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"If I return this time I must return greater..."
Kunwar Narain: His Reminiscences and Retellings of the Past

SUMMARY: Kunwar Narain (1927-2017), an eminent Hindi poet and writer, in his interviews, introductions to published works and public speeches discusses at length matters connected to his writing, poetry and aesthetics, but is somewhat reluctant to share details of his private life. The article is divided into two parts: the former studies the few and far between references Narain made to his own life in his para-textual writings and the latter close reads four of his poems and a short-story that refers to his trips to Poland bringing out autobiographical motifs.

KEYWORDS: Kunwar Narain, Hindi poetry, Hindi short story, autobiographical motifs

Kunwar Narain, the doyen of Hindi poetry, passed away on November 15, 2017.[1] An acclaimed Hindi poet of the next generation, Manglesh Dabral, bade him farewell in the following words (Dabral 2017):

[1] Works of Kunwar Narain, poetry collections and epic poems: *Cakravyūh,* 1956; [*Tisrā saptak,* 1959]; *Pariveś: ham-tum*, 1961; *Ātmājayī*, 1965; *Apne sāmne*, 1979; *Koī dūsrā nahī̃*, 1993; *In dinõ*, 2002; *Vājaśravā ke bahāne*, 2008; *Hāśiye kā gavāh*, 2009; *Kumārajīva*, 2015; *Sab itnā asamāpt*, 2018; short stories collections: *Ākārõ ke ās-pās*, 1971; *Becain pattõ kā koras*, 2018; essays: *Āj aur āj se pahle*, 1998; *Diśaõ kā khulā ākaś*, 2012; *Śabd aur deśkāl*, 2013; *Rukh*, 2014; *Lekhak kā cinemā*, 2017b;

> There now remain very few people in the Hindi-speaking world who, in their personalities, carry the value of cultural diversity and whose language reflects truth, dignity and ethics as a beacon for our times. Kunwar Narain was one such individual and writer. His demise marks the loss of an individual of rare values, and the universe of Hindi poetry is now left without a poet whose poetry could bring its readers close to the feelings of respite and grandeur at the same time. For several years, Narain struggled with failing eyesight and an abiding ear ailment, and the last five months of his life were spent in a condition of incapacitating senselessness, fighting death. The whole universe, for him, was enveloped solely in touch, but despite that, the sincere expression of his sympathy never dulled; nor did his ability to dictate through gestures, become weak.

In his interviews, introductions to published works and public speeches, Narain at length discusses matters connected to his writing, poetry and aesthetics, but is somewhat reluctant to share details of his private life. My intention in this essay, however, is to look at elusive glimpses of his life narrative found in published texts and in this way foreground the reading of four of his poems and a short story that recall memories of his trips to Poland.

Narain had a unique connection to Poland, which he visited on several occasions. In 1955, a year before the debut volume of his poems was published, he came to Poland as a young, zealous poet on his first foreign journey right at the beginning of his literary odyssey. Later, he visited Poland on a number of occasions; for instance, in the fifth decade of his career, to be honoured for his lifetime achievement in poetry and critical writing.[2] He knew Polish poets—some of them

interview collections: *Mere sākṣātkār,* 1999; *Taṭ par hū̃ par taṭasth nahī̃,* 2010*;* selected translations: *Na sīmāẽ na dūriyā̃,* 2017c.

[2] In 2005 Narain was the guest of honour at a conference commemorating the 50th anniversary of teaching the Hindi language and literature at the Section of South Asian Studies of Warsaw University, on this occasion he was awarded the university medal.

personally—valued their work[3] and translated several of their poems into Hindi. Their verses struck a chord with his deep belief that art and philosophy in general, and poetry in particular, cultivate concern for others, a value he considered essential for protecting humanism in troubled times, be it in the past or contemporarily. In a 1999 interview he commented:

> At the time when Europe, and particularly Poland, were going through the most terrible period of the Nazi occupation, it was difficult even to imagine that in this spiral of destruction such a delicate thing as poetry could survive! Therefore, if today poems of Różewicz, Miłosz, Herbert and Szymborska are here amongst us, then maybe we can argue that human creativity is stronger than human cruelty.[4]

By no means was Narain's interaction with Poland a one-way venture. Two collections of his poems and several stories have been translated into Polish and published in Poland so far.[5] More translations of his works into Polish are taking place at present. Moreover, Maria Puri has accomplished a rendition of his epic poem *Ātmajayī* into English, which is to be published soon.

For me, writing about Kunwar Narain and his literature is walking down memory lane. I first encountered him as a student while reading his poems during my classes with Professor Danuta Stasik, who later

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[3] He admitted, though, that he liked selected poems of various poets, not all that has ever been written by any particular poet, with an exception of Kabir, perhaps, whom he greatly admired.

[4] Narain 2010 [1999]: 116: *jis samay yūrop dvitīy mahāyuddh ke sabse bhayānak nāzī daur se guzar rahā thā—khāskar polaiṇḍ—us samay yah kalpnā karnā bhī muśkil lagtā thā ki us vidhvanslīlā mẽ kavitā jaisī nāzuk koī cīz bacī rah sakī hogī! phir bhī, āj agar hamāre pās rozevic, mīvoṣ, herbert, śimborskā ādi kī kavitaẽ maujūd haĩ to śāyad ādmī kī paśutā se uskī racnāśīltā kā tark zyādā baṛā hai.* All translations from Hindi if not attributed otherwise are mine.

[5] Narain 2007; Narajan 2013.

translated a number of his poems into Polish—an engagement any poet would perhaps cherish the most. The lines I read then are the same lines I read now with my students. My reminiscences of our first meeting in person, at the beginning of the 2000s—during one of his visits to Warsaw—remain vivid even today. To me, a recent MA graduate, a couple of brief conversations with Kunwar Narain were like standing face to face with a living legend that had walked out of a book of the history of Hindi literature, or else, from between verses of his poems. To my surprise, it turned out he was an unassuming, kind and attentive interlocutor, at times somewhat aloof, lost in his own thoughts, charmingly uncomfortable with the intensity of attention showered upon him.

With passing of time I became acquainted with Narain's critical writings. He was an enthusiast of art in any form and an admirer of Indian classical music and dance, world cinema,[6] Indian and Western philosophy, mythology and religion; probably one of the best-read men of letters in India, equally familiar with Abhinavagupta and Bachtin, Aristotle and Chomsky, Sontag and Derrida. When I came across a passage on Sanyukta Panigrahi, an Odissi dancer, where Narain described her performance in his Lakhnau house,[7] it made me intensely relive my own captivation and elation experienced at the first ever live performance of Indian classical dance that I witnessed during Panigrahi's recital in Warsaw in the mid-1990s. In later years, I visited the Narains' house in Delhi several times and Kunwarji, his wife, Bharatiji, and their son, Apurva, always received me with warmth and generosity.

[6] Krzysztof Kieślowski, a Polish director acclaimed worldwide, was one of the two of Narain's favourite film directors.

[7] Great personalities of Indian culture, for instance Ustad Amir Khan, Satyajit Rai, B. V. Karant, were, at different times, frequent visitors in the Narains' house in Lakhnau (Bharadvaj 2010: 12), where in the true spirit of the sophisticated culture of Avadh *gaṅgā-jamnā tahzīb* was thoroughly present.

With his poetic sensitivity and mastery of language, Narain won acclaim for his versatile translations of poetry.[8] I feel fortunate that Maria Puri and I shared some valuable moments of intense discussions with Kunwar Narain while working on the poetic revision of Adam Zagajewski’s poems which we translated. Though his health was already fragile, he agreed graciously to go through our translations, for which we are both grateful. And when the book was published in 2014, we witnessed the meeting of the two poets in Delhi, both unique in their poetic universes but sharing similar sensitivity that they both believed essential in redeeming ‘the mutilated world’.[9]

Narain never penned any autobiographical piece of writing *per se* and in a 1977 interview, with a subtle touch of humour, he spelled out his feelings about the genre and his opinion on the presence of the autobiographical in creative writing in general, and in his works in particular:

> Creative writing, if not completely autobiographical in itself, can be called a process of self-examination. That is why, perhaps, creative writers of excellence have never been autobiographers of equally superior standing—but they remain interesting subjects of biographies. (…) Anyhow, right now I do not think that writing autobiography is capable of giving me as much satisfaction as I get from creative writing. Some experiences of the past and their memories have entered into my writing, and can be discerned, at times easily and at other times less easily.[10]

[8] A recently published collection of Narain’s selected translations of world poetry proves his versatility as a translator (Narain 2017c), it includes Homer, Walt Whitman, Constantine Cavafy, Rainer Maria Rilke, Bertold Brecht, Jorge Luis Borges, Pablo Neruda, Derek Walcott, Ted Hughes and others. It contains poems by three Polish poets: Anna Świrszczyńska, Tadeusz Różewicz and Zbigniew Herbert.

