



ज्ञान-विज्ञान विमुक्तये

UGC
University Grants Commission
Sr. No. 49124


UGC Approved Journal - Arts & Humanities

ISSN 2349-5189
Vol. 4 Issue 1 August - 2017

LangLit

An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal

www.langlit.org


(Dr. S.V. Patkar)
Self Attested

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NO OTHER WORLD; NO OTHER CHOICES

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ABSTRACT

This novel opens by setting two scenes: in 1985, a boy named Kiran Shah is spying on his neighbors across the road, the Bells, hinting at traumatic events that have transpired in the recent past and others that will occur in the future; and in 1998, in western India, Kiran, now a young adult visiting relatives, meets two members of the transgender caste, hijras, who come to the door. All of this will be spun out in succeeding sections that move back and forth in time and place to follow several narrative threads. Dominating the early part of the book are the troubled connections between the Shahs and the Bells, which include both the adults and the children. Shanti Shah, unhappy in an arranged marriage and demeaning jobs as a housecleaner and a bank teller, is powerfully drawn to the blond pastor who lives across the way—and he's interested in her, too. Her daughter, Preeti, dates Shawn Bell, a boy who ends up sexually abusing both Shah children, affecting the siblings' relationship and Kiran's coming-of-age as a gay man.

No Other World from Rahul Mehta, the author of the prize-winning collection *Quarantine*, is an insightful, compelling debut novel set in rural America and India part coming-of-age story about a gay Indian American boy.

In a rural community in Western New York, twelve-year-old Kiran Shah, the American-born son of Indian immigrants, longingly observes his prototypically American neighbors, the Bells. He attends school with Kelly Bell, but he is powerfully drawn-in a way he does not yet understand - to her charismatic father, Chris.

Kiran's father Nishit Shah, a successful doctor, is haunted by thoughts of the brother he left behind. His mother, Shanti, struggles to accept a life with a man she did not choose. Her marriage to Nishit was arranged and she has a growing attachment to an American man. Kiran is close to his older sister, Preeti until an unexpected threat and an unfathomable betrayal.

As Kiran leaves childhood behind, Kiran finds himself perpetually on the outside, an Indian American torn between two cultures and as a gay man in a homophobic society. In the wake of an emotional breakdown, he travels to India, where he forms an intense bond with a

Vol. 4 Issue 1
Website: www.langlit.org

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August, 2017
Contact No.: +91-9890290602

Indexed: ICI, Google Scholar, Research Gate, Academia.edu, IBI, IIFC, DRJI

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teenage hijra, a member of India's ancient transgender community. With her help, Kiran begins to pull together the pieces of his broken past.

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The title of the novel refers to the notion that in another world, different choices might have been made, different lives might have played out but there is no other world. That may be so, but the book's very omniscient narrator spends a lot of time telling us what didn't happen, what the characters aren't thinking, didn't notice, or can't know yet.

Kiran Shah is a little different compared to his peers in 1980s Western New York. He is Indian, obviously gay, and also somewhat geeky. His older sister Preeti is more conventional in her ways: while Indian, she has converted to Christianity and she fits in well as a pretty cheerleader. She even dates baseball star Shawn for a period in middle school. But Kiran has his own secret relationship with Shawn, which may have contributed to Shawn's public humiliation of Preeti when they are twelve, and Kiran is only eight. The guilt from this event follows him into adulthood, and even spreads out to affect his family.

No Other World is partly a story about Kiran, and partly a story about his family and their individual struggles. It spans the time between the summer in the mid-80s when Preeti is molested and the summer in the late 90s when Kiran has a breakdown and goes to live with his cousin Bharat in India. The narrative also includes the perspectives of his mother Shanti, and his cousin, who was once a guest of the Shah family in America, and experiences a role reversal in the final section of the book.

The Shahs have their share of struggles. Nishit's brother Prabhu lost his wife in childbirth and fell into a deep depression. He, too, came to live with the Shahs in America for a time, but spent the entirety of his visit locked in a bedroom. Shanti is given a perspective for her wandering eye during Kiran's childhood, which results in her carrying on a small affair with neighbor Chris Bell, a classically white Christian man and the antithesis to her small, dark husband. Her affair is half-assed and fleeting, and not at all rewarding to anyone.

No Other World is a beautiful prose, interesting and complex characters, and allusions to some greater mystery. The novel lost direction around the middle, and struggled to regain it. In trying to write a longer story, the writer has kept adding plot points and characters. As it is,



this doesn't feel like a complete novel, and more like a preliminary draft. Each chapter was trying to change the focus from a struggle with homosexuality, to adultery, to religion, to marriage, to foreigners, without any of them being fully realized. Perhaps most disappointing was the end, which veered off in an undeservedly dramatic direction, and did little to resolve the many issues brought up throughout the story.

A theme that the title hints at is that in other worlds, these characters may have done things differently or experienced different fates. But there is no other world, and their lives played out as they did, which is all understandable, but Mehta's characters never attempt to connect the dots or learn from these events, the way we all try to.

When we meet Kiran Shah, the central protagonist of Rahul, he is twelve or thirteen years old. In our first encounter with him, the boy is in the woods, literally and figuratively. Kiran's father Nishit is a surgeon and his mother Shanti is a bank clerk. They seem to be living the American dream but they have not yet committed to it. His father has not made up his mind to stay. He may take his family back home at some unspecified date in the future.

