



The Awakening

Batayan



বাণায়ন



The Paper Boat

Compilation of serialised novels, stories, travelogues and articles



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Editor
Jill Charles



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Editors

Ranjita Chattopadhyay, IL, USA
Jill Charles, IL, USA (English Section)

Coordinator

Manas Ghosh, Kolkata, India

Networking & Communication

Biswajit Matilal, Kolkata, India

Design & Art Layout

Kajal & Subrata, Kolkata, India

Website Support

Susanta Nandi, India

Published By

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www.batayan.org

Production & Management

Anusri Banerjee

PHOTO CREDIT

Atanu Biswas, IL, USA

Front Cover

He is a scientist by profession who came to USA from Kolkata in 1980. However, more people know him as the face of Biswas Records, which he founded in 1994. In recognition of Biswas Record's contribution to Bengali music, the North American Bengali Conference (NABC) twice awarded Dr. Atanu Biswas its highest award at San Francisco Bay Area (1999) and at Detroit (2007).

He is embracing photography as his hobby and constantly aiming to develop the photography skill.

Tirthankar Banerjee
Perth, Australia

Inside Back: Light Festival
Back : Esperance, WA



His interest in photography started in student days. Much later the long nights in the dark-room were replaced by hours behind the computer and focus shifted from Black & White to Colour. He likes to show the images as they are and does not approve of computer gimmickry. He loves nature – flowers, birds, trees and all things beautiful. Tirthankar is an engineer, specializing in Renewable Energy and lives and works in Perth, Western Australia.

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Jill Charles

Frederick Douglass Never Gave Up on Voting

We wait in line to vote
Hours and hours
My friend says
"It won't make any difference
The government cheats
City, state and federal
They won't count our votes."

I think of all who gave me the vote
And never lived to cast a ballot:
Susan B. Anthony
Sojourner Truth
Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass never gave up
Teaching himself to read
Borrowed books by candlelight
Escaping slavery in Baltimore
In sailor clothes sewn by his bride
Freedwoman Anna Murray

Frederick Douglass said
"Right is of no sex
Truth is of no color"
We all have the right to freedom
And responsibility to govern.

We wait hours to vote
Some waited lifetimes.

Remember the homeless man on the church steps
Think about immigrant families hiding
Think about when the wrong man is arrested
Remember those who cannot wait in line
For the ballot and the voting booth

I cannot walk away.
"We are making a change," I say.



Jill Charles grew up in Spokane, Washington and majored in Creative Writing at Seattle University. In 2007 she moved to Chicago where she writes poetry and fiction and lives in the Albany Park neighborhood. Her career includes nonprofit, academic and legal office work. Jill is co-editor of *Batayan*, a bilingual literary magazine in Bengali and English. She performs her poetry at open mic nights at The Heartland Café and Royal Coffee. Jill is one of the Chicago Writing Alliance workshop facilitators at Bezazian Library in Uptown. Read her jazz age novel,

Marlene's Piano, available from Booklocker.com.



M. C. Rydel

The Haunted Villanelle

I've seen his ghostly face in my window
From the street below; his eyes shine heaven's light,
Proving that we all go somewhere after we die.

Drawers open and close; flowers wilt and revive;
The lights flicker; and I've never been more sure that
I've seen his ghostly face in my window.

On the street below, people always say something
About the wind, the music, the voices out of nowhere,
Proving that we all go somewhere after we die.

In the sky above, the sun's a huge red ball,
And the crickets and cicadas are silent, since
I've seen his ghostly face in my window

Is he up there, haunting my pied-a-terre,
Or just a desperate delusion invented for
Proving that we all go somewhere after we die?

I've conjured up Virgil from Limbo, Judas from Hell,
Politicians from Purgatory; and Angels from Heaven, who prove
I've seen his ghostly face in my window.

He haunts me everywhere and all the time,
Chasing me into the very lines of this poem, where:
I've seen his ghostly face in my window
Proving that we all go somewhere after we die.



Mousumi Banerjee

Still

First went the words
Dropped here and there
Like the orange leaves
On a crisp Fall afternoon.

Then names
Who was the chap
That brought newspaper
On Sunday mornings?
Name of the little village on the mountains
With white-washed churches,
One hundred and two people,
And two hundred and one sheep?
And the math teacher
Who taught limit going to infinity?

All of a sudden
Lapses in a melody,
A cherry missing from a cherry flan recipe,
Almost like a lost beat.
And blurry unfamiliar faces
Eating dinner at the same table.

I am falling into oblivion within myself
Where words fail
And silence speaks.....



Binita Gupta

Sincerely

Dear God,
I think I saw You yesterday.
In my classroom wearing a tie,
Hair speckled with bits of gray.

But dear God,
I thought I saw You last week.
Ten-armed, red-lipped, unflawed,
Black waves shrouded in mystique.

God, I thought You had told me
That "Plagues come from deception and sin" — —
But today You just said, "It's easy — —
Anything is preventable with vaccination."

When the universe was born and it first saw light,
Aum was the first sound the universe sang.
But now, that doesn't seem to be quite right —
You just now said it began with a big *bang!*

I am surrounded now by a hundred new preachers.
Forgive me, Father, for I am getting confused
Do You take the forms of these teachers
Just to keep Yourself amused?

I'm not quite sure who I'm supposed to believe,
By day, You're Jekyll and by evening, You're Hyde.
Maybe I'm stupid, young, or just naïve,
But could You please just tell me which one of You lied ?

