

BOOK REVIEWS

1

Review of D. Gnanasekaran's *A Divine Visit and The Human Touch* – A Story Collection of Human Pathos

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D. Gnanasekaran's second story collection *A Divine Visit and The Human Touch* contains fifteen well-written stories which are predominantly marked by an intimate and urgent sense of passion. It deals with the lives of people and what their real-life interactions are like. The memory of the stories refreshes the readers in a gripping narration. It is a collection of insightful human element that stands in the forefront. To him, every image that leaves an impression is the seed of a story. Inspiration could come from the simplest things in life. Every experience in life adds to your art and widens the perspective. "Each individual is going to be uniquely different" drew my attention as to how much Gnanasekaran fuels a kind of interest among the readers. It is to his credit that these stories get the gamut of emotions that affected, or appealed to his readers. It is not his readers who are judges but he himself becomes a connoisseur of human pathos in the world around him. A creative writer uses those situations in which he either experiences or observes them. In the story collection, Gnanasekaran appears both as an experienced citizen and an observer of life around him. The stories entitled 1) A Divine Visit 2) Mass Leader 3) Sorcerer Grandpa 4) All Out 5) In

Search of Mother 6) Last Dinner 7) Deadline 8) A Wormy Mind 9) Nightmare 10) Inamorata 11) The Gift 12) Bad Touch 13) Call Me dad For Once 15) Ponamma, An Altruist are perfect gems that move around facts and realities. The ordinary gets a sublime treatment thus the collection's richly textured prose ripples like shot silk with regular shafts of brilliant imagery, anecdotes and elements from the past appearing and reappearing in the form of lives experiences. The scope and grandeur of story collection is vast, serious, and socially multi-dimensional. The stories are fairly longer, pithy, compact to the point of brevity. It is what I reckon to be a masterly collection. Gnanasekaran is undoubtedly "a Walking Encyclopaedia" whose power of expression and narrative technique hold the readers in rapt attention. It is no exaggeration to put his skills in presenting those stories. Of course, as a reader, I find that the collection is a brilliant amalgamation of past and present in its truest existence that finally casts a dark shadow in a few stories and at others, an awakening of knowledge and wisdom. It is a collection of real places and real incidences as we watch in contemporary society. Real incidents are viewed through multiple lenses and common, everyday images run like a leitmotif through an excellent narrative to the finish. All the stories deal exclusively with common people and everyday situations. In the run up to the first story which is entitled *A Divine Visit*, Gnanasekaran takes the readers to somewhat a fairy tale that deals with the unexpected visit of the Monkey-God and that finally left the inmates and the belongings in a chaos and disorder. In Indian context which the writer predominantly focuses it is more of a divine visit and he still remembers how his beloved mother persuades him like," son, my dear son, For Heaven's sake, don't harm the visitor" (3). Usually, people worship animals as representing Gods. In the story, his mother pleads with him, "No, no, dear son, for goodness sake, you shouldn't say like that. It is blasphemous to say so. We shouldn't call it a monkey"(3). The appearance of monkey was seen as a manifestation of a divine visit in the incarnation of Lord Anjaneya. He recalls it as, "I respected her religious sentiments with deep admiration. She did not mind her persistence in being religiously over-zealous" (4). In continuation to the strong belief of Indians and their practices, the writer observes how his mother recounts from the past, "Normally, believe me, he won't visit homes.

He may visit the premises outside a house but he is not likely to enter into a house like royals. Today, you are abundantly blessed since he has chosen our house to leave his divine footmarks inside our house. Our house has become a sacred one after his visit” (5). Such comments are but a reflection of past into present bringing back the ancient Indian system of beliefs and rituals. His mother, as the writer recollects, had a knack of telling stories from myths and legends in her own rustic style. It is significant to note that Indians whose strong beliefs are rooted in fairy tales are back into action once again. This story is noted for chaos, disorder, abrupt interruptions, belief system, disturbed state upon the visit of monkey who is revered to be an incarnation of Lord Anjaneya. Gnansekaran exposes the hollowness of Indians since ancient times. Any belief has to be suitably justified. Indians follow the fairy tales in true spirit. In the end, Gnanasekaran delved deep into whole episode and observed that, “To me, her laughter was as mysterious as the monkey’s visit. I reflected: why is she laughing? Is she laughing to mean that I’m in complete ignorance of such legendary stories? Did she find my ignorance horrifying? (7). True to his observations, India has been in the system of strong ancient beliefs in the midst of blind superstitions for centuries. Rightly, he exposes the blind beliefs that hold people on their feet. It is altogether a story of human sentiments and emotions. In the next story, “In Search of Mother”, the writer presents the shocking revelations and betrayals in which a young girl, Meena faced it in the hands of her grandfather, Venu. The focal point of the story is to find out whether Meena’s mother is alive or not. It moves around endless questions which Venu evaded so cleverly in order that Meena should not learn the facts. Meena protested several times. “Her outburst was met with silence from him” (48). “Where is she now? (48). Venu listened to her in unbroken silence. A resolute Meena was bent on cracking the secret held in suspense for years. After a series of queries, Venu convinced Meena but she was undeterred in her efforts. All his curt replies yielded more pressing questions by Meena. Charumathi, his wife, must have leaked it to Meena. As things stand out, she asked her husband, Venu, “How long can we hide the truth from her” (49). Soon, the story took a twist and turn. Embarrassments caused much damage between two families. Mohan’s marriage with Anu and subsequent shifts in family to Delhi