Kiran is gay and he knows it. He has been experimenting sexually with a friend's elder brother. His uncle is in the house and is depressed but no one in the family will admit it; instead hopeless attempts are made to set him up with jobs. And then on a trip to a mall with his non-vegetarian mother, he sees her kissing a strange man. Chris, a big white American, certainly not his father.

The tone of the prose is muted as if everything happens in a subaqueous space where feeling is also dulled. And then such feeling as there is gets lost in the clauses. Take this moment where Shanti is thinking about her infidelity:

"Not that anyone had criticized her, not openly, but on rare occasions when she received a certain nasty look in the drugstore and she wondered, just wondered, if perhaps Pearly Franklin or Sarah Bradshaw or whoever it was somehow knew about her and Chris (although they had been so careful), she thought if only these women had felt what she felt—his large hot palm under her blouse, on the small of her back, stubble on his cheek, his hardness through his jeans (jeans Amy had picked out for the way she knew he would look in them)—they'd be shooting her other looks, looks of jealousy, not judgment."

The other device Mehta uses lavishly is to skip into the future, in the middle of a sentence. Years later, we are told, this will happen. Decades later, we are told, that will be remembered. It can be wearing to skip around in time, just as it is wearing to try and figure out whether Shanti knows that Amy chose Chris's jeans because his butt would look good in them or whether it is our omniscient narrator breaking into Shanti's worries and fears about the people around her.

There are many strands in this novel. There is the Uncle who plays deus ex machina in the central tragedy of Kiran's life. There is the Uncle's son, Bharat, who comes to America and



suffers from a form of hives he dubs Americaria, after a lexical union he effects between the country and urticaria. There is Kiran's sister, Preeti, who converts to Christianity. Her parents seem to shrug metaphorically and get on with it. There is a hijra of course and a chela. And there is a supporting cast of barely drawn Americans who provide the chorus.

Most hijras in India live at the margins of society with very low status. The very word hijra is sometimes used in a derogatory manner. The Indian lawyer and author Rajesh Talwar has written a book highlighting the human rights abuses suffered by the community titled *The Third Sex and Human Rights*. Few employment opportunities are available to hijras. Many get their income from extortion i.e. forced payment by disrupting work/life using demonstrations and interference, performing at ceremonies, begging, or sex work. An occupation of eunuchs also recorded in premodern times. Violence against hijras, especially hijra sex workers, is often brutal, and occurs in public spaces, police stations, prisons, and their homes. As with transgender people in most of the world, they face extreme discrimination in health, housing, education, employment, immigration, law, and any bureaucracy that is unable to place them into male or female gender categories.

Same-sex sexuality to a Western observer may not be same-sex or sexual at all to the people engaging in such behaviour. A female who dresses and works in a masculine fashion and marries a woman is seen as belonging to a third gender; their relationship is not homosexual. Boys who ingest the semen of older males to aid in their maturation, is disputed whether this is best understood as a sexual act at all. In recent times, scholars have argued that notions of a homosexual and heterosexual identity, as they are currently known in the Western world, only began to emerge in Europe in the mid to late 19th century. Behaviors that today would be widely regarded as homosexual, at least in the West, enjoyed a degree of acceptance in around three quarters of the cultures surveyed in *Patterns of Sexual Behavior*.

Acceptance of homosexuality is particularly widespread in countries where religion is less central in people's lives. These are also among the richest countries in the world. In contrast, in poorer countries with high levels of religiosity, few believe homosexuality should be accepted by society. Age is also a factor in several countries, with younger respondents offering far more tolerant views than older ones. And while gender differences are not prevalent, in those countries where they are, women are consistently more accepting of homosexuality than men.

There is much here that Mehta gets right, for instance the way the United States of America is associated with a certain smell of fabric softener and detergent; the way in which Bharat saves the silver foil of cigarette packets for no reason at all; the way Kiran retreats into dark spaces when he needs to find comfort, assaulted perhaps by the near-unlimited lebensraum of the U.S. And there is at least one unforgettable image in the

"...four-armed monster in silhouette, a demon come to life from the Ramayana, emerging from the woods only to reveal itself to be not a monster at all but..."

No more. That would be telling.




One does not expect an American editor to know the difference between Bagwan and Bhagwan, between arre baap re and are baap but one might expect them to know that a father should not be tussling his son's hair. Chota Kaka, one of Kiran's uncles, a huge drunken man, suddenly becomes convinced that he needs proof that his nephew is a male and asks him to take off his pants and show them his penis. This is almost an echo of another form of checking, in which men must drop their pants to prove their religious identities. Moments like these seem few and far between in a book that seeks to explore the depths of intersectional identity but plays in the shallows, dabbling in the smells of shampoo and descriptions of long-forgotten television shows.

The novel ends without any conclusions or any solutions on the problems stated. It seems like a chronological order of life-style of Indian, American and Indian-American people. It also makes clear how the people, especially Indian teenagers, living in America are crushed between the cultural complexities.

Its all the time stated by the author that Kiran is gay. But the author never points out its Indian mentality of negative attitude.

REFERENCE

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