Sincerely, Your Devotee



Susim Munshi

Yes I Am

But I am Made in Bengal
Like Made in India
Or Made in Bangladesh
Like the 100% cotton shirts
Made in that multistory
Shirt factory that came tumbling down
But I don't remember making a donation
It is the World Cup Soccer I watch
Cheer, cheer, cheer for my favorite Brazil
While a despot, a fascist comes to power
The favelas welcome a baby
Whose birth is as sure as its death
In the shifting squalor of squators
While Neymar scores a goal again
And I pay \$49 for a
Premium subscription channel
20% of India's diseases are water related
For 1 Billion people safe water is scarce
My Durga Puja contribution was \$180
For Chicken malai curry
And a overpriced Bollywood star
But I am a Made in Kolkata of Bengal
At St. Xavier's they turned away Chhatra Parishad
I showed I cared, loved, understood
The plight of the poor and oppressed
Joined in 14K walk from Dharmatala to DumDum
And donated blood at Mother Teresa's Nirmalya
I challenge you all the Made in Bengal of Chicagoland
My brothers and sisters
Say "Yes We Are"
Against bigotry, oppression and suppression
No one will leave our shores or those of Bangladesh
We will forego our festivities at Durga Puja 2019 and beyond
Buy bottles of water, save the children from cholera, stop rape
Embrace a Rohingya

"Forward to the *Essays from The Education of a Bengali Gentleman*" by Susim Munshi — The great Stoic teacher Epictetus stated we become philosophers when we examine our preconceived notions, ask questions about our emotions and even the words we use each day. The essays in this collection are an honest self-examination of Bengali sentiments, values, and beliefs as perceived by the author who while growing up in a traditional Bengali household learned to look at them from a different perspective while going to a Catholic School and College in India, then moving to America for the rest of his adult life."

Jerry Kaiser

Butterfly



Jerry Kaiser is a floral designer and artist. He is currently working as a human rights volunteer, resettling refugees in the Chicago area.

Daniel Staub Weinberg

I Heart Mir I Love Peace in Russian





Becky Laurent (Springfield, Illinois, USA)

HOW DO I FIT IN?

Even though I just sent you an email about getting some time to look at your magazine, I went ahead and opened it up. Wow! I was pleasantly surprised and impressed. What an enormous selection of input from so many people and places.

Within minutes I started to write. It wasn't a poem, it wasn't an essay and it wasn't a story. It was just my initial thoughts after looking at your magazine.

After being introduced to Jill Charles at her engagement party to my nephew, we shared that we both liked to write and that she is part of a magazine called “Batayan”. I, of course, had no idea what she was talking about and what that word even meant. Being polite, I asked her to send me the link to the magazine not knowing at all what in the world it was. I thought I might be interested in sending in some of my work.

When I opened it up, I was even more confused. As I looked through the magazines poems, writings, photos etc., it came to me that I am so uninformed about things outside of my own personal world. What could I possibly contribute to such a magazine. I have my own stories, poems, funny items I share. But how could that fit into such a magazine as this. I felt very intimidated and sad at how little I knew about the world around me.

I consider myself an everyday American with an everyday American life, an everyday American family, everyday American problems, everyday American hopes and dreams, etc. Never in my everyday American existence had I ever given a thought to anything outside of my circle of life. Of course, I have seen the hardships others have in other countries, but that was on TV and I would think momentarily, how sad, then after the commercial I went back to what I was watching and going on about my day.

How thoughtless of me to think that my life was the only thing important in this world. How rude of me to think “those people” are different from me. I have always been a loving, caring, considerate person and have never been prejudice or at least I didn't think I was. Because I didn't try to understand, help, give, or learn, I guess in my own way maybe I didn't think my time should be wasted on something I knew nothing about. How selfish of me.

I was awakened with the beauty of the photos, the sadness, and hopes of others, and the love that we all share as I read through the magazine. I am now retired, a daughter, wife, sister, mother, grandmother, cousin, aunt, and friend. But I realize that is my whole world. As wonderful as it is, this magazine has opened so much more to me. I immediately sat down and started putting my feelings into words.



After the above critique of myself, I thought, wait a minute, I have a lot to offer. I have done so many things throughout my life. I have owned several businesses, I have been successful, I have been a failure, I am extremely creative in many ways. I have raised my family with all that it entails. I was a child who later in life learned about why I felt the way I did, why I did the things I did, and why I didn't do certain things. I realized how my parents' values were put upon me with no input of my own until I grew up, just as theirs was put upon them by their parents.

I then realized I would love to share my life experiences with those that would be interested in why we are so different yet so much alike. I think it would open my eyes and maybe some of yours as well. I hope that I will be welcome in the "Batayan" world.

Becky Laurent lives in Springfield, Illinois, USA.



Lew Rosenbaum

Who Shall Inherit The Earth? – Lew Rosenbaum

<https://chilaborarts.wordpress.com/2018/09/06/who-shall-inherit-the-earth-lew-rosenbaum/>

[First of all: apologies for the reproductions here, which come from my “phone” at the exhibit and consequently have all the defects associated with that. Second, this exhibit has now left Chicago and will be opening at MoMA in New York in October, 2018; then at LACMA in Los Angeles in February, 2019. Do not miss this exhibit. Last, with gratitude for having had the opportunity to meet Frances Barrett White, and her two children Jessica and Ian, and be welcomed into her home in the mid 1980s. — LR]

“Think! Think about what you’re tryin’ to do to me.” These lyrics from the song written by Aretha Franklin’s (1968, *Aretha Now*) are chasing through my head as I mull over my response to seeing the Charles White Retrospective exhibit in the Art Institute of Chicago. *For the second time.* And I don’t go to exhibits more than once. But I did make time for this exhibit, and these Aretha-lyrics come to me because of something Danny Alexander wrote. It’s about the artist and the thought processes that galvanize the artist’s work, whether music to the ear or the visual music on paper and other media. It’s what the artist is *telling* the listener or viewer. I am not skilled in the language of visual art, so I will leave it to others to comment on the techniques, of which Charles White was a master. The force of the paintings, etchings, linocuts, drawings — everything — moved me to tears throughout the galleries. Often tears of joy at experiencing something that struck so close to home that it felt like a personal communication, an embrace by what art should be conveying.

