

TLC Showcase

NIRAJ SHUKLA

Introduction to the manuscript	2
Extract from <i>Moksha</i>	3
About the Writer	6

Introduction to *Moksha*

Moksha is a work of comic literary fiction. In Hindu philosophy, moksha is the escape from endless cycles of death and rebirth, and my protagonist, Jishal Bhatt – who I see as a kind of desexualised Indian Portnoy, is a corporate finance manager whose free time is spent pursuing his own version of moksha in the form of various artistic projects. They have, however, all ended in humiliating failure. He feels that he has nothing spiritually enriching to show for his industrious life, and in his desperation his ideas have drifted towards the bizarre. The culmination of his bad ideas is a project he hopes will reclaim and redeem the loveless, soulless pornography which dominates the web.

Jish lives in London and the story takes place over the course of his fortieth birthday as he straddles the different poles of his life: the city office, the suburban home of a married couple who make pornography, his flat in which he lives alone, and his parents' house. On his way between them he flaneurs through the city and its transport systems, observing people as they try in vain to create meaning out of the everyday, and the methods by which they then seek to escape their disappointments. However, he begins to realise that his delusional ambitions are themselves an attempt to escape the past, to forget a significant partner, and to mask his growing detachment from the people around him.

In structurally and musically enacting the repetitions of the daily grind, *Moksha* seeks to explore the role of (amongst other things) routine, repetition, and normality in keeping us boundaried.

The following excerpt is taken from the second half of the novel, after Jish has endured a particularly humiliating failure.

My experience with TLC has been fantastic. I explained what sort of reader I had in mind and Joe at TLC, understanding my aims perfectly and who would be best able to help me achieve them, suggested the critic, Jonathan McAloon. This turned out to be an excellent choice. Jonathan was, of course, insightful and incredibly knowledgeable, but the most important thing for me was that he was able to criticise. My worry was being told what I wanted to hear, rather than what I needed to hear. Jonathan's criticism was constructive, and his praise grounded. A perfect combination.

Extract from *Moksha* by Niraj Shukla

...The next station is Acton Town...Please mind the gap between the train and the platform...There are beggars and buskers operating on the train; please do not encourage their presence by supporting them...my phone rattles against my keys in my bag. A birthday message at last? No, an email from Astroforecast advertising their other services. They have an offer on his-and-hers opal rings, and if I book quickly, I can get a discount on their next Astro Festival. A festival is the last place I'd want to be right now: so many people, so many eyes...the pain of being perceived.

The train isn't too busy – the eastbound Piccadilly line service is generally less populous than the westbound service towards Heathrow. What is the cause of this deficit? Are some people escaping and not returning?

The man sitting opposite me stretches his arms into a V, pushes out his chest, tenses every muscle, and yawns profoundly like a gorilla. Watching this, I am unable to prevent my body from issuing a mirror-yawn, though one which is suppressed, contained, in case he notices and thinks that I am mimicking him intentionally.

I try to read some more Schiller. *'...there we will see actual life governed by the ideal, honour triumphing over possession, thought over pleasure, the dream of immortality over existence. There, public opinion will be the only thing to be feared, and an olive wreath valued more highly than a purple cloak...'* I'm too tired for this.

Again, I hear the revolting metallic *clack...clack* of nail clippers, and again, I cannot see the culprit. Perhaps though, it isn't so revolting, and they feel that clipping nails is something we all share, like Warhol's Coke bottles: everyone clips their nails – Presidents and Prime Ministers clip their nails, celebrities clip their nails, and office workers, teachers and factory workers clip their nails too. *Clack...clack*. And this person just wants to allow a private act to roam free in the cool open air, casting off the shame that had festered and fermented in the dark: we are all human, thus nothing human can be alien to us, so why not clip our nails on the train? I feel like following the *clack...clack* like a sonar and tracking down this nail-clipper, wherever he or she is, and grabbing them by the collar, shaking them, and saying: 'Please, leave some things in the shadows: less shame doesn't mean more honesty.'