[9] I am paraphrasing here a poem by Adam Zagajewski, *Try to Praise the Mutilated World*, which shoot into fame after it was published in *The New Yorker* on 17 September, 2001, after the terrorist attacks in New York.

[10] Narain 2010 [1977]: 34: *racnātmak sāhitya likhnā apne āp mẽ agar pūrī tarah ātmakathātmak nahī̃, to ātmanivednātmak prakriyā to kahā jā saktā hai. isīlie śāyad bahut utkr̥ṣṭ koṭi ke racnātmak sāhityākar utnī hī utkr̥ṣṭ koṭi ke ātmakathā lekhak bhī nahī̃ rahe haĩ—ve acche jīvan carit viṣay rahe haĩ. (...) baharhāl, maĩ abhī to aisā*

More often than not, readers tend to look at poetry as communicating a more personal voice than that of prose writing. Poetry, indeed, has always been regarded as a mode of expression of in-depth 'self-examining' quality, of soul-searching. Narain in his writings steadily admitted a connection between his lived experiences—including emotional and intellectual ones—and his writings.

In his address to readers, opening his collection of short stories of 1971, Kunwar Narain provokingly declares:

> I don't talk about a story in the name of reality, but about reality in the name of the story—the reality which is lived not only at the transactional level of practicalities, but primarily at the poetic level of ideas.[11]

His literary interests lie in the exploration of various dimensions of 'reality'—physical, emotional, intellectual, metaphysical—all of them, perhaps, offering a different insight into THE reality. Hence, he defines poetry as combining 'reality' (*yathārth*) with 'sublimity' (*udatta*). He draws here from the words of his favourite poet—Kabir—which, according to Narain's understanding, conceptualised the perceptions of 'reality' and 'sublimity' as *had* ('horizon/boundry') and *behad* ('what is beyond the horizon') respectively.[12] In this manner,

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kuch nahī̃ soctā ki ātmakathā likhnā mujhe vaisā santoṣ de sakegā jo mujhe sāhitya racnā mẽ hī mil jātā. bacpan ke tathā bād ke bhī anek anubhav aur unkī yādẽ mere lekhan ke sāth juṛī haĩ jinhẽ kabhī spaṣṭ, kabhī bahut spaṣṭ nahī̃, āj bhī pahcānā jā saktā hai.

[11] Narain 2007 [1971]: 8: *yathārth ke nām par kahānī nahī̃, kahānī ke nām par yathārth kī bāt kartā hū̃ - us yathārth kī bāt jise keval vyāvahārik star par nahī̃, mukhytaḥ mānasik star par jiyā jātā hai*. English translation by John Vater and Apurva Narain: Narain 2020: xxxvi.

[12] Narain 2010 [1995]: 113. Cf. e.g. Kabir's lines: "The one who is confined in limitations is human, the one who roams into unlimited is a Sadhu. The one who has dropped both limited and unlimited, unfathomable is his being and understanding." (*had mẽ cale so mānav, behad cale so sādh. had behad donõ tāje tāko batā agādh:* http://santkabirdas.blogspot.com).

Narain seems to define the essential and distinctive quality of the poetic mode of expression, i.e. its transcendence.

In a way, poetry construed as continuous autobiographical narrative of physical, intellectual and emotional experiences, and drawing from Derrida’s reflections, can be perceived as an exercise in autothanatography.[13] However, Nancy Miller observes that “autobiography—identity through alterity—is also writing against death twice: the other’s and one’s own,” and, therefore, every form of autobiographical writing is autothanatographic, as constant consciousness of passing away accompanies human being throughout life (Miller 1994: 12). In this light, Narain—returning to an issue of the sensuous world and reality—states:

> Poetry is a sensitive and imaginative way of expanding our comprehension of the life we face—and it can be fruitful to read some of my poems in that way. It is not only the experiential world but also the imaginative world that combine to form a total life reality. I have never tried to force any kind of “poetics” on my poems, but rather let them freely determine their own “form” and “content”. (Narain 2017a)

Narain’s verses encrypt the autobiographical in a structure with multiple layers, not only in testimonies of his individual everyday experiences, but also in commentaries on the political or the historical as seen from a contemporary perspective, in reflections on life and culture, and in sketching internal emotional landscapes.

[13] Cf. Long 2015: 10–18; 14: “The Self which presents itself to itself, or the self that writes or is written about, are not the same (and are different form the self who reads and views). (…) Thus the self, preserved, is a different self, and the autobiography comprises heterography, and thanatography as the written self is often other and dead. (…) The strong, self-present, undivided autos presumed by the autobiographical genre is a fiction.”

Narain, perceived as an introspective person,[14] reluctant to openly share details of his private life in interaction with others, when confronted with the interviewer's question of whether he is an introvert or an extravert poet, reacts with an air of irritation and defends his poems as synthesised forms of reserved and exuberant expression; it is his constant effort to perceive complex issues as such and not to simplify them:[15]

> In criticism, (...) we often propose these single terms, like 'introvert' or 'extravert', for the sake of analysis and comprehension, but one does not live life like that. To live or to write about what one has lived through is to directly confront life in its totality and in all its complexities. At least I have experienced these interconnections between my life and my writing.[16]

The inquisitive approach and interests of interviewers, as well as varying levels of Narain's willingness to open up to them, shape the reminiscences of his life in the published interviews and other texts (public speeches and introductions to his works) whose addressee is an anonymous audience. In some conversations, he seems more outspoken about his life, largely with those conversers with whom he shares a level of familiarity and comfort, e.g. a long-time acquaintance Vinod Bharadvaj, or a duo of two interlocutors, i.e. a poetess Arundhathi Subramaniam and Apurva, his son. Reading between the lines of other

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[14] Cf. in an earlier interview of 1979, Narain (Narain 2010: 62) admitted that in his childhood he was introvert and shy and that even in his adolescence it was not easy for him to befriend many people.

[15] Cf. his essay *Kalā jaṭil hotī hai* [Art is complex] in Narain 2013: 43–47.

[16] Narain 2010 [1977]: 39–40: *samikṣā mẽ (...) viśleṣaṇ aur samajhne kī suvidhā ke lie, ham 'antarmukhī' yā 'bahirmukhī' jaise ekal padõ ko prastāvit kar lete haĩ—lekin jīvan ko ham us tarah nahī̃ jīte. jīnā, yā jīe hue par likhnā, jīvan se uskī samagrtā aur jaṭiltāõ mẽ sīdhā sāmnā hai. kam se kam maĩne apne jīne aur likhne ke bīc aise hī antarsambandhõ ko anubhāv kiyā.*

conversations, the reader often gets a sense of irritation or even annoyance on the part of the poet, which puts Narain into a more reticent mode.

