TLC Showcase

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Literary Values in a Digital Age

Introduction to We Are One

My parents, my mother a New Zealander, my father from Northern Ireland, met in India. I was born there and given an Indian name. Most of my early life, until I was sixteen, was spent in a part of India that had been ruled by the Nizam of Hyderabad. When I was growing up he was no longer a political force, but he remained a figurehead and was still alive in popular consciousness. There were stories about him, and we children found and played with old coins from his era. The path to independence for the people who lived in Hyderabad was different to the one for Indians who had lived directly under the British raj, but it was also violent. Hyderabad was an authoritarian, feudal state. The ruling elite was largely Muslim while the overwhelming majority of the population was Hindu. The Nizam had a police force and an army, the feudal landlords had their own enforcement agents. Communist opposition grew and recruited from oppressed villagers. There were armed clashes, murders, sabotage, pain and suffering. In the context of those troubled times, my characters are ordinary people who love, squabble, make friends and enemies and plans that go awry. There is tragedy and heroism, and life changing experiences.

Independence era novels have been written about Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh communities, but as far as I am aware, my novel is the first one written about a Christian community.

The first draft of the novel was written for a Master of Creative Writing course. I wrote subsequent drafts and paid for professional assessments and editing, but the manuscript was never given more than 'a light edit'. I felt the novel needed a more rigorous and experienced response and so I contacted TLC.

Kavita Bhanot read my manuscript and her assessment and critique were just what I needed. She was specific in her recommendations. I needed to cut the novel by 15,000 words, to clarify what happened in a particular scene, to make more of a particular relationship etc. Kavita was also encouraging. I may have to do further work on my novel, but the attention TLC have given it has been a real boost to my confidence, and to my hope that it will one day be published.

We Are One by Kamala Jackson

As arranged, I met with Satyan in a solitary shack found where the margins of the city met open countryside.

"Welcome to the Hanuman Chai Shop. This is where I meet with my friends." Satyan's smile, his gold chain gleamed, but I did not share his good spirits. Why, out of all the chai shops in Hyderabad, would Satyan ask me to come to this out-of-the way hovel? I had to take a rickshaw in order to find it, and because the way was long, it took all my money to pay the rickshaw man.

Inside, the only light in the thick gloom came from a smoke vent in the thatched roof. I made out a rough wooden support with a framed print of Hanuman, the Monkey God, hung from a nail. A tinsel garland with coloured medallions hung around the picture, doubtless placed by someone in a spirit of devotion, but it had since become fly-spotted and tarnished. Greasy curtains separated the cooking and eating areas, and a fat-laden haze, carrying smells of onion, ginger and chilli, drifted through the gaps in the curtains. I immediately felt hungry.

Satyan pulled aside a curtain with a grand sweeping gesture.

"Come, Anand. Meet my friend, Devadas."

A man in his thirties, his face and bare chest sweaty from the oily heat, sat cross-legged in front of his stove, a simple affair of three rocks on which balanced a smoking pan. He wore nothing but a dhoti and his legs were polio-withered sticks. He drained the pakora with a slotted spoon and put them on a plate.

"Welcome, Anand. I hope you are not as noisy as Satyan's other friends."

"No, no. Anand is very quiet. Very studious. He is here to teach me to read and write Telugu."

"Abbah, you have taken on a big job there, Anand. We will see how well you retain his interest. Will you have some pakora? Satyan said you would probably be hungry. You will have some chai too, isn't it? Das, Das, come here. Light a lamp for Satyan and his friend."

A boy of about ten emerged from the gloom, and I saw behind him a thin, tired-looking woman suckling a baby. When I namasteed, she looked wearily away.

I was touched by the friendliness and hospitality of Devadas, and the immediate prospect of food improved my mood. As Satyan and I ate and drank, sitting on mats, and in the light of the hurricane lamp, he told me that Devadas was ten years old when he contracted polio. His father worked on a large estate belonging to a Muslim. There was a bad outbreak that year and the landlord's son also contracted the disease. That boy was now his landlord, and out of a fellow-feeling he allowed Devadas to have this shack and run his business here for a minimal rent.

We then talked about the Telugu lesson.

"Are you ready to make a start?" I emptied my cloth bag of the slate, my father's New Testament, the pencils and printed sheet.