Outside, the same suburbia – houses, gardens, shops, churches, flats – I saw a couple of hours ago flies past, but in reverse. I notice a graffiti wall, that I didn't see earlier, covered in commissioned images about recycling. One depicts a flying superhero made to resemble Superman, except that the famous red 'S' on the hero's chest has been replaced with a green 'W'. Underneath, in big bubbled lime-green letters, is his name: Wasteman.

Clack...clack.

The train screeches into Acton Town. A bald, scruffily-bearded man in paint-stained overalls sits down and immediately produces a yellow can of extra-strong lager. Another metallic sound: the *snap* of the ring-pull followed by a *fzzzz* which the workman catches in his mouth, truncating it. He takes a second slurped sip and then places the can between his thighs. He now removes his mobile from his bag, puts in his earphones, and settles in to watch some episodes or funny video clips. His face slackens into a doped tranquillity.

At Hammersmith, a woman holds the doors open to allow her friend to squeeze through. *'Ladies and gents, we're gonna have to remain at the platform and delay our departure for a few moments. If you're grateful for this delay, and would like to show your gratitude, you can pass your thanks to the young blonde lady in the last carriage who thought it would be a good idea to force the doors open. If, however, you'd prefer to get home on time to your partners or children or, like me, to some Call of Duty and a beer, then please do NOT obstruct the doors. Thank you.'* This gets a giggle from the passengers who aren't wearing headphones – the workman in blue overalls is unaware, and carries on staring at his phone while slurping from his yellow can. The woman and her friend are defiantly unembarrassed and mutter something about it not being 'that big a deal' as we pull away.

I wonder if the train driver often makes jokes like this to liven up his day going up and down a blue line, from Heathrow to Cockfosters and back again. In the past, when the locomotive was new and thrilling, being at the helm of one of these iron miracles would have been glamorous. Now, driving a train is seen as not substantially different to a child playing with Scalextric. Dad still smiles proudly when informing people that he was a pilot, but eventually, as technology improves, he will have been little more than a taxi driver of the skies.

Perhaps I'm just bitter that this train driver, with his spontaneous joke, has now had more success in the art of stand-up comedy than I managed with my months of preparation.

I spot an extremely dishevelled man shambling through the connecting door from the adjacent carriage. He makes his pitch to the other banks of seats further up, where he is met with sheepish ignorance, before approaching the two rows at the end of the carriage and thus the end of his expedition along the length of the train. The outlines of the other passengers – their silhouettes, so to speak – are, in general, clearly defined. Their trousers, shirts and jackets broadly follow the contours of their bodies; their shoes are foot-shaped; their hair doesn't stray too far from the skull. The refusal, however, of this dishevelled man's outline to approximate a human form is what marks him out as a 'wild man'. His brown and grey hair has freed itself from the constraints of unity, and the arrangement of some parts – hairs flying off the side of his head, a stray lock swinging over his eyes – has no connection to the whole. He is wearing a cargo-green trucker jacket, a grey t-shirt and khaki combat trousers which are all so tattered that pieces of their fabric flip back and forth as he walks, opening and shutting like a network of ventilation flaps. He has no shoes; the only thing separating his feet from the floor of the train are a pair of torn muddy socks, which were once white. Even his eyes want to flout boundaries, flitting about as if trying to escape their socket cages. But although his unfitness for society is exteriorised, his status as an outsider is the result of a superficial assessment. The bald, bearded workman sitting in front of me will be home soon, and this evening, he may well derive pleasure from watching two strangers on a screen having sex. Or maybe three strangers, or ten. The blonde woman who held the doors open will perhaps enjoy the sight of a girl 'pegging' a man. The only difference between this mendicant and the other passengers is that he, like the nail-clipper, hasn't learned to keep his wildness in the shadows. And in this, they are perhaps ahead of the curve.

About the Writer

Niraj lives in London.

His first taste of literary success was at the age of fifteen, when he won PC Gamer magazine's *Letter of the Month* competition. He read somewhere that this was how Virginia Woolf got started. This gives him confidence.

He believes that, although it has been superseded by Google, literature is still the second-best way of uncovering the truth of life.

