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***No Presents Please: Mumbai Stories* by Jayant Kaikini and Tejaswini  
Niranjana**

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**Kaikini, Jayant and Niranjana, Tejaswini. (November 2017). *No Presents Please: Mumbai Stories*. Harper Perennial. ISBN-13: 978-9352645879. Pages: 240, Price: Rs. 350**

*No Presents Please: Mumbai Stories* is a collection of sixteen short stories by renowned Kannada writer Jayant Kaikini about life in Mumbai city translated from the writer's mother tongue into English by Central Sahitya Akademi Prize winner Tejaswini Niranjana, penned over a span of two decades beginning in 1986. The narrative of the stories is in third person omniscient and so provides the readers with the characters' individual understanding and perception of Mumbai and its role in their lives. The book also has a 'P.S.' section at the end which includes an article on 'Translating Mumbai's Cultural Vernacular' by the translator and a discussion on Kaikini's stories by four of his readers, presenting us multiple views on his writing.

The first story in the book is titled "City Without Mirrors" and is about an unmarried man in his forties named Satyajit who has never been in a relationship but finds himself connected with the various thousand faces he sees everyday in the city. He believes he does not need any relationship because he is "married to this city". The protagonist finds himself in a strange position when he is presented a marriage proposal with a thirty nine year-old woman named Shalini by her father Sanjeev Sen despite never having seen the bride. However, Kaikini describes these ageing unmarried singles' existence as coming close to one another through the city as nobody is a stranger here; all part of the same universe. And, as the title reads this city is without mirrors because one can see its reflection even in a stranger here.

What is so special about Kaikini's stories is the innocence of his characters who while meditating on the art of silence in isolation find some part of them – a connection – in a total stranger in the city. The young strangers Manjari Sawant and Nandkishore "Nandu" Jagtap in "Interval" decide to elope together but upon meeting for the deed realise that the other person's purpose was not to be a lover but to liberate the other from the sullen life that was holding them back for so long and to present "the infinite possibilities afforded by their freedom". Strangers are saviours in Mumbai city, where even the dead acquire a new life when their photo frame is

used as a prop on a drama company's stage as seen in the story "Unframed". Kaikini's idea is how even an inanimate object can be brought to life in Mumbai.

Kaikini (and his characters) often romanticise the city as they forget themselves while meditating in its lap forming the strangest of bonds in the meantime. For example, in "Opera House", a young keeper of a declining opera house finds a lost thermos flask and is restless until he returns it to the presumably needful owner or the intended recipient who must be unwell. Meera Kothari in "Inside the Inner Room" forms a most unique relationship with Parul – the woman who is more than just friends with her dispassionate and unfaithful husband Antariksh. Alienated initially, the wife comes closer with the other woman over the latter's medical operation and together they oust the self-centered man – who is nothing but a 'ghost' by the end of the story – from the apartment both metaphorically and literally. Kaikini does not limit bonds formed in the city to just those between humans of the opposite sex; for him the essence of the city lies in the closeness it can make one feel with anyone or anything one lays its eyes on.

How much the Hindi cinema influences the life of Mumbaikars is an ever present feature of Kaikini's stories. For example, in "Gateway" the unemployed married man Sudhanshu wishes his life were a movie so that he could catch a break – an intermission. He does not want either the surprise or the magic that is part of a movie screen but the timeout that allows one to relax which is why he indulges in a conversation with a roadside keychain-seller while contemplating about the city and his wife. In "A Spare Pair of Legs," a group of women in a chawl ask Popat the tea boy to dance to the tune of A.R. Rahman's 'Hamma, hamma' for them. And, in "Toofan Mail" the protagonist Toofan's livelihood depends on his job as a stunt double for famous movie stars such as Shah Rukh Khan. It isn't just the movies that connects these characters but also the uncertain nature of their jobs. They aren't economically content yet they behold the city in their eyes. And, the elaborate way in which Kaikini writes his characters' thoughts (and Tejaswini Niranjana translates) elicits the reader to be in tune with that particular character's consciousness about his/her life in Mumbai.

The aforementioned struggling characters are as reflective as the dying self-made successful businessman Santoshan who is in the city for a medical check-up in "Water". The only thing he wants in life now is six more months so that he can attend his granddaughter's wedding. And, while struggling in the relentless Mumbai rain he realises the terrible error he committed when he decided to become one of the first to sell packaged drinking water in the country – a thing that should be free to everyone. No matter how you look at this city every sight of it is an eye-opener. It shall provide you with all your answers if you reflect with an open mind.

In these stories Mumbai indulges its people in an insightful train of thought with Kaikini not forgetting to mention the symbolic Victoria Terminus (now Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus) – the headquarters of the Central Railways – on multiple occasions. Kaikini's characters are never at a

standstill. Always moving, travelling, both literally and metaphorically. But, whether they are moving in or out of the city Mumbai stays with them. These stories weave a collective narrative of people becoming one with their city. And, because of that reason one doesn't have to be a Mumbaikar to enjoy Kaikini's book. No matter where you go you can never lose connection with an enchanting city like Kaikini's Mumbai – a place that shapes you and is a part of you even in isolation.