Thinking. How do you capture brain waves on paper? The text accompanying “Awaken from the Unknown recalls White’s transformation after reading Alain Locke’s 1925 *The New Negro* anthology, and finding there “a new world of facts and ideas in diametric opposition to what was being taught in the classrooms and text-books as unquestionable truth.” Maybe you start there,



Awaken from the Unknown – Charles White (1961)

recalling what it was like, when your mother dropped you off at the public library (it was at the Chicago Cultural Center then) at 7 or 8 years old, and you reconstructed the real world from what you read there, and then walked the few blocks to the Art Institute, wandering the halls, where you said you found the work of Winslow Homer particularly influential. At least that's what Charles White did and said, and in this piece I see myself and imagine the subject of this piece on a road to discovery, perhaps after work, exhausted, and falling asleep over the piles of newspapers, just like I have done many times. Falling asleep in the process of awakening, kind of a visual pun, I suppose. She's been asleep and here is the key to awakening. Discovering the new ideas that transform. Here's a new idea that transforms: "Think! And let yourself be free!"

Much earlier in his life, Charles White contemplated what brought him to his own understanding. He painted these two pieces in 1942, "Hear This" and "This, My Brother."

Both these pieces speak to a kind of awakening, or different stages of awakening. Referring to the title of the novel by John Rood, call "This My Brother" *social consciousness*, the discovery not only that classes exist, but that the workers as a class, in this case the miners, have a class enemy. This form of learning comes directly from the struggle, the battles for a better life. It evolves out of what is often called the "spontaneous movement," though it should be clear that there is very little spontaneity even in this process. But then you have "Hear This," in which the two figures are engaged in, even fighting over, the written word. One figure, grasping a book, tries to convince the other about its point of view; the other, seems unconvinced (the text next to the paintings implies that it referred to White's own experience learning about the social struggle from communists). They (the man with the book, the communists) introduced something *new*, something that came from *outside the struggle* itself, something that reflected that *particular role that workers play in transforming society*. Changing the social order is fundamentally different from



This My Brother – Charles White (1942)



Hear This – Charles White (1942)

the practical role workers have in fighting for better wages and working conditions. Looking at these two pieces gives a kind of visual representation of the difference between the school of the strike struggle and the school of revolutionary propaganda. And, of course, the relation between the two: without the learning that comes from the practical struggle, the propaganda remains so much sectarian jargon. But in these two paintings, along with that dramatic "Awaken" piece,



comes a visual lightning bolt that 100 pages of explanation can never transmit so dramatically (or, dare I say, graphically).

* * * * *

Let's take a step backward, talk about Charles White and this "communism" thing. The text accompanying the exhibit alludes to it in a number of places aside from what is noted above. For example, at the entrance to the exhibit, the text calls him a "political leftist who championed the rights of the working class." The text accompanying his mural work reads: "White aligned himself with a group of leftist artists [in Chicago] who drew attention to inequities in American society in order to effect social change." It was much more than that. Frances Barrett White wrote a memoir of her life with Charles White (*Reaches of the Heart*, Barricade Books, 1994, o.p.). "Charlie's art teachers," she writes, "encouraged his talent and twice entered his work in statewide competitions. Both times he won, and both times when he appeared to receive the awards, they were denied to him." It was a mistake, he was told. Someone else had actually won. "By the time he was fifteen, Charlie had read . . . *The New Negro* many times. The knowledge of his culture he found there was overwhelming. . . ." He began to dislike school intensely, stopped attending, and found as an alternative the "Arts Crafts Guild, a group of black artists who met every Sunday. It changed the direction of his art." In his early meanderings in the Art Institute, he had been influenced by Winslow Homer and the Hudson River School, and this translated into paying attention to landscapes. Now, with the Arts Crafts Guild, he took his easel "into the neighborhoods and painted people. Black people. . . on the streets, on the stoops of broken-down buildings, and hanging up their laundry." Winning another statewide competition this time brought him a one-year scholarship to the Art Institute.

He completed his course work in 1938, a time when the depression still ravaged the streets of the U.S. The government found work for artists through the Works Progress Administration; numerous arts organizations brought writers and people in the theater and visual artists together to talk about their individual crafts and also how to address the issues raised by the depression. Along with the fight to survive came the attempt to grapple with the issues intellectually. Within this ferment communists brought their understanding of the drive toward World War that was seizing Europe. In the John Reed Clubs and later the American Writers Congress, authors debated how to stop the threatening war. Artists joined the Lincoln Brigade of the International Brigades to stop the fascist offensive in Spain. Artists looked to Mexico and the mural movement there and the involvement of artists in workers' struggles. The current exhibit mentions only four murals he worked on; but Fran White relates that he "joined the WPA where he painted murals in post offices, libraries, and public buildings throughout the country, never staying in one place any longer than the work required." In 1941 he married Elizabeth Catlett, a prominent Black sculptor, and in 1942 won a \$2,000 fellowship to study the role of the Negro in the development of America. The two of them spent the next two years in the American South studying and sketching subjects from Black life.

Drafted into the army in 1944, he suggested to his Sergeant that he could use his skills as a combat artist. He was therefore assigned to the Jefferson Barracks in Missouri, where "he painted the mess hall, the tables, the benches, and the chairs again and again, always using the same color of green paint." During a flood he and his fellow soldiers in the segregated battalion filled and moved sandbags, as if in a prison gang. And shortly thereafter he came down with tuberculosis, which affected him for the rest of his life.

These are some of the events that formed the context of his early life for the intellectual development that brought him, for example, to be an art director at Wo-Chi-Ca, or Workers' Children's Camp in upstate New York (where he first met Frances Barrett). Led him to form binding friendships with some of the most prominent artists of the time — Margaret Burroughs, Gordon Parks, and Rockwell Kent — and, when he settled in New York, to form an organization, the Committee for the Negro in the Arts, in the early 1950s, including Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Langston Hughes, and Oscar Hammerstein. He appealed to friends in the Thomas Jefferson School of Marxist Studies (the Communist Party workers' school) for help finding a place for an interracial couple to rent an apartment in New York. These cohorts, his colleagues, his confreres stoked that intellectual fire and helped him conclude, as the text to the exhibit proclaims, "Art is not for artists and connoisseurs alone. It should be for the people."