and finally Meena's birth – all these moved them amidst fights and arguments and finally to bigger problems. "Silly matters swelled into tasteless arguments which ultimately approached the flashpoint. Much squabbling and pleading followed" (50). Such disconnections between the parents put Meena into the care of her grandparents. Anu and Mohan argued endlessly for some time. The altercation muddied the situation over the trivial issue. Mohan left Anu and settled in his native town for he needed emotional and moral support at that juncture. They were not on good terms as couple. Then, Anu's mother asked her to leave Meena in the care of Mohan. "So, you can take your child, deposit it in Mohan's house and come away. Just do that. Nothing more" (53). Then Meena who was one and a half years old was deposited in Mohan's house. Since then, Meena has been with her grandparents. Gnanasekaran evokes human pathos in accurate description as "There is a general feeling that mother is always coeval with unfathomable profundity of compassion, love and solicitude. Mysteriously and painfully, Anu was an exception to this general perception" (53). Mohan was remarried to Leela later. His efforts to take Meena to Bengaluru failed. Extreme desperations followed. Meena was left to the care of her grandparents. The climax gets emotionally packed up in the end when Venu took Meena to Jaipur to see her mother Anu who was working in a hospital. Thus, the long waits and tensions that Meena underwent for some years came to a happy conclusion. Venu felt greatly unburdened. Indian situations usually witness such cases of negligence and violations when children are left with their grandparents. It is at first emotions and tensions and finally separations and divorces between parents that left young kids at the hands of grandparents. It is not an isolated case but a representative story in the end which Gnanasekaran rightly exposed as a social reformer. Unnecessary fights between couple put Meena into the world of chaos and tensions. Endless waits cause mental traumas. The plight of a young girl is succinctly portrayed through the story. Similar tales have happened in India in the past. In yet another brilliant story of contemporary life, the touch of human pathos figured prominently in "Last Dinner". It revolves around a newly married couple by name Dinesh and Divya whose married life ended in a tragedy of sorts. It came like a bolt from the blue. Dinesh, a multi-national employee, working in Dubai, was

married to Divya. He came to India some three months ago. Though it was a brief separation for the young couple, it was painful for her. As it was the hundredth day of their marriage, they wanted to celebrate it. They planned it a day before. They wanted to do trekking. As usual, Divya prepared the special dishes. They were dressed up accordingly for trekking. They desperately missed all the fun as the young couple. "It is quite natural for a husband, separated for livelihood compulsions very soon after his marriage, to wallow through such emotional depression when his wife suffers as a green widow at the other end" (62). They felt like Superman and Superwoman flying high in the air. Suddenly, the part of the mountain has put on a flaming face. Soon, it was like a wildfire. The fire was alarmingly rushing towards them. In order to escape from the fire, they jumped from crag to crag. The flames of the fire were just behind them as if letting their sharp tongues lap up the couple alive. They screamed for help. Dinesh was burning along with the twigs and leaves. Divya had closely looked at him in a bid to put out the fire. They became united by the flames and Divya too was in complete union with Dinesh. Gnanasekaran described the scene as, "Light and shadows danced before their eyes beating a grotesque tattoo. Memories drifted back and forth, but they couldn't collate them into a recognizable unit" (66). It was the last dinner for them. Through this dark lane of chaos, they ran all the fun-filled moments of the short span of their married life. "Last Dinner" became eternally silent for them. Life took an unexpected turn and twist for Dinesh and Divya. The story presents that life is temporary though people may take it for granted. All that they had dreamed ended in a death-trap. They died on the spot. Nothing is permanent on earth. "Nightmare" is a story of nightmarish experiences for the author whose auto-biographical account of episode gets dominantly covered for certain chaos and unnecessary drama that finally uncovered. The settings are usually his farmhouse where he and his brother applied pesticides through the day and were taking rest. All drama unfolded when his father came to inquire their safety in the farm-house. Most of the countryside life depicts such incidents nowadays. His father found his brother absent at the site. There was a big confusion and they searched for him all around the place His prayers to Murugan and his efforts to engage a swimmer to find him in the well yielded