Reminiscences of the Past

Kunwar Narain was born on 17 September, 1927, in Faizabad and spent his early years in Faizabad and Ayodhya. The memories of his childhood bring back dark days of despair after the deaths of his mother and then his beloved elder sister. Both fell victim to tuberculosis and Narain himself also suffered from it. The traumatic experiences of profound loss return in Narain’s poetry and in his recollections of the past, like in this interview of 1979:

> In the beginning, within scarcely a year, the untimely deaths of my mother and then of my elder sister, who had supported me a lot when my mother was no more, filled my life with a sense of such terrible apprehension and alienation that, if I had not kept close relationship with my extended family, my life on the mental level could have gone badly wrong.[17]

Haunting memories and contemplations inspired by these deeply upsetting experiences reappear in Narain’s works throughout his creative journey, to name just two epic poems, one from the early and the other from a later stage of his poetic career, *Ātmajayī* (1965) and *Vājaśravā ke bahāne* (2008). The protagonists of both compositions originate in the *Kaṭhopaniṣad* but what concerns Narain here is the significance of the mythological narrative for contemporary man; the poet

[17] Narain 2010 [1979]: 62: *ārambh mẽ, sāl-bhar ke andar hī, sabse pahle mā̃ aur bād mẽ phir baṛī bahan—jinse mujhe mā̃ ke na rahne par bahut sahārā milā thā—ki asamay mr̥tyu ne jis tarah kā bhayānak ātank aur akelāpan mere jīvan mẽ bhar diyā thā use agar ek sammilit parivār kā sagāpan na miltā to jīvan mānasik star par bikhar bhī jā saktā thā.*

remains involved with eternal existential questions, simultaneously creating autothanatographic narratives. An introduction to *Vājaśravā ke bahāne* brings out the connection between past lived experiences and epic poems:

> I recollect this decade, about half a century ago, when I suddenly learned about death very closely. In later years I came to know life better. In my memories both experiences are present in a combined form. Life has its own allure, which—in spite of the constantly present fear of death—gives us drive to live. (…) While in *Ātmajayī* life was examined from the perspective of death, *Vājaśravā ke bahāne* is an attempt to look at death from the perspective of life.[18]

This passage from a 2017 interview sheds light on the process of creative writing—though not of autobiographical narrative *per se*—seen as an exercise in autothanatography:

> *Ātmajayī* (…) is very different from my other collections. It is my response to death, which every individual has to face in life. A creative life, to my mind, seems to provide some sort of an 'intimation of immortality' and a distraction from the fear of death. (Narain 2017a)

The ancestral house in Lucknow (Lakhnaū), where Narain moved in later to live with his extended family, returns in his recollections. Leaders of the movement for Indian independence frequented the house (Narain 2010 [1998]: 36) and that is how Narain became acquainted with many remarkable personalities of those times: Narendra Dev,

[18] Narain 2010 [2008]: 7: *āj se lagbhag ādhī sadī pahle kā vah daśak yād ātā hai jab maĩ ne mr̥tyu ko acānak bahut nazdik se jānā thā. bād ke varṣõ mẽ jīvan ko zyādā nazdik se jānā hai. yādõ mẽ donõ anubhavõ kī ek milījulī upasthiti hai. jīvan kā apnā sammohan hai jo mr̥tyu ke santrās ke bāvjūd hamẽ jīne kī śakti detā hai. (…) 'ātmajayī' mẽ yadi mr̥tyu kī or se jīvan ko dekhā gayā hai, to 'vājaśravā ke bahāne' mẽ jīvan kī or se mr̥tyu ko dekhne kī kośiś.*

Jivatram Bhagavandas Kripalani, and Ram Manohar Lohia[19] who had a formative influence on him. For instance, Narain participated twice in the election campaigns of Narendra Dev, which was an exercise in disillusionment, 'an eye-opening experience' of power games in Indian politics. He stayed for a year (1944–1945) with Narendra Dev in Mumbai, a period recalled by him as 'apprenticeship' in socialism and Buddhism (Narain 2010 [1979]: 36).

When Narain was asked in the 1988 interview to enumerate a couple of the most important moments of his life, the foremost on his list was the foreign journey of 1955 that took him to Poland, Russia and China, and to which I will return later. He also recalled a colleague with whom he studied science in college, and whose enthusiastic interest in literature was so 'contagious' that Narain got attracted to it as well and finally enrolled for an MA course in English (Narain 2010 [1998]: 94). That shift from science towards literature, understandably, is seen as the most notable change in the course of his life, but still comes second to the 1955 tour.

During his years in college, Narain composed some poetry in English, but soon turned to writing in Hindi. In a 2017 conversation, he possibly pinpointed the reasons for his choice of this particular language as the medium of his creative expression:

> Hindi words have a long and fascinating etymology—they have meanings but, more than that, a culture and a history. They have an immediacy but, more than that, a personality that can be evoked in poetry to speak of the experiences and adventures that the word has passed through over the ages to arrive at its present meaning. In that sense, *Cakravyūh* [debut collection of 1956] was my first "adventure" in the wonderland of words! (Narain 2017a)

[19] Narain 2010 [1977]: 29; 37. In another conversation Narain (Narain 2017a) adds: "A close association with Acharya Narendra Dev, Acharya Kripalani, and Dr Ram Manohar Lohia—who were like family members—contributed considerably in shaping my thoughts and diverted me towards literary pursuits away from my family business background. I consider all these experiences vital to my literary make-up."

The interest in Hindi as a medium of poetic expression could also have been motivated by Narain's exposure to contemporary Hindi poetry of the 1950s, a period of intense experimentation with form and content. For instance, his fellow student Raghuvir Sahay (who in due time became a renowned Hindi writer) had introduced Narain to Agyeya's poems from his collection *Harī ghas par ek kṣaṇ* (*A Moment on green grass*, 1949) (Narain 2010 [1979]: 63).

In 1951, after completing an MA in English literature in Lucknow, Narain spent a year in Delhi with Kripalani, where he worked for a newspaper *Vigil* (Narain 2010 [1977]: 29; 37). By 1954 he had to his credit write-ups in English on Hindi Chāyāvādī poets and Hindi literary reviews published in *Yugcetnā*.[20] In 1956, that is the year after his visit to Poland, China and Russia, he published a debut poetry collection, *Cakravyūh*, and in 1959 Agyeya invited him to publish his poems in the third collection of contemporary poets, *Tisrā saptak,* which is to the present day considered to be one of the milestones of modern Hindi literature (Narain 2010 [1979]: 63).

Narain's business-oriented family seemed not very pleased with his interest in reading and writing, though he recollects that his beloved sister was enthusiastic about literature. Narain confesses: "From the very beginning I was fond of reading and writing but at home there was no environment that would encourage it, quite the contrary, there used to be a kind of opposition."[21] In spite of his family's resentment towards his literary interests, in the 1995 speech at the Sahitya Akademi award function, Narain talked about poetic works that were very much present in his ancestral place, like in many Hindu households:

> I can accept that the first acquaintance with poetry was through *Rāmcaritmānas* and *Gītā*. At that time, these volumes were for

[20] Some of them were reprinted in his collection of essays Narain 1998.

[21] Narain 2010 [1979]: 62: *paṛhne likhne ka śauk śurū se hī thā par ghar mẽ aisā vātāvaraṇ nahī̃ thā ki usko adhīk protsāhan miltā thā—balkī kuch virodh-sā hī rahtā thā.*

me more about moral and cultural traditions than poetry. These traditions were passed to me as an inheritance from my family.[22]

At some point his life gravitated so heavily towards writing that his uncle, the head of the extended family, “considering me a ‘spare part’ of the family, ‘spared’ me for literature.”[23] Narain’s conscious decision, however, was to continue with the family business till his shift from Lucknow to Delhi, in order to have a source of income that would allow him to maintain his creative independence.[24]

In a conversation with the poetess Arundhathi Subramanian and his son, Apurva Narain, in a way Narain summarises his own poetic journey through the decades, mapping a relation between historical developments in India and his aesthetic interests:

> (…) I did not entirely abandon the Hindi *mātrik* metres. In *Pariveś: ham-tum* [his second independent poetry collection of 1961] (…), free verse and metrical poetry co-exist. But linguistically and socially speaking, it is a small varied world that my poetry moves in and around. I am never in a hurry to publish collections of my poems. Five to ten years apart, they are ‘joined’ by time and space; gaps similar to the gaps joining two words; apparently blank spaces, but not really so. In a sense, the different collections are interlinked and can be read in a continuum, reflecting my response to the changes taking place within me and in the realities around me. (…) Poems in *Apne sāmne* (1979) relate more directly to the socio-political

[22] Narain 2010 [1995]: 106–107: *kavitā se apnā pahlā paricay ‘rāmcaritmānas’ aur ‘gītā’ ke dvārā mān saktā hū̃. us samay mere lie ye granth kavitā se adhik naitik aur sanskr̥tik paramparāẽ thī̃ jo mujhe parivār kī or se virāsat ki tarah dī gaī̃.*

[23] Narain 2010 [1977]: 29: *mere cācā jī mujhe parivār ke ‘sper pārṭ’ mān kar likhne-paṛhne ke lie ‘sper’ kar diyā gayā.*

[24] Cf. Dabral 2017: “He used to work as a managing partner in a showroom of ambassador cars in his favourite city Lucknow, but he never did much to expand this business and gain profit. In fact, he used to self-deprecatorily call himself a ‘damaging partner’ or would say, ‘I am in the car business so I don’t have to partake of the business of words’”.