* * * * *

Art isn't only to illuminate horrors of the past. It's to envision, to hope for the future. So yes there is "Birmingham Totem" printed after the 1963 bombing of the Birmingham church. And there is the series of "Wanted Posters" that summon up all the demons of past enslavement and degradation post slavery. About that group of works, done in 1969 to 1971, White said: "Some of my recent work has anger. I feel that at this point I have to make an emphatic statement about how I view the expression, the condition of this world and of my people . . . I guess it's sort of finding the way, my own kind of way, of making an indictment." But there is also the ecstatic "Oh Freedom," expansive joy in the face of the subject, with the vigorous open-handed casting of seeds (in my mind, the intellectual seeds falling on fertile soil of the oppressed).



Oh Freedom – Charles White (1956)

Look also at the determination in the eyes of the woman depicted in "Ye Shall Inherit the Earth." I dare you to think that this woman will allow her child to inherit an earth like the one into which we have been born. She has her eyes on the prize and will protect not only him, but all children. Of course the title is a reference to "Sermon on the Mount," but keep in mind that in 1953, when he drew this piece, he could not marry his wife in the state of Michigan; and that he could not easily find an apartment to rent in the city of New York. To live in this land was not his birthright, and to imagine it, well, that almost smacked of treason.

In "Hope for the Future" and in "The Children" White again turns to a rendering of the child as a symbol of what is possible. Where can we go from here, he seems to be asking, how can we extricate ourselves from this dilemma in which we find ourselves? It is certainly the same question revolutionaries ask themselves today, knowing that hope for our future lies with those recently



Ye Shall Inherit the Earth – Charles White (1953)

born. And, perhaps much like Charles White, here we stand trying to figure out how can we prepare for that future with the best possible art? The way Charles White does it, as revealed in this exhibit and these pieces in particular, is by showing that the best art is also the best propaganda, the best propaganda is the best art. How do you convey, with the necessary ambiguity to express the shifting ground on which you are standing? Look at the massy workers' hands — I don't know another way of describing the strength, the weight, the solidity of those hands — gently holding the child in "Hope for the Future." Is she looking off to the side, and if so what is she seeing?

Is she presenting us with a gift, this child, this future? Are "The Children" looking through the window with confidence, anticipation, hope . . . or is it with fear? Now that *we* see it, it is *ours* to do with what we will. It is *our* future now.

* * * * *

I saw the show for the second time on the Thursday five days before the exhibit closed (Thursday nights are free at the AIC). It was much more crowded than the first time I went, and from the moment I entered I knew I was among a group of people who were there not simply to be seen at the latest big exhibit. These were folks who really engaged with the art, some who were, like me, old enough to be contemporary with some of his working years; others born long after he had passed on (he died at the young age of 61 in 1979). It was a conversation starting crowd, because of the excitement with the art and what it represented. Like when I first came into the exhibit hall and looked over the shoulders of three older people no longer looking at "The Cardplayers," but talking about what was life like in the 1940s during the war, and what did it mean to throw all the effort into the war, what did that mean for artists, and the older man, trying to remember, the word was right on the tip of his tongue, he couldn't quite find it, it had something to do with limited quantities of goods available in stores, and just then a younger man, standing next to me, interrupted to say the word, and they all said Yes! Rationing, that's it! And how do *you* know about rationing? And so the conversation continued with young and old appreciating each other and then talking about what they appreciated in the art work. And then they moved on, new friends made and



Hope For the Future – Charles White (1945)



The Children – Charles White – (1950)

exchanging views until, much later in the exhibit they shook hands, even embraced and bid each other good bye.

It was a conversation starting crowd. The secret smiles between two people as they saw the same things in the drawings. Yes this is my favorite in the whole show. I really like the “Wanted Posters”! I don’t know how he created this sense of motion with his pen and ink. And near the end, I found myself standing next to an older man, perhaps my age, who wondered why it had taken so long for a show like this to be mounted. He told the woman standing next to him, I don’t give the Art Institute credit really. They should have done it a long time ago. Of course I’m glad they did it now. You notice one thing about his work, he tells me, and that is the large hands and feet, the parts that engage in work. The emphasis on these, and his voice trails off. And then he begins to tell me, you know why there are so few oil paintings? It’s because oils are expensive, and he never had enough money to spend on oils. Well, maybe this is true. But I cannot get out of my mind Charles White’s own words, that art is not simply for the artist or the connoisseur but, most emphatically, for the people. And his work was displayed and copied and shared everywhere. Prints are a form adapted to this kind of art. Often people’s first exposure to a Charles White print was a poster on a telephone pole. “Ye Shall Inherit The Earth” was used as a poster to advertise a 1960 NAACP rally in Los Angeles.

It is disappointing that the mural — “Struggle for Liberation (Chaotic Stage of the Negro, Past and Present)” — Charles White designed for the Hall Branch of the Chicago Public Library was never installed. He began the mural in 1940, near the end of his WPA days and before he and Elizabeth Catlett went into the South to gather material for the Julius Rosenwald Fellowship. Striking out from the left panel of the mural is the insurrectionary John Brown, while more modern forms of protest form the core of the right panel. A color study for the mural showing both panels is in the show, and it gives some idea of his bold ideas. The exhibit also presents a study for the mural, “The Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America,” the result of the Rosenwald Fund fellowship, and still installed at Hampton University in Virginia. The text for the exhibit identifies fourteen figures in the mural, including his contemporaries Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, and Leadbelly. I listened in to the conversations around these murals, to the excited identification of the people in the murals, to the careful examination of the features of the black and white studies for the mural (Robeson and Denmark Vesey, for example).



Study for Struggle for Liberation
(Chaotic Stage of the Negro, Past and
Present – Charles White (1940)



Study for the Contribution of the Negro
to Democracy in America –
Charles White (1943)

Charles White grappled with the idea of how to introduce new ideas into widespread discourse all his life. Roque Dalton wrote that “Poetry, like bread, is for everyone.” Bertolt Brecht or maybe Vladimir Mayakovsky perhaps wrote, “Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it”; Both certainly could have said this: it is congruent with their writing and their philosophy. There is no doubt that Charles White, along with these other titans, saw his pen and brush as his weapon: Art is, after all, not for the artist or the connoisseur but should be for the people.



