

ISSN 0976 - 8165



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

11th Year of Open Access

**Bi-Monthly Refereed and Peer-Reviewed
Open Access e-Journal**

Vol. XI, Issue-3 (June 2020)

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ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

The Other Woman

(Originally Written by Ajeet Cour, a Renowned Punjabi Writer)

Translated by

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It was a sad evening. April started and the weather was humid and hot. We were strolling through the lanes.

We spent some time sitting in the *Janpath* coffee lounge. Slowly, very slowly, we sipped three cups of tea to pass time. Between the sips of these three cups, was passing the time, slipping, creeping and moving. Only a feeling of bitterness and a vacuum were left.

Oma means Om Parkash poured second cup of coffee from the kettle. He filled three quarter of the cup and was about to add the milk, I said, “No, no milk.”

“Sugar?”

“No sugar.”

“Black coffee?”

“Yes.”

“Like Russians? And Oma smiled.

I could not smile and reciprocate as I was not in that state of mind. Whenever there was a feeling in the inner recesses of my mind that I am an extra in Oma’s life, I was always tempted to say such a biting and hitting comment so as to pierce his normal and whole self thoroughly. I used to feel vexed at such moments when he pretended and projected his outer wholeness. And I always wished that something would prick and pierce him cutting his whole being, even half an inch cut would do to penetrate and bring out his crumbled and pretentious self beneath the shining upper surface.

Still, whenever I used to prick him-even a little, only a crack, a straight line, with a sharp shining knife-I always found myself guilty of the meanness I performed.

What did I want? Nothing much. Perhaps a very little and innocent desire of a small house where I could have some privacy and intimacy with Oma, resting upon his shoulders. And books, and music and perhaps something more also. What actually I required, was unclear. I only knew that I don't have what I desire. Oma was responsible for not providing that as he was the decision maker.

It was already half past seven till we finished two-three cups of coffee. Oma looked at the watch. It was a moment when something was incomprehensible to him. Whenever there were three lines across his forehead, exactly above the centre of his spectacles, it was a clear indication of his effort to grasp the things which were incomprehensible. Although such moments were rare because normally he could comprehend everything all the times. It seemed as if Oma has a complete and firm grip upon everything around him, even the wandering air was under his control.

I used to feel pity upon him whenever I saw those three lines on his forehead. Pity and love. And my heart melted and became soft towards him without reason.

“What are you thinking?”

“Nothing.”

“Some appointment with anyone?” I asked and smiled.

(Unfortunately, a woman learns acting since the time she comes from mother's womb. She acts to please her man, she acts for small concessions in her life. She acts while being in fraternity and neighbourhood in their good and bad times. Perhaps this is called the Triangular character of a woman. She is called such while she is being condemned, or she is being taunted. But why? Why the big effort which is required for this, is not calculated?)

“No, no,” he said quickly.

“Then?”

“Are you a futurist who comes to know of it?” and he became natural. Then smiled.

Often when Oma smiled, his two front teeth used to smile like pearls in the sunlight. And the rest of the teeth were like yellow coloured sand, common, rather a little ugly. But the corners of two front teeth were silver coloured like the pearls inside the oysters.

The treasure of Oma was not hidden in his forehead rather in the corners of two front teeth. He never had to make any effort to allure and enchant me, only a smile with the two pearly-shining teeth would melt me like a candle.

“Not futurist. An Omniscient.”

“Then please tell, what were you thinking? You will not hide anything from an omniscient person.”

“I was thinking that it’s already half past seven. Pictures as well as plays have started. Where should we go?”

I could again sense a black cloud on the far-off boundary. There was lightening also. It was a lightening of anger, blame, disharmony and a feeling of being shelter less. This man of mine, instead of making a home with me, had made me a refugee. A vagabond, a gypsy.

But again, the permanent woman inside who is a permanent actress also, warned and checked me.

I applied a smile like a lipstick on my lips.

“My king, there is one place. I can tell if you spare my life.”

He laughed,” Yes please?”

“Let’s go to hell, how does it seem?”

“Okay, let’s go.”

He asked the waiter for the bill and paid; took the bill back as was his wont. And we came out. A question accompanied us about where to spend the rest of the evening. While stopping before a taxi he asked,” Should we go to Rano’s place?”

“But you told that they are vacating the house of M.P.”

“Yes, Kalu shifted her to a new house before going to England. I have the new address also.”

Kalu was Oma’s friend. All friends called him Kalu. His name was something else, like the elders in the family named their grandsons for the salvation of their souls. Still he was called Kalu by all.

I said, "Fine. Let's go."

By saying this, I realised that one more evening is also going to be murdered. So what's the use to disagree?

.....

The taxi stopped before a huge bungalow. It seemed a government bungalow. We entered the gate and reached the backyard going along the sides of the house. Here was a huge deserted lawn where the grass looked old before its time. It was very dark among the branches of a huge tree at the farthest corner of the lawn. The tree was giving a sinister feeling and the lawn was looking deserted.

Oma knocked at the door from the back side. Rano opened.

"Welcome, how come you are here today?"

"No, no. We have come specially to meet you today. To enquire about your well being. Saying this, Oma, climbing the small staircase, entered the room. I followed him.

Rano's hair gave the same feeling of darkness of the huge tree. She was looking sad and bewildered. Perhaps the room where she was staying might be the fuel room of the house a long time before or it could be the quarter of the assistant of cook.

It was a very small room. Half of the room was occupied with a small bed in one corner. Another corner was occupied with electric gas. Nearby there were two-three cups, plates, spoons, everything was lying deserted. In a strange bewildered position. Five-seven emptied bottles of jam and coffee cans were lying nearby with the spices perhaps. Their corners were so dirty that it was difficult to guess what was lying in which bottle.