"Yes." Satyan held out a thin pamphlet. "This is what I wish to read."

I took it without thought, assuming maybe it was a gospel tract, such as the ones printed for enquirers. But when I looked at it, I was so shocked that for some moments I could not breathe. Moscow Dialectics. The words were large and unashamed in bold, black capitals. Below in blood red a crudely drawn hammer and sickle. The black and red inks had bled into the paper, which was of the poorest quality. After just a week under Benjamingaru's tutelage, I recognised this to be a very poor print job. That in itself was sufficient cause for distaste, but the real shock was discovering that Satyan, a caste Hindu boy, was flirting with atheistic ideas. For all I knew, he was already a fully fledged god-denier. Politeness prevented me from immediately dropping the pamphlet. I turned the flimsy pages, seeing spelling mistakes, characters from different fonts, gross examples of bad inking that left pages too dark or too faint to be easily read. Evil words jumped out at me. I read the last words aloud, 'Death to the bourgeosie, death to their children', then I set the pamphlet down and pushed it from me.

"What's the matter?" asked Satyan.

"It is terrible workmanship, full of mistakes. The man who did this took no pride in his task. Benjamingaru says that to produce a clean printing job on the worst paper is a true test of the printer's metal. This man has failed."

"Never mind that," said Satyan. "Can you read it?"

"Of course. But the writing has difficult words. Very difficult words. It is better to start with something simple. Do not try to run before you can crawl. I have chosen a sentence for today. I'm ready to begin, if you are."

"I have shocked you, my friend. I see that. Perhaps you are also a little frightened?"

"A little," I admitted. "I see now why you chose such a distant, out of the way place for our meeting. This tells me that you yourself must also be a little frightened, isn't it?"

Satyan laughed easily. "I, too, can be cautious at times. It is of no benefit to be shown to be a communist here in Hyderabad. And my parents do not know."

A silence followed this admission. I could not help thinking that perhaps it was also of no benefit to be shown to have a communist friend.

I looked out through the open doorway. It was now dark. Had I come all this way for nothing? A mosquito whined in my ear. I flapped it away and looked at Satyan in the dim light of the hurricane lamp. Even with shadows on his face he did not look a sinister fellow, but nevertheless the man was a militant god-denier. A heretic, a renegade in what was customarily a god-fearing country.

My disappointment was sharp. It told me that I had wanted to be not only this man's teacher, but his friend also. But if I became his friend, then I too would have a secret, to be kept from Amma, Thandrigaru, the Amos family and all those who loved me. Even my mother who had imagined all the vices and evils that could endanger her son in Hyderabad, had not imagined this: her son consorting with, befriending a communist.

"It is true that when learning it's better to start simply," said Satyan, breaking our silence. "But I have a strong desire to read this. It is only a crude pamphlet, I know, but it will be a start. Eventually I mean to gain a full understanding of the principles and strategies of communism."

I was impressed. To want a 'full understanding' of anything, even something as corrupting as communism, was ambitious.

"Have you no . . ." I did not wish to utter the word 'communist', to force my mouth, my cheeks, my tongue into such a shape, " . . . similar thinking friends who can teach you?"

"My Telugu-reading communist friends are busy. They organise conferences and workshops. Write policy and remits. Go into the villages to teach people there."

I had not known the god-deniers were so many, or so organised. A familiar scene came to mind. An impromptu classroom under a tree. A man or woman instructing

a group of villagers sitting on the ground. The teacher drawing in the dust, or using a flannel board, or acting out a scene. In this manner, a pastor or bible woman taught villagers of the love of God and his son, Yesu Christu. To think that similar scenes, similar methods could be used for spreading hate and godlessness was very uncomfortable.

“Also,” continued Satyan, “the Telugu language is my birthright. My Muslim friends are fond of reading Urdu and Persian poetry. For them the highest culture is found in Persian ghazals. But Telugu is also a beautiful language. It also has an ancient and great literature. Modern literature also. Have you read Gadhya Thikkana? His novel *Satyarathi Charitam*?”

“No, not yet.” I did not like to say I had not heard of it. Or knew there was such a thing as a Telugu novel.

“What do you read, Anand?”

I listed texts in my head: the Bible, with its poetry, and histories and parables. School books. Tracts. Newspapers. Such reading might appear inadequate to someone with a great passion for our high and ancient literature. It surprised me a little that Satyan was apparently such a person.