Sreya Sarkar

Lady in Red

"Aggarwal ji this is Monty. I will be there in fifteen minutes," Monty droned an apology to Mahesh over the phone for running late. After a couple of curt responses, Mahesh disconnected the call and shook his head in exasperation. His soon to be son-in-law Nitin had requested him to meet his friend Monty, an upcoming apparel designer, amidst the crazy preparations of his daughter's wedding. Mahesh's house was over flowing with relatives and his daughter's wedding festivities. So, he had agreed to meet Nitin's friend at a nearby hotel. He ordered himself a stiff whiskey at the lobby and ran his gold-ring laden fingers through his thinning hair.

Mahesh Aggarwal, the proud owner of *Reshamdor Sarees* was not used to waiting for anyone. He had built himself a successful business empire in the last two decades. His father had owned a small *saree* store in Burrabazar. He had left him, then a mere lad of twenty, to shoulder the responsibility of his failing business. Growing up with older sisters who discussed *sarees* every waking hour, Mahesh had developed a good eye for them from a tender age. When he married, his wife brought in a hefty dowry with her that helped him invest in a modest workshop to add threadwork and dyes to the *sarees*. It was not a smooth ride and he had to fight numerous battles to keep his expansion plans buoyant.

Mahesh's hawk-like eyes scanned the lobby and came to rest on an attractive looking woman. She was wearing a shiny red *saree*. Her slight slant of head, and the way she rested her face on her palm, gave her a distinguished poise. She seemed to be a proper lady, not one of those easily available, yet when their eyes met, she smiled at him for no good reason. He reminded himself that reputable men like him shouldn't smile back at unknown women, especially in hotels and forced himself to look away. His gaze travelled out of the hotel's broad windows and stilled on the hotel's rectangular swimming pool. It was raining hard against the concrete parapet, making the palm trees around the pool sway like lost souls in a wild trance. Mahesh remembered his boyhood, when he would often sneak out during rains and frolic in rainwater filled puddles. He would come back home drenched and his mother would chide him for his messy adventure. The rains always had an uplifting effect on his disposition. He finished his first drink and ordered a second one as his eyes travelled back to the lady in red. She looked young, probably in her twenties. He felt conscious about his own age and appearance. If only he was more distinguished looking, a bit taller, a tad broader. He sat up and straightened his shirt collar. In his younger days, he was a ladies' man but now with grown-up daughters, he was more cautious about his trysts.

Mahesh's cell chimed. "Daddy ji I am sorry Monty is late. He just called me a minute ago. There is a nasty traffic jam on the highway and it will take him another half hour to reach," said Nitin in an anxious voice.

"My whole evening is spoilt because of this friend of yours. I have so many things to do before your wedding and now..."

"I am sorry. I will understand if you choose to leave." Nitin sounded dreadfully apologetic.



Mahesh liked Nitin. He appreciated Nitin's sense of dedication towards his work for he had not allowed his upcoming wedding to consume his entire attention and slight his business acumen. Mahesh sensed that Monty was important to Nitin, for Nitin had just signed him up for his enterprise. He could not let his son-in-law down by being uncooperative. "I will wait some more. You better tell Monty that I am doing this just for you."

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The woman talked into her cell phone for a while, appearing rather restless. As she disconnected she walked to the lobby bar and ordered herself a drink. She sat down on the couch next to Mahesh's with a glass in her hand. It was filled with an amber colored liquid. She turned to face him and smiled tentatively. "It doesn't look like the rain is going to stop anytime soon." It took Mahesh a few seconds to realize that she was really talking to him. He blinked his eyes consciously. "Are you waiting for someone?"

"Yes, a friend of mine. He is trapped in a big traffic jam on the by-pass."

"The person I am waiting for might be trapped in the same traffic. You could talk to me until your friend arrives." *What am I getting myself into?* Mahesh shuddered inwardly at his sudden audacity.

"I don't want to disturb you," she said.

"You are not disturbing me at all. I...am Mahesh. May I know your name please?"

"My name is Reema." She sighed and continued, "I am not going to get a taxi back home easily tonight. If my friend does not show up it's going to be difficult reaching home."

"Don't worry, I can help you." The offer to help slipped out of him before he could check himself.

"Why will you help me? You don't even know me." She gave him a surprised stare.

"That can change. We can get to know one another." He had a hint of smile in his eyes that he couldn't resist. Her face went blank for a while but a moment later her eyes narrowed as she appraised Mahesh and he felt an absurd rush of adrenaline. They sat sipping their drinks measuring their thoughts and wordlessly, like strangers do. "Have we met before?" he asked. She did look familiar. She did not answer. Another brief silence followed, and Mahesh started to wonder if he had overstepped. Then she cleared her throat and said softly, "Can we go the rooftop café? It's much quieter there." Mahesh was thrilled at the unexpected directness. His heart galloped. "I have to meet someone. Can you wait for me?"

Reema's eyes sparkled as she thought for a moment. Then she finished her drink and stood up. "Sure. Do you like living on the edge?"

Mahesh was amazed at how the conversation was turning out. "Why not?"

"In that case, I have a little game planned for you. I hope you won't mind playing along." She walked away with a lilt in her steps. She looked elegant yet tempting, respectable yet bold, a strange mix of soft and hard. The alcohol was starting to buzz in Mahesh. He got up to wash his face in the washroom. He had just decided to meet a stranger at the rooftop café. This was beyond bizarre. He felt like he was stepping into a fast shifting time warp and losing his calm composed



older self to the younger reckless one. Monty called again and this time Mahesh spoke calmly, amused at the absurdity of the situation. "Just call me when you reach, and this time you might end up waiting for me."

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Reema flashed a radiant smile when she saw Mahesh walking up to her at the Rooftop Café.