> mood of the country that preceded and followed the Emergency. In my later collections, *Koī dūsrā nahī̃* (1993) and *In dinõ* (2002), I tried to broaden my view of human life and the world we live in. To call this view simply global would be too gross for the wider concerns of myth, history, culture, and progress, etc. that it seeks to embrace.[25]

I would like to close this part of my essay presenting autobiographical glimpses of Narain's life in his own words with some of his answers from an outwardly light-hearted interview of 1995 (seemingly modelled on the so-called 'Proust questionnaire'), in which the poet responded to questions that attempted to reveal some aspects of his personality. For instance, he unsurprisingly says that thinking and writing, as well as talking to his family and friends, was what he enjoyed the most;[26] that he was afraid of being misunderstood,[27] and avoided most of all chairing at public events and giving speeches.[28] However, when confronted with a question about what consoles him in moments of solitude, he incongruously and somewhat disturbingly replied: "I am accompanied by the belief that I am not alone… And sometimes also by the fear that maybe after all I am completely alone."[29]

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[25] Narain 2017a. I took the liberty to change the transcription of the titles of Narain's poetry volumes in this quotation to maintain consistency within the text. Cf. Narain (Narain 2013: 51) where he discusses both fascination with modernity, Marxism and Gandhism of the early period and later disillusionment with these concepts.

[26] Narain 2010 [1995]: 91: "I like reading and writing, thinking and contemplating. Proximity to this awakens in me hope, self-assurance and forbearing love." (*likhnā-paṛhnā aur socnā-vicārnā pasand hai. vah jiskī nikaṭtā mujhmẽ āśā, ātma-viśvās aur nispr̥h prem ko jagātī hai.*)

[27] Narain 2010 [1995]: 92: "In being misunderstood there is a burden of double helplessness, which is that maybe I am incapable of making myself clear or that others do not understand me correctly." *(galat samjhe jāne se dohrī asamarthtā kā bodh hotā hai ki śāyad maĩ apne ko ṭhīk peś nahī̃ kar pā rahā hū̃, yā dūsre mujhe ṭhīk se samajh nahī̃ rahe.*)

[28] Narain 2010 [1995]: 92: "I avoid chairing and giving speeches." (*pablik maukõ par adhyakṣtāõ aur bhāṣāṇõ se katrātā hū̃.*)

[29] Narain 2010 [1995]: 90: *ek viśvās ki maĩ akelā nahī̃ hū̃… kabhī-kabhī ek bhay ki kahī̃ maĩ bilkul akelā to nahī̃ hū̃?*

He humbly replied to an inquiry about his rebirth: “Maybe I would like to be a poet again, a better poet…”[30]

After all, Narain was of the opinion, expressed for instance in a speech at the Sahitya Akademi, that a poet—no doubt he was talking about his own experience—was never satisfied with his compositions (Narain 2010 [1995]: 108). In another speech—upon receiving the Shatdal award—he spelled out the ethics of a writer, which should be rooted in a sense of responsibility towards present and future audiences:

> For any conscious writer a receipt of an award is an indication of great responsibility towards his readers and society, an indication that his work has not yet been completed. There is a lot he still has to keep doing, because life never ends. […] Literature is not only concerned with what happens right now, it is also preoccupied with times to come, that is where our expectations and hopes of a better world are vested.[31]

At the same time Narain was thoroughly and stoically aware that most people are interested in entertainment provided by popular culture and not in art posing essential but disquieting questions (Narain 2010 [1998]: 112).

Retellings of the Past

Let me now return to Narain’s retrospections of an experience he singled out as the most significant of his whole life i.e. his journey of 1955, which recurs quite frequently in a number of his life reminiscences shared in his interviews and speeches. A visit to Poland was a part of a longer tour covering Russia and China as well. Narain was

[30] Narain 2010 [1995]: 93: *śāyad phir se kavi hī honā cāhū̃gā… ek behtar kavi…*

[31] Narain 2010 [1995]: 111: *kisī bhī sacet sāhityakār le lie puraskār kā arth apne pāṭhakõ aur samāj ke prati ek atirikt zimmedarī kā bhī sanket hai ki uskā kām abhī pūrā nahī̃ huā. use age bhī bahut kuch karte rahnā hai kyõki jīvan kabhī samāpt nahī̃ hotā. […] sāhitya keval tatkāl kī hī fikr nahī̃, us ānevāle samay kī cintā bhī hai jismẽ ek behtar duniyā kī hamārī ākā̃kṣāẽ aur āśāẽ nihit haĩ.*

a member of the Indian delegation that came to Warsaw for the 5th World Festival of Youth and Students, an event which attracted thirty thousand foreign delegates from more than a hundred different countries.[32]

In the 1950s, the situation in Poland and India displayed some vague similarities. Both countries went through tragic historical experiences, which culminated in the end of the Nazi occupation in 1945 for Poland and the partition of British India in 1947 into India and Pakistan. In the 1950s Poland was still recovering from the devastation caused by the Second World War, at the same time society was disconcerted by the political turn to a communist system under Soviet control. The Poles were relieved by the end of war, but unevenly divided into those intensely disillusioned with, or even opposed to, the enforced change, those expecting positive transformation in new socio-political circumstances, and feasibly those unconcerned. India, on the other hand, in turmoil during the struggle for independence, experienced the trauma of partition that loomed heavily over the enthusiasm of building an independent state and nation. Soon, the initial hopes of solving all problems with self-governance turned bitter; and disenchantment followed.

War damage was still very visible when foreign visitors came to Warsaw for the festival in 1955; the Nazis aiming to erase the town after the 1944 uprising thoroughly destroyed it. Nevertheless, the communist regime of those times, and purportedly the Soviets too, wished to showcase the city, as well as the whole country under the new government, as a place of rapid growth, dynamic changes, and a bright future, a phoenix reborn from the ashes.

Reminiscences of Narain's then visit to Poland resound in three poems: *Do nilī ā̃khẽ* (*The Blue Eyes*, of 1961 collection *Pariveś: ham-tum*),

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[32] The festival was organised by the World Federation of Democratic Youth, a youth organisation founded in London in 1945, which was left-oriented and designed as a platform facilitating contacts between young people from capitalist and communist countries. Earlier editions of the festival took place in Prague in 1947, in Budapest in 1949, in Berlin in 1951 and in Bucharest in 1953.

Nāzim Hikmet ke sāth—1955 (*Warsaw 1955 with Nâzim Hikmet*) and *Pāblo Neruda se ek bhenṭ—Vārsā 1955* (*With Pablo Neruda*), both from the volume *Hāśiye kā gavāh* of 2009. Besides the three poems mentioned, I would like to look at one more poem, *Krākāu ke ciṛiyāghar mẽ* (*In Krakow Zoo,* 2002), which recalls Narain's later visit to Poland, and a short story, *Vārsā mẽ Olgā* (*Olga in Warsaw*) published posthumously in 2018 but evoking the earlier journey.[33] There are other pieces of Narain's writing which refer to the same episodes of his life and seem to encode similar experiences in a covert and more reticent manner. I have already identified a number of such texts that revisit his impressions from Poland and I hope to further explore this subject in my future research.[34]

These four pieces of creative writing discussed here are openly autobiographical as they bring reminiscences of Narain's journeys to Poland, and, beguilingly, all narrate encounters of different kinds. Two of the poems in their titles indicate not only the year 1955, but also names of the poets whom Narain met during his visit, i.e. Hikmet and Neruda.[35] The title of the latter poem perpetuates even the name of the town, Warsaw. Both poems were published in a volume of 2009, much later after the experiences that they relate occurred, whereas remarkably, *The Blue Eyes*, had appeared four decades earlier i.e. in Narain's second poetry collection. However, reading of this otherwise intangible love poem along with the short story *Olga in Warsaw*, published in 2018, sheds some light on an enigmatic romantic relation and brings a kind of narrative coda in prose that throws light on the allusiveness of the earlier verses. The last poem of 2002, recollecting a later

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[33] *Warsaw 1955 with Nazim Hikmet*, *With Pablo Neruda* and *In Krakow Zoo* were translated by Apurva Narain, and I will refer to these poems in his English translation.

