enriching, engaging and thought-provoking book. I also believe that this collection would also allow young students with literary sensibilities to explore the genre of the short story with all the formal and thematic nuances.

Before ending this note, I would also like to congratulate Ms. Ankita Sharma for the wonderful cover design. The bright paintings with evocative symbols and imagery anticipate the larger theme of the collection.

Title: A Basketful of Lies: A Collection of Short Stories

Author: Geetashree Chatterjee

Publisher: Creative Crows Publishers LLP (New Delhi)

Available: Amazon and [Flipkart](#).

About the Author



Geetashree Chatterjee belongs to the corporate world with more than thirty years of experience. Her writings have been published in prestigious journals like Muse India, Contemporary Literary Review India (CLRI) and Phenomenal Literature. My collection of short stories named "A Basketful Of Lies" has got published in 2018.

About the Reviewer



Deeptangshu Das is an Assistant Professor at the Department of English, Dibrugarh University (Assam). He holds an M.Phil degree in English from the University of Delhi. He has published poetry in literary magazines like 'Efiction-India'.

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