"Tell me, we have met before, haven't we?"

"Perhaps we have," she said in a low voice.

"You sound so mysterious. What do you really want from me?"

Reema narrowed her eyes. "Exactly what you want from me."

Mahesh felt a quick flow of blood to his face. He looked away to scan the almost empty café. His eyes hurt from the low lighting. His head was growing a dull throb.

"Come on, let's start the game I was telling you about. You tell me a secret about yourself and I will tell you one of mine. One by one we shed our layers," said Reema slowly, caressing each word with her full lips.

Mahesh craved the company of beautiful women. It was an addiction that he had guarded over the years, but it had a tendency of showing up surreptitiously, sneaking up on him unaware at the oddest moments. The only way he could get over the strong pangs was by indulging them once in a while.

"Well, I can share some secrets if you promise that you will not be offended," Mahesh said with open leer in his eyes.

"I am not that easily offended."

"Okay then. I love women, especially if they are as attractive as you."

Reema gave him a steely look. "I love drinking," she said.

"That's not much of a secret, is it?" chuckled Mahesh.

"I have another name that my father gave me but I don't use that always," said Reema.

"Hmmm...my father had asked me never to drink but I didn't listen to him," said Mahesh.

"I like dancing in the rain," said Reema.

"I have an empty flat in Kolkata that my family doesn't know about," said Mahesh.

"I love taking long relaxing bubble-baths," said Reema.

"I like going for long drives on nights like this," said Mahesh with a grin.

"I love expensive perfumes, it's my big weakness."

"I love expensive watches, my big weakness."

"We both have expensive weaknesses, don't we?" said Reema.



"Weaknesses are always expensive," said Mahesh his smile widening.

"I like older men," said Reema, her eyes burning into Mahesh's.

"I like risk-takers," said Mahesh.

"I like people who are direct, who can state what they want without flinching," said Reema.

"Same here," said Mahesh. It was heady flirting with someone like her, someone half his age.

But where is this going? he wondered, growing restless after sometime. Mahesh wanted more. Much more. He was sinking deeper and deeper into Reema's beautiful kohl-rimmed eyes and felt flattered by her attention. He found her brash, unnerving, but also exciting.

"I have a special talent," said Reema dreamily.

"What is that?" asked Mahesh swooning under her attention.

"I can read faces," said Reema.

"Really! Tell me what you see here."

"You run a very successful business."

"That is not very difficult to guess," Mahesh said teasingly.

"No, it is not," admitted Reema. "You are in the *saree* business, right?"

"That is correct."

"You worked hard to reach where you are." Mahesh let out a satisfied breath.

"You had to do a lot of things to get what you wanted. Some good. Some bad," said Reema.

"Don't we all have to sometimes do things we are not proud of?" said Mahesh, intrigued.

"Not the kind of things you have done," said Reema.

Mahesh felt uncomfortable about the way she said it. "You know what, I think you are taking this game a bit too seriously. Let's just relax and enjoy each other's company, okay?" Mahesh said.

She drawled unhurriedly, "Mahesh *ji*, I admire men who admit what they are capable of. That is also another secret I have just let you into. Let me tell you what I see. The great Mahesh Aggarwal, owner of a big *saree* empire. You have inspired a lot of young entrepreneurs. You grew your business quickly but ruthlessly, leaving a lot of people hurt."

Mahesh knew that he should stop Reema from talking further but he seemed bewitched at how she was looking at him.

"You had brought a group of skilled *Rabari* women from Rajasthan, to train your workers. You overworked them so much that two of the women fell ill during their stay and you refused to pay them their due wages. Your manager in those days was disturbed by this and requested you to reconsider how you treat your workers but you chose to... ignore him."

"The very next year you transported a group of *Chikankari* craftswomen from Lucknow and got even bolder with them. You demanded sexual favors just so that they got their full pays."



Beads of sweat lined Mahesh's face. His throat felt unusually scratchy. "Who are you?" he asked in a gravelly voice.

Reema continued without answering his question. "That is not the end of your heinous deeds. You knew that the chemicals used in your workshop emitted fumes that was a health hazard. Workers developed a bad cough and your manager asked you to look into the matter, but you did not do anything until one of them died."

Mahesh could feel hot blood whooshing in his ears. His manager Alok's face came to his dreams often, even after so many years. After the death of the worker at his workshop Alok wanted to resign.

Mahesh used to drink himself silly back in those days. He had got drunk and felt unreasonably furious with Alok. "You are a nobody. Don't you threaten me!"

"I am not threatening you Mahesh ji. I am just saying that your ways are very different from mine. So, it is better that I quit," Alok had said and resigned formally.

Mahesh had felt threatened for Alok knew too many of his dark secrets. His upright personality made Mahesh uncomfortable. He spent an entire night worrying about what Alok might tell others. A few light slaps and blows were all that he had asked his men to deliver just so that Alok would not open his mouth against Mahesh, but the goons had gone overboard. Alok had died just after a day in the hospital. Mahesh remembered visiting his family to offer help. Alok's wife was young. Suddenly he remembered her unique face and a shot of fear ran through his body. He stumbled out to the terrace. It had stopped raining but the air was still wet from the rain. *How is that possible? That was such a long time ago.*

Mahesh asked again in a quivering voice, "Who are you?"

"I am Alok's wife."

"But...but..." stammered Mahesh wide eyed. "I had heard that his wife had died a year or so after him..."

Reema's eyes had a queer shine in them. "You are right."

She set free a low menacing laugh. "That is my last secret."

His breathing began turning erratic and he felt a numbness spread through his arm. His words slurred. "I didn't want Alok to die, believe me..."

The wet wind whipped her hair wildly around her face. "But you did kill him." The wind started howling in his ears. Her piercing gaze squeezed Mahesh's breath out of his lungs. "I am going to... finish you." He tried to reach for her neck. "I am already gone." She took a step away from him. "But now it's your turn." She held out her slim hands that had looked so attractive a while ago. Now they seemed to grow towards him like a serpent, lethal and unforgiving.