“Apart from the Bible, present day writing. Newspapers and such. I have studied a little of the Telugu classics, but not much.” It was difficult to make this admission.

“But you have read the journals of Pantulu?”

Another name I did not know. I began to feel somewhat heated. Here was a Telugu illiterate who seemed intent on showing up the limits of my education. What right did he have to speak to me in this way? Had not my own father been a poet?

“May I ask why you became a . . . communist?”

“For a thousand reasons.” Satyan looked away. His face became still and shadowed. He was no longer the open man, careless with his secrets. His voice started low and gruff and I strained to hear him.

As a boy I often skipped class. I had a friend. A labourer’s son. An outcaste. He was the happiest person I knew, not seeming to understand that he was poor and without hope. That his future as a man was to be ground down and exploited. He knew the habits of birds and reptiles and animals. Where to find berries and ripe fruit. I spent many afternoons with him, foraging and swimming.

If my parents had known they would not have approved of this friendship, but I did not see this boy as inferior to me, or to persons of my caste. In many ways he seemed better. He ran faster, was more accurate with the sling, could hold his breath longer under water. But one day, a holiday, we were playing around an abandoned mill. There was an accident and the boy was pinned down, his breath being choked from him. Older boys were nearby. Landlord's sons like me, whose fathers I knew. When I asked these boys for help, they refused. They asked me why I was concerned. The boy was only an outcaste. One said it would be a blessing for his parents to have one less mouth to feed, and they left. I watched my friend die, unable to help him. It was that day my hate was born. My hate for landlordism and casteism.

I was moved by this story. Communists were of course evil-doers, but Satyan's motives for becoming one arose out of a pure sorrow. And I, too, was against casteism. My mind stumbled as I tried to think of something to say. I could no longer simply walk out, refusing this man the lessons he desired.

"Perhaps . . ," I started, then stopped. Satyan looked at me."Perhaps we could spend half the lesson on my book and the other half on yours. What do you say?"

"I think that is fair, given your prejudice." Satyan had recovered himself and was smiling.

As fair, I thought, as sharing my gold with you, while you share your dross with me. Had I given in too easily?

"You must understand it will be distressing for me to touch that pamphlet again. Not only touch it, but examine each and every badly printed word and mistaken idea and treat them seriously."

"So you have read this book before and know its ideas?"

"I did not say . . ."

"You do not believe in freedom of thought and discussion then?"

"No, I don't mean . . ."

"Am I not prepared to tolerate your foreign book full of lies and superstitions?"

I gave him a look, but decided not to take offence at this description of the Holy Bible.

“So I should be able to read your unIndian ideas promoting violence and hate? You make a good point, Satyan. And besides, I may be able to persuade you of the wrongness of your thinking.”

“Or I you.” He spoke softly.

We laughed together, and Satyan called for more chai.

About the Writer

Kamala was born and grew up in India. Her parents were expatriates, running schools for village children. Kamala spoke the local language, Telugu, before she could speak English. One of her favourite books was a Penguin edition of Katherine Mansfield's *The Garden Party*. She liked the stories, their connection with New Zealand, and because the author photograph on the back cover looked like her mother. After a trip to see her grandmother, she wrote her first story set in her grandparents' New Zealand garden on a hot, summer's day. The style owed a lot to Katherine Mansfield, as her teacher at boarding school recognised. At school she was trained to write essays and precis, but imaginative writing was not part of the curriculum. Family friends were writers of textbooks, memoirs and scholarship, and her mother had written a book. A very brainy lot, but not a poet or fiction writer among them. Indeed poets and novelists seemed remote, untouchable beings. When she was about thirteen she asked herself what she wanted to do when she grew up. The answer was clear: a story writer, a novelist. This pipedream she kept to herself.

Later, when Kamala was living and working in London she joined a creative writing class at the City Lit. She wrote a story that her tutor forwarded to the London Magazine. The editor said he liked it, but did not accept it for publication. Kamala went to India and wrote another story, and talked to local people about their knowledge and experiences during the Independence era. These conversations were the germ of her novel. Back in New Zealand her stories were broadcast on National Radio, she wrote a novella accepted by a Literary magazine and researched her novel. She is now experimenting with flash fiction.