no results. All his family members became panicky. They had a sleepless nightmare. They moved all around cinema theatre in the hope of finding him. Finally, his brother was traced in the cattle shed. They suspected the worst to befall them. "My father rushed inside and found my elder brother standing motionless and blinking his eyes. He pulled him out and we all looked at my brother with a mixed feeling of relief and anger" (98). He just hid inside the manger just when he returned from a cinema theatre. He was afraid of calling them. The story ended on a happy note when his brother had surfaced before them. "Nightmare" left them in futile searches and his brother had hidden from them. This caused much embarrassment throughout the sleepless night. Having looked at the story, I find such instances 'very common recurrences' in Indian context. "The Gift" is a fine story of many reflections in life. Rajesh, the father, gifted a medium –size rubber dog for his daughter, Priya. It went on a few funny situations after Bubbly (Rubber Dog) was accepted as a member of the family. It is but natural that children are tempted to buy artificial toys. After many twists in the story, the gift that Priya expected from her father ended in a tragedy of sorts. Since her father was occupied in the office, he could not pick up Priya to the shopping mall. But to his surprise and shock, Rajesh could see Bubbly also running behind her. He found that something got stuck under the left front wheel. Then, he got out of the car and found that Bubbly was in a pool of blood. Its crushed head lay at the feet of Priya lying unscathed. Priya then asked for the gift in her ignorance. The rubber dog saved the life of Priya who was about to die then and there. This was really a gift of life. "Bubbly had given its life as a gift to Priya and saved her" (118). Priya was still peering at the gift lying blissfully on the car's rear seat as innocent as the little girl. Gnanasekaran concludes the story that Priya had an irresistible temptation to take the doll and fondle it. Thus, the story leaves life's little ironies at the end. Animal gifted life to Priya and it evokes human pathos in complete faith. Life is full of unexpected gifts from different sources. It leaves a message that the most loving and caring in the world get gifted. "Bad Touch" is a story of reflections about the safety of girls. It is further a story of many precautions that Kalpana, as a responsible mother, felt and experienced. It is a story of how the girls are molested, raped and killed by those ruffians. One such incident was

reported from a TV News Channel in Kashmir. “A ten-year old girl was molested to death by eight men in Kashmir” (121). This news has put Kalpana into deep contemplation about the nefarious activities going on in the country. She questioned the lawlessness in the country. As a responsible and dutiful mother, Kalpana was under mental trauma. There are no stringent laws in the country for such heinous crimes. Having undergone the intensity of molestation on TV channel, Kalpana had visualised the appearance of the girl molested in her thoughts. Horrific incidents loomed large in her mind. Insecurity of girls was troubling her disturbed mind. Conspirators and betrayers rule the world. Gnanasekaran observes that the physical scar may wear away but the mental scar will always remain. Kalpana is worried about her daughter’s safety in such situations. That reflects a mother’s anxiety about a safe world for her daughter in future. Her line of thinking, as the author rightly emphasised, had continued. All the frantic searches about the girl had failed in the end. A law-abiding author questions, “what are the laws for?” strongly reflect the state of poor governance and sentence of punishment for the crimes unchecked. This story calls for urgent implementation of Laws necessary for delivery of justice. “Bad Touch” symbolizes the atrocities and molestations on women by men on shoulders and other parts of the body in physical wounds or injuries. When there is a bad touch, there is also a good touch. An appreciation of someone is regarded as a good touch while a molestation of girls is indeed a bad touch. This was how Kalpana alerted her daughter Brinda against bad and good touch. Thus, the story is both a rumination and reflection of safety concerns as the primary focus for girls in particular against all bad touches intentionally inflicted upon in the society. “Good Chemistry” is a story of harmonious relationship between two individuals. It focuses on two people and between people and it is obvious that they are attracted to each other or like each other very much. It is a story of ambition and achievement. It is further a story of understanding between two people. The mother, Sathya had a dream. “Not all we want comes true, not all the dreams that blossomed have borne fruit” (143). The dream was to prepare her daughter, Bhavana for a dance competition conducted by a popular TV channel and win the first prize. Having a dream is good. But fulfilling that dream into realities

is always challenging. A good chemistry emerges between the mother and the daughter in the end. The show began. It was a duet song involving Bhavana with a male – partner. All the judges except the Woman judge gave away ten out of ten. The woman judge has given just nine marks that irritated Sathya and later Bhavana. The judge revealed her weaknesses in body language and poor expressions when she was dancing with her male counterpart. Expectations were running high for Sathya but performance put her in agony and frustration. What was required was a good chemistry in the end for accomplishment of a performance. When Bhavana attained puberty, all problems started from her. Ceremonies restricted her to sit back at home for a week. Later, her cautious warnings about her moving with Sriram, her next-door neighbour, brought her so many questions about her. “Sathya advises her daughter not to go along with her neighbour, Sriram anymore” (149). Thus, Bhavana is not able to understand her mother’s sudden change of attitude. She is forbidden to continue her classes too. At this Sathya feels that she is both a woman and a seasoned mother, and a combination of intuition and instinct developed over many years. She needs to watch her daughter as the world goes by her because adolescence is the watch word here. She feels a certain responsibility laid upon her. Gnanasekaran rightly titled the story as “Good Chemistry”. What is required between mother and daughter is good chemistry. A good understanding dispels doubts between them.

In conclusion, I reckon that Gnanasekaran diagnoses the society by touching the prevailing issues in elegant narration. He selects the themes according to the contemporary times and situations. The narrative technique is nicely done in terms of plot, point of view, character and style. He adopts a style that is remarkably simple and easily intelligible. His power of narration is gripping and his command of vocabulary is extraordinary. Human Pathos dominates all the stories. Contemporary realities are the hallmark of the collection. He is for sure “A Walking Encyclopaedia” through the story collection.