"Come with me. It's time for you to leave as well." That was the last thing he heard before the whooshing sound took over his hearing and he lost consciousness.

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Monty watched his friend nervously. "What you did was dangerous Brishti!" Mahesh had



suffered a severe heart attack and was ordered bed rest for a month. Monty was afraid that he would harm Brishti if he found out about her. But Brishti did not care. The nightmares that had chased her for years, had finally stopped.

She was fifteen when her father, Alok, died because of Mahesh's callousness. Her mother died of a broken heart a year later. Bristi's grandparents had made her promise never to go near Mahesh but Brishti knew in her heart that she would not be able to move forward in her life until she avenged the untimely death of her parents. As she grew up she was the spitting image of her mother, but had none of her mother's softness. The pent-up anger had corroded her insides and made her hard. Fortunately, she made a few good friends in college who introduced her to theatre acting. Her theatre troupe became her close family and saved her from her bitter self. Brishti met Monty there. They acted in several productions together and became good friends. She opened up to his caring, empathetic temperament and told him about her painful past.

Monty transformed into a successful designer in a few years-time and bumped into Nitin, his old school-friend who wanted to commission him for his line of apparel. Monty learnt from Nitin that he was getting married to Mahesh's daughter. When Brishti found out about it, a plot crystallized in her mind. It took her a while to convince Monty to help her. He had been skeptical about luring Mahesh into a meeting through Nitin. "I will be hurting Nitin indirectly through this."

"No one will ever figure out that you could have any connection with my father," Brishti had convinced him. "You said Nitin is a good man. He will take care of that horrible man's family if there arises a need." Brishti had used her uncanny resemblance to her mother to teach Mahesh Aggarwal, a much-deserved lesson.

"What if Mahesh Aggarwal finds out about you once he recovers?" Monty asked, his eyebrows raised in concern. A crooked smile curled around Brishti's lips. "Don't worry, Mahesh ji will never have the courage to look for the *lady in red*, not even in his dreams now!"





Film Reviews by Ranajoy Ganguly

Gems from past and present

Ramdhanu (Bengali)

Director : Shiboprosad Mukherjee and Nandita Roy.

Cast : Shiboprosad, Rachana Banerjee, Kharaj Mukherjee, Gargi Roychowdhury

I have always admired the creations of this duo director – Shiboprosad and Nandita, right from the days of “*Ichhe*” and “*Prakton*”. *Ramdhanu* delves deep into the psyche of the Bengalis that goes to any extreme to see their wards in an English medium school. The whole focus and mantra of the entire family gravitates around a single theme, how to teach English to the 6 year old son that deserves an education much better than the current schooling. Rituparna comes as a Godsend when her business of grooming parents to face interviews from schools where the wards are supposed to compete for a seat.

Climactic moment is when the mother realizes that it is the son’s well-being and his happiness that really supersedes all forms of education. This realization comes just after they understand the loneliness and helplessness of an elderly couple in their apartment complex, whose son is a big shot in NASA, but hardly has time to talk to his forlorn parents in India. The couple almost start picturing their future in this forlorn couple. The son finally cracks an interview, but would he really join the celebrity English medium school? A nice watch and like any other Shiboprosad-Nandini film, comes with a very direct, crisp message.

Stars : 4 out of 5

The little girl who lives down the lane (English)

Director : Nicolas Gessner

Cast : Jodie Foster, Martin Sheen

A very old movie starring Jodie Foster as an early teenage girl of 14. Well, she was actually a 14 year old girl in 1976 when this film was shot. She is mysteriously living alone in a large mansion at the end of the street. Some local people, including the police get suspicious. On interrogating her, they come to know about her father being out of town. But is that the truth? What is it that she tried to hide. With a perfect poker face, with brilliantly and meticulously planned steps and measured dialogs she is almost invincible in front of seasoned interrogators and policemen. A real mind game that she keeps on playing till the end. But again, what is she hiding? Well, she has lots to hide at a tender age. Towards the end, you will empathize with the little girl, who albeit a heavy heart puts up such a strong face and carries on with her life unfettered. A superb movie that will keep you nail biting for the entire span. Jodie Foster’s brilliance was evident from that tender age and no wonder she went ahead to win many more laurels after earning her stripes in this film.

Stars : 5 out of 5.



***By the sea* (English)**

Director : Angelina Jolie Pitt

Cast : Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie

Brad Pitt and Jolie give a riveting performance. This 2015 movie is an excellent portrayal of a marriage that has turned cold after 14 years. To spice up their marriage this rather odd couple start spying into the privacies of their next door neighbor in a hotel and even start enjoying the intimate moments of the couple. The deep and dark recesses of the wife's mind is explored, when a sense of jealousy takes the better of her. She starts seducing the husband of the neighbor only to be caught by her husband. The husband confronts her and helps her vent out all the negative feelings in a moment of mental catharsis.

An excellent movie.

Stars : 3.5 out of 5

Warning : Please don't watch with kids.

Perfume (English & French)

Director : Tom Tykwer

Cast : Ben Whishaw, Dustin Hoffman, Alan Rickman

Jean-Baptiste Grenouille was born in eighteenth century France with a superhuman olfactory sense.

He was born in a fish market in a French village and was raised as an orphan. When the owner of a local perfume shop identifies his unique skill to discern different fragrances with infallible accuracy he employs him. Jean-Baptiste gets the training of preserving fragrances as his salary. Obsessed with the desire to capture and store fragrances, Jean-Baptiste starts his mission of capturing fragrances from bodies of women. He stores them successfully but at the cost of a lot of lives. Very soon, the murders that he had committed in his obsession to create makes him a most wanted criminal. He is arrested just after he succeeds in creating his "dream fragrance" that can extract the most amorous and carnal feelings from humans. Minutes before his execution, he lets loose a good amount of that fragrance and sets the entire crowd including the government authorities into a mass orgy. He walks out of his trial unscathed. However, the ending is a bit sad, after he returns to his place of birth. In short this is a master piece with a unique story line.