Doesn't even the gas fire, when not working, cold, look dejected? Sad and in a miserable plight.

If there was anything which was of ancient times, it was only a silk quilt and its colour was not conflagrant. Still like an extinguishing fire, it had its old warmth and brightness. And the second phenomenon was transistor which Kalu gave Rano as a first gift when he brought her from Chandigarh as his friends tell.

Rano was brought up in a middle class family and was working as a typist in the secretariat, who was attracted with the blaze of Kalu's wealth and she eloped with him enamoured with his crammed love formulas. When she regained consciousness, she found herself in that small fuel room and was left alone. Kalu had gone to England with his wife to bribe her.

(A woman, whose name is wife, is bribed by her husband, when he conceals something from her. This concealing is a theft. The larger the theft, the bigger the bribe. But another woman, an extra, a mistress, can be lured with a living, clothes and ornaments only. And the woman, who is captured in the apocryphal love of that man, can never be saved even by God.)

Either the room had shrunk when we entered or the air in the room was not sufficient for all three of us. There was something which was suffocating. There was something which was making our breaths heavy. Heavy and rough.

Oma scattered himself in the middle of the cot, resting his arms behind. I adjusted myself upon he bed post. Oma asked her how she was doing. Rano sat on a stool lying near the gas fire.

She replied in a strange tasteless tone, "You can see."

"Any letter?"

"Ten days before."

The vacuum of the last ten days, the wait of the letter and depression, were all parts of her voice.

"All well?"

"Yes, all well."

"And you?"

"Me?" She suddenly looked at Oma.

"Are you okay?"

"Fine," she spoke as if arose from a deep well, in a desolate tone.

A silence prevailed in the room for some time. It was a silence which is lingered on in the air even after the shrilling sound of a siren in a deep dark night. With this silence, a danger also hangs on in the air and ears are always eager to listen some other sound in the darkness- perhaps the sound of a bomb explosion.

Oma laughed and said, “I received a letter from Kalu. He wrote to take care of the things he left on the platform.”

“Really!” she said and her voice disclosed a thick darkness, a brittle black darkness.

I looked towards Oma. He was taken aback and it seldom happened that he had to wait to answer. Rano was looking towards him with an unknown challenge in her eyes.

“Won’t you serve us? We are your guests.” Oma threw the challenge away.

“I don’t have milk; otherwise I would have made tea.”

“So don’t drink too much of milk. You should have saved it for tea.”

“No, no, I didn’t bring milk today.”

“Why?”

“I can’t sleep the whole night due to hot weather. It’s very humid in the room. Could sleep only while it was dawn and the milk depot closed.

I looked around the room. The small room was surrounded with walls. There was no window. And ventilators are not in fashion these days. There was a door in the back wall which was permanently closed. Perhaps the owners of the house might have closed from the other side.

(When Rano eloped with Kalu from Chandigarh, she perhaps never had the idea that his wealth could never provide her a “home”.)

“Then bring whiskey, “said Oma.

“The whiskey people are in England. I only have the empty bottles, “She sighed.

“Is it? “Oma laughed superficially.

Again a silence prevailed.

“What do you do the whole day?”

“Measure the roads.”

“Which have you measured?”

“I don’t remember the names.”

“Don’t move on the roads too much. Do you know what these women, who walk alone on the roads, are called in England?”

“What?”

“Street-walkers”, Oma laughed.

I trembled and glanced at Rano’s face. Her face was as flat as a deserted road as if she didn’t get what he said.

“Okay. They might say,” perhaps her mind was in some other thoughts.

I looked towards Oma and had a strange feeling that this person can stoop to the level of ferociousness. Cruel person.

I should have argument with Oma in favour of Rano because she also belonged to my tribe, my type---the tribe of extra woman. But extra women don’t fight. This is the right of wives only. A fight with her man for an extra woman is like jumping into a well. And the meanness inside me decided not to attempt suicide at that time.

We sat silently for a long time.

“Should we go?” Oma’s eyes questioned.

“Yes” and I got up.

Rano also stood up.

“When you write a letter to him next time, tell him that Sahni comes every fourth or fifth day and gives me twenty rupees only. I am in deep trouble.”

Oma became cautious, ”Sahni comes?” as if he was the watchman of his friend’s farm.

“He himself told Sahni to come.”

Rano opened the closed door. The air in that dark deserted lawn felt very gentle and comfortable after sitting and spending time in a hot humid room. It was a relief. Silently, moving along the side of the bungalow, we three came at the gate with soft steps. There was enough light on the road.

The light wind, and light.

“Okay.” We said and separated from her.

Slowly and softly Rano said, “Come soon again.”

The road was silent. There was no traffic on this side. There were huge trees on either side of the road. They were engulfed in darkness. Perhaps these were the trees of Indian blueberry. A gentle breeze was blowing when we were passing under a tree. A crying sound softly arose from the tree.

“What is this?” I recoiled and stopped. Perplexed and bewildered. Perhaps I was scared also.

“What?”

“Someone is crying.”

“Where?”, asked Oma.

“Nowhere”, I said and started again.

(The author of the story is Ajeet Cour, a renowned Punjabi writer and a recipient of many awards like Sahitya Akedemi Award, Padma Shri, Shiromani Sahityakar Award etc. Her story has been translated by Sushmindarjeet Kaur.)

Bio note:

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She writes short stories and poetry. She has edited three books. She has translated a book *Sikh Soldiers in Italy* during Second World War. She has to her credit more than fifty poems and articles published in various anthologies and journals. She has presented research papers in many International and National seminars and conferences.