[34] For instance, a short story *Kahānī kī khoj* (Narain 2018) to be read along with a poem *Titliyõ ke deś mẽ*, and another poem *Pyār kī bhāṣāẽ* (Narain 2009).

[35] Coincidently, quotes from these two poets open two initial chapters of Arundhati Roy's latest novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.

journey to Poland, describes a scene from Krakow Zoo that the author, in all probability, had been a witness to.

In his reminiscences Narain summed up his tour of 1955 that took him to Poland, Russia and China in the following words: “People there had an immense respect for and inner faith in a writer—it was reassuring and encouraging too—for the first time it made me realise that being a writer carries both responsibility and attractiveness.”[36] The visit to Warsaw was a period of intense contacts with participants of the festival: city dwellers, foreign visitors, as well as contemporary cultural luminaries from Poland and from abroad.[37] For instance, Narain met an established Polish poet from an earlier generation, Antoni Słonimski, whose name he mentions in some interviews, and two renowned international poets whom he admired and to meetings with whom he dedicated two of his poems. In an interview from 1979, Narain shares his recollections of that stay and how significant the interactions were:

> I spent most of that time in Poland and in many ways this was a joyful and important [time] for me. There, I felt that people were closer and more open. At that time Nazim Hikmet arrived in Warsaw, just some time back released from jail. His personality and poems were discussed extensively. A friend of mine, Mr. Trepka, introduced me to Nazim Hikmet. There, I also had a flying meeting with Pablo Neruda, but I had a chance of spending a lot of time with Hikmet, which was a significant development for me at that age. I often talked to him through an interpreter in a coffee house, but also in the open air. But his manner of talking, enthusiasm and his optimism I found very attractive. Even today I remember his heavy, strong peasant hands and the way he was patting the hands of the person he was talking to.[38]

[36] Narain 2010 [1979]: 64: *lekhak ke lie vahā̃ ke logõ ke man mẽ viśeṣ ādar aur āśā kā bhāv thā—yah āśvast bhī kartā thā aur utsāhit bhī—lekhak honā vahā̃ mujhe pahlī bār zimmeddārī aur ākarṣaṇ donõ lagā*.

[37] A short documentary that illustrates the general spirit of joy at the festival https://www.britishpathe.com/video/5th-international-youth-festival-in-warsaw.

[38] Narain 2010 [1979]: 64–65: *polaiṇḍ mẽ sabse adhik samay rahā aur kaī manõ mẽ mere lie sukhad aur mahatvapūrṇ rahā. vahā̃ mujhe lagā ki log mujhse adhik*

Interestingly, the poem *Warsaw 1955, with Nâzim Hikmet*, from 2009, brings the same image of peasant-like hands of the Turkish poet recounted by Narain in the quoted interview:

> I remember his heavy, coarse, rustic hands,
> on my hands, my knees,
> when he made a point
> enthusiastically…[39]

Images carrying memories resound in these recollections, be it an interview or a poem, as in both Narain evokes, through powerful imagery, reminiscences of the past highlighted by intense emotions.

Hikmet, a Turkish poet of Polish ancestry (via his great-grandfather), imprisoned in Turkey for his communist activities, escaped from his homeland, was invited to settle in Moscow, and later travelled widely in the communist countries of the Soviet bloc. *Warsaw 1955, with Nâzim Hikmet* enlists the memories of the regular interactions between Hikmet and Narain during his stay in Warsaw, hence phrases referring to memories (*yād ātā hai, yād hai, yād nahī̃ hai*) intersperse the poem. These remembrances are the key to reading the verses, as they seem to have a constant forming influence on the poet. The closing lines mark the interaction between poets with an oxymoron: labelled as incomplete (*adhūrī,* in the translation rendered as 'casual'), it has a lasting, completing effect (*sampūrṇ*) in a constantly transforming world:

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ghaniṣṭh aur khule rūp se mile. unhī̃ dinõ vahā̃ nājim hikmat vārsā āe hue the kuch samay pahle hī jel se chūṭe the. unke vyaktitv kī aur kavitāõ kī bahut carcā thī. mere vahī̃ ka ek mitr śrī trepka ne nājim hikmat se merī mulakāt karāī. vahī̃ pāblo nerūdā se bhī ek uṛtī mulākāt hūī thī, lekin hikmat ke sāth kāfī samay bitāne kā maukā milā—jo mere lie us umr mẽ mane rakhtā thā. kāfī hāus mẽ, bāhar bhī, unse aksar bāt hotī rahtī thī, dubhāṣiye dvārā. lekin unkā bāt karne kā ḍhang, utsāh aur āśāvāditā mujhe bahut ākarṣit kartī thī. ab bhī yād hai unke bhārī majbūt kisānī hāth aur bāt karte samay dūsre ke hāthõ ko thapthapānā.

[39] *yād haĩ unke bhārī, khurdure, kīsānī hāth/mere ghuṭnõ par—hāthõ par-/jab ve utsāhit hokar/samjhāte the koī bāt.* English transl. by A. Narain.

Time changes, views change, places change,
But a poet's solicitudes
Do not change so much

The remembrance of a casual meet
Even today
Makes life more complete[40]

With Pablo Neruda refers to the short meeting with the well-known Chilean poet and dedicated communist, also mentioned in Narain's earlier interviews. This poem composed along the lines of reportage, relates circumstances of an unexpected, singular meeting and recreates fragments of a conversation. A sight of the old Warsaw hotel half a century after the initial visit provides an impulse for recollections, a hotel café evokes for Narain memories of himself, at that time a young Indian poet, unexpectedly spotting Neruda in the café and hesitantly approaching him with lines of his poems. The Chilean poet, apparently pleased with the introduction, generously invites Narain to share a cup of tea and a conversation, the poem foregrounding the two essential elements of this exchange.

When asked by Neruda, whom he obviously admires for his verses—and therefore is, at first, hesitant to approach him—about himself, he answers humbly: *I dabble in writing/ I am Indian...* (*paṛhtā-likhtā hū̃/bhāratīy hū̃…*). The Hindi line composed of two verbal forms—literally 'I do a bit of reading and writing'—capably communicates Narain's self-effacement in front of the revered Neruda, and also the readers. The young poet is reluctant to acknowledge his interest in writing, careful not to elevate himself onto the same platform as Neruda—the unpretentiousness is a distinctive thread of Narain's own narrative of himself. The second highlighted point

[40] *vakt badaltā—dr̥śya badalte—jagahẽ badaltī –/lekin bahut nahī̃ badaltī̃ ek kavī hone kī vajahẽ/ uskī cintāẽ,/kisī adhūrī-sī bheṇṭ kī yād/jīvan ko adhik sampūrṇ banātī hūī…* English transl. by A. Narain.

of the conversation is Narain's interest in Neruda's associations with India;[41] if they were stereotypical ("the country of fakirs and philosophers"; *fakir dārśanikõ kā deś*); it is comforting that for Neruda India is the country of Gandhi.

