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Memory and Desire

Tushar Vyas

Professor of English

S. D. Arts and B.R. Commerce College

Mansa, Gujarat, India

Kalu greatly longed for the witch-doctor's advice and robotically walked towards the hut which stood alone in the area. When trouble showed its ugly teeth and danced blowing out every spark of joy, every heart in the area was divulged in the dark to the witch-doctor. One could hear at night low voices of a farmer which were soon responded with a loud voice emerging from the witch-doctor's strong vocal cords.

As soon as Kalu entered the hut, the witch-doctor opened his eyes, nodded his head to welcome the visitor and then closed his eyes again. Kalu carefully studied the witch-doctor's appearance. The witch-doctor wore nothing, but a black dhoti and his forehead, chest and hands were painted with red and black colors. He looked almost like an animal still in the process of evolution. A big skull was lying before him and around it was a heap of bones.

'Didn't you tell Dhania that the serpent roaming in my farm is my own father?'

'Yes, I know it well', the witch-doctor said.

'Why does my father roam in my farm in the avatar of a serpent?'

The witch-doctor blazed up and stared at Kalu who immediately lowered his eyes to the floor.

'Don't you know that your old father wanted a few years back to marry your wife who was a spinster then?'

'Yes', Kalu nodded.

'Then why do you ask me?'

'What shall I do now?'

'Rid yourself of him and do anything.'

Kalu threw a few coins on the floor which rattled jarringly. Then no stir, no rattle and the coins were silent like corpses.

Kalu lived in perpetual disturbance then. Everyone in the village knew that his father wanted to marry Sukhi to whom Kalu himself was attracted. Despite the fact that Kalu and Sukhi liked each-other, Kalu's father discovered a spark of love for Sukhi when his own body was sinking in atrophy. But soon the father died and Kalu felt relieved, married Sukhi and now she was pregnant. At that time, the exit which Kalu's father had made seemed even more wonderful than a hundred exits in puppet shows Kalu had witnessed in his life. But when he was at the peak of his happiness, Kalu felt to have stumbled over a grim reality that he was not relieved. Kalu wondered at the reappearance of his father as he had wondered at his exit. The witch-doctor told each of the visitors that Kalu's father who died with an unfulfilled desire was born again as a serpent and that he would still endeavor to get Kalu's wife.

It was true that a big serpent was found gliding restlessly in Kalu's farm and a fire of desire seemed to leap from his hissings. Kalu himself had seen the serpent and noticed that the serpent was visible especially when Sukhi was on the farm. In a joyless world of Kalu, the only thing which animated him was the round belly of his wife. Since last few days, the snake had repeatedly and boldly appeared with its fierce hood, sullen eyes and his tongue always leaping out of the mouth. Five days back when Kalu was digging a part of his farm to prepare a way for the flow of water, the snake stood just six inches away from his feet. Had Sukhi not come to the farm and had she not screamed loudly, Kalu would have been dead.

In the silent, sleepless nights, Kalu lamented over the second-coming of the dead. 'Does he want to kill his own son?' Kalu muttered in the silence. Ultimately, Kalu called a few young men to his farm, searched collectively for the snake, caught him and threw him away. But the next day the serpent was found bossing around the same farm. 'Go away, else I'll kill you'. Desperate Kalu warned the serpent, but he stood there, hissing, adamant and unshaken. Discouraged Kalu then left the arena.

On the following day Kalu went to the farm with an axe and started looking for the serpent, but could not find even a trace of him. Hardly had squatting Kalu sighed, when the snake appeared and advanced to Kalu who stood up and took up the axe into his hands. The snake moved neared growing more sullen and Kalu clutched his axe tightly. At last was a fierce blow before a fatal bite. The war culminated in success and Kalu bent triumphantly over the dead, smiled, cried and then walked towards the witch-doctor's hut. Kalu strutted like a victorious king. 'I'm free as leaves', he shouted. How beautiful everything then seemed! The azure of the sky, branches playing with the wind, purling stream and idea of a little baby waiting for its hour to open its eyes in the world! At last Kalu found himself talking to the with-doctor.

'Parricide?'

'Yes.'

'Oh! You should not have done so.'

'Didn't you suggest so?'

'I advised you to do anything, but not to kill.'

'Now?'

The witch-doctor closed his eyes. 'If he has cherished', said the witch-doctor, 'a really burning desire, he would come again to interrupt your conjugal bliss.'

Kalu was horrified then. He felt that his house was an Eden Garden where he lived with his wife as Adam lived with Eve. Why should the dead father be a Satan and play an intruder?

Kalu felt a strong desire to see a puppet show. The marionettes dancing and fighting, entering and exiting the little stage filled Kalu's heart with joy. Kalu scrutinized the wooden faces of a few marionettes entering the stage and immediately identified himself with them. 'There I am.' He exulted in mixing the stage with the real life.

When he reached home, Kalu found pieces of apples and oranges waiting for him in a nice dish. His wife uttered a few squeals of pain. 'What is it?' Kalu asked relishing a piece of apple in his mouth. His wife smiled with a streak of shame. 'Call the midwife', she said, 'I think the baby is restless to come out'. And Kalu was suddenly seized by the witch-doctor's words, his eyes widened with horror, he rushed to his wife's bed and bent over her face with his red eyes. 'Sukhi, I don't want to part from you.' He stooped closer to Sukhi's face. 'I vow Sukhi', he said, 'in each birth I will be your husband'. Kalu bent more, lost his control and fell on Sukhi who started screaming loudly. 'No intruder can shatter our bliss', Kalu shouted.

People dragged Kalu to the witch-doctor who observed Kalu and concluded, 'Kalu is possessed by his father's ghost.' The witch-doctor commanded the people to disperse and then closed the hut from inside. He lit fire, wore his anklets, applied colors on his body and then started whipping Kalu. 'I'll expel you', said the witch-doctor dancing and whipping, 'from Kalu's body.' He rolled his eyes and shouted, 'Oh! Old pig, why do you torture your poor son?' 'I'm Kalu', cried the victim, 'K a a a l u u u u.' 'No, you can't cheat me.' The witch-doctor's whipping went on until Kalu fainted.

When he recovered consciousness, Kalu found himself lying flat on the floor of the witch-doctor's hut. He struggled to get up, but failed. 'Who am I?' He shouted. Nobody answered. At a far off place people including the witch-doctor were enjoying a puppet show. The winds brought soft music of a pipe to Kalu's ears that was played when a marionette was to die on the stage. 'Joy is spent', Kalu muttered, 'from the vessel of my heart.' He looked at the blood around and remembered the witch-doctor's beating. 'The present giggles and the future threatens, let me exit.'

The show was still not over. When Kalu rested peacefully in a pool of blood in the hut, the witch-doctor was returning to the hut playing with his whip and Kalu's house was filled with joy because his wife had given birth to a baby girl.