During the ten days of Narain's stay in Warsaw, apart from these creative and intellectual interchanges appreciated for their lasting stimulus, a romance blossoms, in all likelihood quite unforeseeably. *The Blue Eyes* is an intangible account of the affair, which offers glimpses of a relationship between a narrator-cum-character and an enigmatic woman, who is merely introduced as a foreigner, it being the only hint at the connection of this poem with his journey of 1955. The veiled tale of love in the poem is refurbished with some details in the short story *Olga in Warsaw*. Readers learn, foremost, the name of the mysterious woman—Olga; Warsaw is set as the distant location of the affair and some of its circumstances are related. The name of the protagonist, who just like in the poem narrates the tale, is consciously omitted from the text. In a dialogue passage he does introduce himself to the woman, but the space to be filled with his name is intentionally left blank (Narain 2018: 135). It is mentioned, however, that he is an Indian poet visiting Warsaw for ten days, later heading towards Russia, China and then back home. With these many details similar to events in Narain's life, the text can be assessed as an autobiographical account. However, of course, the extent of the factual and the fictitious is impossible to discern, and perhaps there is no need to do so as the poem, just like the short story, at first veil and later unveil the goings-on only to the extent Narain wanted them to be shared with readers.

[41] Neruda visited India and wrote on India. Cf. Heine (Heine 2004): "[Neruda's] 'Eastern Sojourn,' his years as Consul of Chile in Rangoon first in 1927, then in Colombo, subsequently in Batavia, Java, and finally in Singapore. It was in those years that he visited India for the first time, coming to Calcutta in 1928 to attend an All-India Congress Committee session, where he met Gandhi, Nehru and other leaders of India's freedom struggle (for him, 'the entire awakening of Asia' originated in India). (...) His poem *India, 1951* resulted from his second visit, when he came to deliver a peace message to Prime Minister Nehru, and he visited Calcutta again in 1957, at the invitation of the distinguished Bengali poet Bishnu De."

The metonymy locked in the title of the poem, the 'blue eyes' (in fact—a pair of blue eyes—pointing to a singular person), throughout the lyric signifies a woman, an anonymous woman. The narrative voice consistently refers to her by a series of metonymies, which substitute her with her body parts ("blue eyes," "quivering lips," "shivering arms," "sad lovely eyes," "happy eyes") or, once, with her feminine garment, a skirt, however it is the metonymy of 'eyes' that returns persistently in the poem.

These handpicked metonymies offer a fleeting glimpse into the sensual and intimate world of two people in love. The figures of speech referring to female body parts are paired with epithets implying sensitive reaction of the woman to her lover's presence and actions (e.g. quivering, shivering, sadness, happiness). They echo the repertoire of Indian love poetry (classical Sanskrit *kāvya* or later Hindi tradition), which Narain here, like in so many of his other poems, rewrites into a contemporary poetic idiom.

Furthermore, the allusiveness of the metonymies protects the privacy of the couple in love and thus creates anonymity, restricting entry into their intimate circle—the outside world is totally absent from the poem. The metonymies relating to female body and thus implicating the physicality of the woman acknowledge the sensuality of the nameless female character. Additionally, repeated allusions to her persistently evoked physical and sensual presence at some juncture in the past accentuates her absence at present and thus strikes a nostalgic note, but not in the tone of resentment or sadness.

In the poem of four unequal stanzas, the 'blue eyes' appear twice in an evocative opening paragraph, which muses on memories. The expressions *is(ī) tarah yād hai*, or "I evoke (just) like that" resurfaces in this and all the following stanzas, creating a lyrical and musical effect of the compositions, which at the same time reproduces the impulsiveness of memories returning in waves. The second part and the first verse of the third couplet mention the 'eyes,' which are again interchanged with the 'blue eyes' in the last verse of the third couplet and in the closing part.

Structuring the poem on two leitmotifs, i.e. the metonymies of the 'eyes' and the phrases of memories being evoked, builds the poem's

narrative, which somewhat differently addresses the ageless anxiety of those in love—the joy of union and the fear of parting. In spite of the initial verses implying that it is a poem about final separation, as the subject of love is here being remembered in absentia, the verses do not express resentment or pain, for the reminiscences of the earlier union bring comfort in separation and thus invoke positive emotions communicated in a series of similes. Consequently, the 'blue eyes', called 'foreign' (*pardeśī*) in the initial verses, are recalled in the subsequent verses in a somehow oxymoronic manner, as something familiar: "like home, my own town" (*jaise apnā ghar, apnā śahar*) or pleasant, "peals of unstoppable laughter / after an amusing story" (*abādh hā̃sī ke fauvāre / kisī hā̃sanevāli kahānī ke bād*).

The symmetry of the affair divided equally into time intervals is recounted in the second stanza, which talks of days of fervent companionship, nights of distress spent apart and mornings of hopeful expectations of the next meeting. The 'eyes' here appear in the dreams of the man in love offering him sustenance. The classical conventions of Indian love poetry are again rewritten into an individual idiom of the narrative 'I'. Conventionally, for instance, a 'blade of grass' and 'a dew drop' constitute an archetypal pair of lovers of the Indian love lore, for they meet only at night and are destined to suffer days of longing for each other; in the poem, the couple, more innocently, parts in the evenings and awaits mornings to spend days together, which perhaps reflects autobiographical experiences.

Following the seeming regularity of time in love, divided simply into periods of togetherness and separation, the third part of the poem dwells on the image of a one-time incident: the girl trying to straighten her skirt in the wind and her partner laughing at her futile attempts. These reminiscences of a fleeting moment of playful and unpretentious comfort of togetherness, lead, rather unexpectedly, to a narrative peripeteia, which opens the final stanza.

The narrator-cum-protagonist suddenly pronounces his unforeseen decision not to meet again; an exchange of sentences and gestures between the couple follows. The density of sensual metonymies present

in these lines mark the passionate affection of the woman in response to the abrupt resolution of the man. The description of her reaction builds up—tears well up in those “sad, lovely eyes” (*udās pyārī ā̃khẽ*), two “quivering lips” advance towards her lover’s lips—to reach a crescendo of an embrace of two “shivering arms”. Her actions, predictably, have a direct impact on the ‘firm decision’ of the man: it is abandoned—“and my decision became completely immersed in all of these” (*aur mere niścay kā un sab mẽ ḍub jānā*). The man returns to the daily routine of meetings and partings, which make “the blue eyes happy” again.

The final verses of this stanza contain a simile developed upon a synesthetic image, both visual and audial, i.e. an image of the blue sky covered with flocks of chirping birds is compared to the ‘blue eyes.’ The final verses, thus, structure the composition paralleling the initial part, i.e. recalling the ‘blue eyes’, and introducing the extended simile. The closing two lines read: “That’s it, it is just how I evoke fathomless enchantment of those blue eyes” (*bas, isī tarah yād hai/do nīlī ā̃khõ kā athāh vaibhav*).[42] The sophisticated phrase abreast of the comparatively simple “those blue eyes” appears an oxymoron and that too enlarged by the hyperbole; however, it seems to capture the impact the love story had—in spite of, or maybe because of, all its sensual intensity, innocence and temporality—on the narrator-cum-protagonist, whom a reader would undoubtedly tend to identify with the poet himself.

Unlike the poem, the eleven-page story provides us with a narrative introduction and a closure to the (same?) love story, as it expands the outline, giving details of what happened before and after. It extends beyond the world created in the verses and limited to two people in love. The first short paragraph reads:

> At that time over half of Warsaw was nothing more than a wilderness taken over by rubble and ruins. Dejected people, who had not

[42] I am grateful to Maria Puri, who in a conversation drew my attention to the imagery of *vaibhav* in *Ātmājayī.*

> wanted the war, as if by sheer ‘not wanting’ one could escape every single thing one didn’t want.[43]

In this manner, in the opening sentences, the narrator-cum-protagonist succinctly sketches the background, the retrospective timeline, as well as sets an overall tone of gravity, leading us, in the second paragraph, into the ruins of the ghetto, where together with a young German youth he is looking at a poster displaying Jews—men, women and children with raised hands facing the wall—and German soldiers shooting at them. Uneasiness and grief of the young German, confronted with the graphic image of cruelty, prompt the narrator into reflections on war and conflict that affect all who partake in them. He further muses on the inner conflict and varied consequences of such an engagement for the common man and for the historical figures notorious for spreading wars and terror—Genghis Khan, Napoleon and Hitler—people whose inner anguish brings about havoc. Characters from the other end of the spectrum, Buddha and Jesus, fascinate the narrator not for their philosophy but for their quest for inner peace. Expression of horror at the extent of cruelty of the Second World War and the empathy the storyteller felt for those affected ends the opening part.

The six initial paragraphs do not mention any woman protagonist, though those reading the story with its title in mind await her entry anxiously. She is announced in the next part of the short story, at first by a mere ‘she,’ during a brisk conversation between the protagonist and his friend. It is only when her name, Olga, is pronounced for the first time by the friend that the narrator retrospectively narrates their first encounter. Apparently, the previous day, the participants of a youth festival gathered on a famous street in Warsaw and the main character attempted to skip the festivities. He failed, for, in the true spirit of the merry celebrations, he was asked to dance by different women

[43] Narain 2018: 132: *us samay ādhe se zyādā vārsā keval vidhvans aur ṭūṭī imāratõ kā jangal thā. sahme hue log jo yūdh nahĩ cāhte, jaise na cāhne se har na cāhī jāne vālī cīz se chuṭkārā mil jātā hai.*

totally unconcerned with the fact that he did not know how to dance. Ultimately, a young woman saved him from this peculiar predicament pirouetting with him across the street. The protagonist and the woman engaged in a witty conversation, learned each other's names, and promised to meet the next day. The shift from the reflective and sombre atmosphere of the introductory passage to the joyful lightness of the next part is very telling, and this alternating between the tones of jubilation and gravity will continue to structure the story throughout.

Interestingly, the short story broadens the storyline, which was vaguely delineated in the poem, but some scenes and certain elements of the imagery are reused. The critical addition is the insertion of the outside world as a setting to the short story and an increase in the number of protagonists. The scenes of the blossoming affair are interrupted here, in the story, by reflections on war and destruction, for the landscape, namely Warsaw destroyed by the war, and the woman protagonist, who witnessed that havoc, induce such thoughts. The two leitmotivs of love and the world hostile to it—and gravitating towards its opposite, the violence and destruction—are skilfully interwoven in the tale.

The tale of romance—correspondingly to the mode of the poem—is conjured by recourse to different senses. The retrospective scene of the first encounter, for instance, steers smoothly towards the next morning's meeting and the visit of two young people at the cinema. The protagonist admits being overwhelmed with the corporeal presence of the woman that translates into his intense sensual reactions:

> Olga was next to me and the movie was in a foreign language, so it didn't hold my attention. The touch of her delicate, bare arms was intoxicating, and the moist fragrance of her golden hair ensconced in me.[44]

It is not only the sensuality present in the descriptions of an affair that is being evoked by the story in the manner similar to the poem, but

[44] Narain 2018: 135: *olgā pās thī aur film videśī bhāṣā mẽ, is kāraṇ citr mẽ aur bhī kam rucī le sakā. uskī narm, avastr bāhõ kā sparś mādak thā, aur uske sunehre keśõ kī ek bhīnī mahak mere andar bas gaī thī.*

also the imagery, for instance of the eyes that bring similar associations: "The sky was so clear… like Olga's truthful eyes."[45] The narrator notes the woman's reactions and mood swings. In joyful moments Olga suddenly lapses into sadness or seriousness; she seems internally bruised by the traumatic experiences corresponding with the destroyed buildings around. The protagonist is charmed by Warsaw while Olga cannot see beauty in the mutilated town, for the turmoil that caused it is still fresh in her memories: "Don't the bruises left by the ferocious claws that sunk deep into it, the wounds left by bloodthirsty teeth make it ugly?"[46] In response the man admits to being enchanted with the place because of his attraction to her. Furthermore, he responds to her qualms about the shortness of time they may spend together:

> But why should we think about the future. I want to live these days, so unexpectedly given to us, to the fullest. These ten priceless days granted us should not be taken away by what happens next. We might get bored of each other in ten days! Won't the parting be then a desired thing? Our being together may be more unbearable than being apart, the way life at times is more distressing than death.[47]

That is how readers learn that it is not only Olga who is disturbed by the trauma of the bygone; the main protagonist, too—burdened in his own way by the past, which is implied too by his earlier reflections on the inner angst—devises his own strategies to endure. Confronting the inevitability of whatever an uncontrollable future may

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[45] Narain 2018: 136: *āsmān kitnā sāf thā… olgā kī niṣkpaṭ ā̃khõ ki tarah.*

[46] Narain 2018: 136: *lekin us par gaṛe hue ye vahśī pañjõ ke niśān, khūnī dā̃tõ ke ghāv—kyā ise kurūp nahī̃ banāte?* Cf. imagery in Adam Zagajewski's poem *Poems on Poland.*

[47] Narain 2018: 137: *lekin abhī āge kī bāt kyõ socī jāe. ye din jo akasmāt mil gae haĩ unhẽ jī bharkkar jīnā cāhtā hū̃. jo hogā in amūlya das dinõ ko āj hī kyõ le le? śāyad das din mẽ ham ek dūsre se ūb hī jāẽ!... tab vidāī kyā ek vā̃chnīy ghaṭnā na hogī? hamārā sāth rahnā vidāī se bhī adhīk asahya ho jā saktā hai, vaise hī jaise jīvan kabhī-kabhī mr̥tyu se bhī adhik apriy.*

bring, he responds with a tactic of living the moment in spite of whatever happens next. In the midst of that discussion on the most fundamental things, it is now Olga's turn to change the tone, which she does by asking whether they should now spend time on loving each other or on understanding what love is (Narain 2018: 137), to which the protagonist's witty answer is that they should do both.

However, when the woman names the feeling developing between them, the protagonist grows alarmed by the possible frivolity of his approach to the affair. He suddenly realises, contrary to his earlier comments, that given circumstances—the short time they will spend together and their different cultural backgrounds—falling in love seems thoughtless and foolish. Growing protective of her and recognizing her innocence, he comprehends this affair has to be ended and that realisation prompts him to tell Olga that they must not meet again. Here, perhaps, the reason behind the sudden 'firm decision' *The Blue Eyes* mentions is unveiled. And like in the earlier composed verses, in the story, too, Olga's proximity and even more so her confident expectation of him coming to meet her again changes his resolve.

What follows, hence, is not an estrangement but growing nearness, revealed by the next scene, a walk in the rain, the description of which, composed in condensed prose of poetic intensity, chronicles the sensuality and blissfulness of being together:

> Two bundles of fervent, embodied feelings of closeness next to each other under the umbrella—walking not on the earth, but in the clouds. Loving touch of trembling fingers on each other's arms. One, single, united feeling of closeness perfumed by flowers; eyes filled with stars.[48]

A potent metaphor applied by Narain here seems untranslatable; he personifies an abstract noun 'closeness' (*nikaṭṭā*) and uses it in

[48] Narain 2018: 138: *ek chāte ke nīce do garam nikaṭṭāẽ - dhartī par nahī̃, bādalõ mẽ. bāhõ par kā̃ptī ū̃gliyõ kā sneh-sparś. ek nikaṭṭā jis mẽ phūlõ kī mahak hai, ek dr̥ṣṭī jis mẽ tare.*

plural, simultaneously applying it as a metonymy, a replacement for the couple.

Contained in the story’s wider context of the then destroyed town are other characters too. The following passage, for instance, describes a meeting of the protagonist with two of Olga’s friends, her classmates. During the casual conversation in a café, the protagonist intuitively realises that the two new acquaintances are just friends, not sweethearts, which makes him restless and at that moment he turns to Olga for reassurance, perhaps looking for guarantee of the romantic nature of their relationship. Observing her expressionless face, her insensitivity to his anguish, he suddenly experiences an intense sense of alienation. He abruptly sees himself an inept addition to the company of the other three Poles, for it is implied they share so many similarities—a common cultural background, including a common mother-tongue, and shared experiences of the past—and suddenly their friendliness seems insincere to him, and hence his sense of belonging disappears. The closeness celebrated in the previous passage is starkly contrasted with the sudden alienation of the protagonist in the following one. Interestingly, it is not caused by dramatic developments but by a suddenly ascending intuition of feeling alone though in the company of others. At that moment one of Olga’s friends promises to introduce him to some Polish writers, which makes him somehow comfortable in their company again.

In the last scene of the short story pertaining to the affair, Olga feigns being angry with the protagonist for kissing her in public. He teasingly replies that he heard such a display of affection was common in her country. To that Olga’s disposition alters abruptly, and so does a conversation that turns from light-hearted to solemn. The woman wonders aloud if the pitiable condition of her town is “a result of unbound love or unbound hatred” (*berok pyār kā natijā hai yā berok nafrat kā?* Narain 2018: 142). Her seriousness abruptly creates a distance between her and the protagonist, and for the second time during this intense period of experiencing togetherness, a feeling of loneliness overwhelms him. The scene, read along with the previous one, brings

into sharp relief the second theme (apart from love and destruction) that preoccupies the narrator-cum-protagonist, i.e. a sense of alienation, which returns in spite of the fact that the protagonist is in an ongoing relationship.

When Olga gestures towards a destroyed church commenting on its beauty before the war, the protagonist comforts her: "These things will remain alive somewhere in our inner world, in our sublime and secret feelings. Even your eyes will stay alive in me—and in those eyes, all that of ours we call today love."[49] These lines reverberate with the lines of *The Blue Eyes* and, perhaps, give readers another clue about the contentment expressed in the short story and the poem, the contentment in spite of the separation.

A short concluding two-paragraph passage provides closure to the story. It tells of the correspondence of the main protagonists, which lasted several years after the man's return to India, and of his shock when he was informed by Olga of her marriage and decision to move out of Poland. The protagonist-cum-narrator comments: "I think no story is complete in itself. It must start and end somewhere—like life."[50] His stoical approach condensed into two sentences speaks volumes of what the past has taught him.

The story ends with the coda-like final paragraph describing the protagonist's visit to Warsaw after some years. He finds the town and its inhabitants changed: "Warsaw too has changed and now you could see a completely new town, new people. In that irrepressible desire to live there was beauty and hope too."[51] Like in the poem, *The Blue Eyes*, here too the closing sentences—taken together with the opening lines of the short story—pay tribute to life and love, though in its

[49] Narain 2018: 142: *ye kahī̃ na kahī̃ hamārī andar kī duniyā mẽ zindā rahtī hai, hamārī udātt yā rahāsya bhāvnāõ mẽ. jīvit rahẽgī mujhmẽ bhī, tumhārī ā̃khẽ - un ā̃khõ mẽ hamārā yah sab kuch jise ham āj pyār kā nām de rahe haĩ.*

[50] Narain 2018: 143: *soctā hū̃ koī bhī kahānī pūrī nahī̃ hotī. kahī̃ se śurū aur kahī̃ samāpt ho jātī hai—zindagī kī tarah.*

[51] Narain 2018: 143: *vārsā bhī badal cukā thā aur ab vahā̃ ek naya śahar, nae log dikhāī de rahe the. is adamya jijīviṣā mẽ bhī ek aparājey sundartā aur āśā thī.*

unromantic manifestation, which perhaps is another reason behind a tone of general contentment that the story contains.

In Krakow Zoo (2002) weaves another tale of a real-life encounter reworked into a poem. It is an unconventional poem on love and an exceptional poem on empathy; it touches upon the sense of alienation, and both the uniqueness and the repeatability of our experiences, which Narain stretches beyond the realm of human feelings. The poem, hence, describes the narrator looking at an elephant in the zoo in Krakow. The animal is in distress, for he has lost his consort. In the introductory verses, the narrator satirically contemplates if living in a well-supplied foreign zoo was not a reason enough to be content, which leads him to poignant negation, as even such favourable circumstances do not make the sense of loneliness any more bearable. The narrator expresses his wish to know what the elephant really goes through but is left with sheer speculations. He employs a subjunctive verb form *jānū̃*, or 'I wish I knew' that I take as a clue to reading of this poem, for it expresses a humble wish of the narrator, a wish that at the same time seeks to include the consent of the animal; it is as if the narrator emphatically apologizes for interrupting the animal in mourning.

Unsurprisingly, Narain, who is known to have befriended trees,[52] looks at the elephant in the Krakow zoo as a living being afflicted by sorrow and thus rewrites a conventional fable into a contemporary meditation on love and the beyond. India has a long tradition of fables which anthropomorphize animals and make them personify human folly and wisdom. Animals populate Hindu, Buddhist and Jain mythologies. Buddha lives through different births in the forms of different animals. In Hinduism, gods take animal and semi-animal forms to remind the faithful that divinity comes in all forms and is beyond human understanding of norms, which takes us back to pre-historic

[52] Cf. *Merā ghaniṣṭ paṛosī* (*My Intimate Neighbor*), a poem dedicated to an old tree and poems collected by Apurva Narain in his English translation in a separate chapter named "Trees" (Narain 2008: 151–177). Stasik (Stasik 2014) has written an article on that deep connection of Narain and trees.

times of animal worship. The elephant-headed Ganesha is a scribe of the great Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*, and Hanuman, the monkey-god, is one of the main characters of the second one, the *Ramayana*. The elephant in particular, not only in India, but by and large in Asia, evokes a myriad of cultural associations.

Narain frames that entire historical, mythological, and religious heritage in a short unpretentious poem, which readdresses traditions and conventions both from a contemporary and individual perspective. The narrator of the poem, unable to communicate with the elephant, observes him closely and presents his observations in a series of similes based on specific personifications:

> From his wet eyes he looks
> like a poet,
> from his probing trunk, a scientist,
> from his forehead, a thinker,
> from his ears, a saint.[53]

This passage brings to mind an old Buddhist parable explaining the complexity of truth. It tells of a group of blind men touching different parts of an elephant and fighting over their contrary conclusions, as the results of their research are based on different body parts that they put their hands on. The poem, *In Krakow Zoo*, is somehow contrary to this reading; here, different shapes of elephant's body hint at potential human-like qualities of the elephant visible to the narrator. The Buddhist tale is a story of ignorance; Kunwar Narain's poem is a tale of sensitivity, kind-heartedness and empathy, hinting at animal sublimity we are perhaps incapable of understanding at present. The final verses read:

[53] Narain 2008: 213: *uskī gīlī ā̃khõ se lagtā hai/vah ek kavī hai/sū̃ḍ se lagtā ki vaigyānik hai,/māthe se lagtā hai ki vicārak hai,/kānõ se lagtā hai ki gyānī.*

but immersed in a sadness
even an elephant
looks so human.[54]

The Past in its Reminiscences and Retellings

In an early interview from 1977, Narain (Narain 2010 [1977]: 19) talks about how images, words, sounds and thoughts gradually crystallise into a poem. The autobiographical poems and the short story which relate his journeys to Poland, mainly the 1955 one, display how these images, words and sounds are creatively structured into different modes of retelling his past. Here, the autobiographical narratives seemingly simple in form are open to readers' multiple interpretations.

Remarkably, all of the compositions revisit encounters, and even more interestingly *The Blue Eyes* and *Olga in Warsaw* seem to narrate the same episode from different points of time and in distinctive modes of writing, throwing light on Narain's writings in poetry and prose. Two accounts of a single incident of unexpected love turn into two startling narratives of love contextualised variously as nostalgia towards experience of bygone love and as the transforming drive that conquers destruction.

Emotionally loaded images and impressions attending the reminiscences presented in the interviews reappear in the poems. The poem and the short story discussed above evoke similar scenes from the past but the canvass of prose writings are overall much wider than the world limited to two people in love presented in the poem. The shift from the 'tiny universe' of the couple into the world extended to the destroyed town in the short story adds a layer of reflections on the destructive forces of humankind versus its capacity to rebuild.

It is not only the autobiographical theme of these compositions but the fact that they dwell on memories and on the process of remembering that make them interesting from the perspective of reflections

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[54] *lekin ek udāsī mẽ ḍūbā/ kitnā manuṣya lagtā hai/ek hāthī bhī.*

on how people narrate their past. The poems disclose what one remembers and how one remembers it. They discuss individual experiences and evoke the universal element in them.

When in 1965 Narain discussed Shankara and Kabir and their urge to develop inner knowledge in spite of death, he recognized that it was not despair to win over death that motivated them, but rather the inner resolve to achieve in their own lives, both for themselves and for others, something greater than death, something that rises above individual happiness (Narain 2008 [1965]: 7). This thought seems to remain Narain's point of reference, bringing into sharp relief the authothanatographic impulse of his writings.

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