Stars : 4 out of 5

I can Speak (Korean with sub-titles in English)

Director – Kim Hyun Suk

Actors – Na Moon-hee, Lee Je-hoon.

Goblin Granny is a rebel in her community, and virtually a terror to the local municipal office with the myriad valid complaints and loopholes that she brings to the visibility of the officers. The officers' bureaucracy irks her and she makes no bones in creating scenes and insulting the officers



if required. However, very suspiciously she eyes on a young new joiner who speaks excellent English. She hounds and coaxes him on a desperate bid to learn English. But what is the genesis of this desperation. Goblin Granny has a very tormented past when she was subjugated in Japanese camps, which were nothing but chambers of torture and regular rapes. These camps used to operate in Korea under the garb of “comfort women’s” camps. The film has spots of melodrama when the protagonist and the young officer share moments of sentiments. Granny’s journey to USA and to Washington DC was packed in the film sequence rather hastily and could have been better elaborated since that was the central motive of the movie. Overall this is a pretty well made movie and deserves the viewers’ attention till the very end.

Stars – 4 out of 5

Hichki (Hindi)

Director : Siddharth Malhotra

Cast : Rani Mukherjee, Supriya Pilgaonkar

After a hiatus of quite a few years, Rani comes back with an excellent performance in this partial adaptation of “Front of the Class” from Hollywood. There is this branded school for the elites that have a section in it which is filled with pupils from a nearby slum, as a result of some land deal. The kids of the slums are apparently delinquents or ruffians who bring alcohol and cigarettes to school, rough up the so called “rich” kids. Rani is in desperate need of a job to prove herself. She has a very rare condition (Tourette’s syndrome) which makes it impossible for her to talk without involuntary sounds and syllables that her brain can’t control. She faces ridicule from the delinquent class that is assigned to her. They make her life miserable because they want to get rid of her. However, not to be daunted by the pranks and arrogance of the slum kids, she goes above and beyond to instill interest in science in the kids. The kids start understanding that this teacher is no ordinary teacher and she is here for a mission, a mission to improve their lives and to prove that it is the “teaching” that can make a difference and not the students. Her unconventional methods face a lot of criticism and threat from higher management. But what happens in the end is spectacular. A must watch movie.

Stars : 4 out of 5

Get Out (English)

Director : Jordan Peele

Cast : Daniel Kaluuya, Allison Williams

A one of a kind movie. Simply brilliant with a concept that has perhaps never been ventured hitherto. There is this quaint little town where everyone is very polished and suave on the outside but there is something going on. A college girl takes her boyfriend to visit her parents over the weekend. The girl’s family is extremely courteous and well-mannered with the inter-racial relationship of their daughter. However, there are some shocking and unnatural behaviors of certain people in the town that makes the boy suspicious. On further delving, he senses that maybe he is part of a larger plan. In a gesture of warm welcome to the girl and her beau, the entire



town comes for a dinner. There is an auction that is covertly carried out, in sign languages with no words spoken. What are they auctioning for? A particular man gets enraged when someone clicks a photograph of his. What do the old folks in the town want to bid for? What secret are they guarding? Please watch this exceptional and horror cum sci-fi under the wrap of a run of the mill family movie. A shocking saga of slavery of the mind, when the body is left free.

Stars : 4.5 out of 5

Fences (English)

This one is an adaptation of the 1985 Broadway play named "Fences"

Director : Denzel Washington.

Cast : Denzel Washington, Viola Davis, Stephen Henderson.

This film is set in the era just after the second world war, when America has started to build industries and people of color still used to do menial jobs. Denzel and his wife make a decent lower middle class living and raise kids. Denzel is a black and white person, who has slogged it hard in a job of a trash disposal person from the corporation, and makes an honest living and lives within his means. He does not pay anything extra for luxuries to his younger son, when he wants to take basketball classes in school to pursue his passion. Denzel was also a good sportsman once upon a time but has severed all ties with the game, due to the discrimination towards black that hurt him in past. The cinema is more like a play with excellent dialog deliveries, mirth, anger, redemption, everything carefully and artistically presented. The climax was when Denzel confesses to Rose that he has had an illicit affair with another woman and that the woman is bearing his child, Rose is heartbroken. But the magnanimity that she shows to this helpless little child, when her mother dies while giving birth to her, just makes the character of this woman much larger than life. It makes her an epitome of acceptance and love which is above everything. The character of Denzel's brother adds color to the story line. Denzel's performance as a seasoned thespian deserves kudos. But Viola Davis has done an equally great job and also out-performed Denzel in many scenes.

Stars : 4.5 out of 5

Shubh Mangal Savdhaan (Hindi)

Director : R.S.Prasanna

Cast : Ayushman Khurrana, Bhumi Pednekar, Brijendra Kala, Seema Pahwa

This couple has proven their mettle in "Dum Laga ke Haisa" before. Ayushman and Bhumi do an excellent job of portraying a not much experimented topic hitherto in Indian movies. It is about the disfunction of a male anatomy (common known as ED), and the understandable jitters that it causes to a boy who is about to marry a girl that he is in love with. The girl is extremely accommodating even to the extent of forcing herself to go out of her normal genteel self and to seduce the boy and failing miserably there. She embodies a small town middle class girl that is trying all out to secure her marriage at any cost. She knows that she is not extremely good looking and that her family is also under a great deal of pressure to get her married off. She is even ready to reconcile to the fact that her husband may not ever have his "act" together. Amid the tumultuous



roller coaster journey of friendship, love, quarrels, let downs, making up, it is worth noting that they never give up on hope. It is this hope that eventually wins and after a lot of patience, they consummate their marriage. A beautiful love story with a unique twist. There are silent moments over a cup of tea and biscuit that just show the subtlety of the director. Never for once is there a vulgar moment. Supporting actors like seasoned stage actors Brijendra Kala and Seema Pahwa give a stellar performance. All in all, it is a delight to watch this movie.

Stars : 4 out of 5

Shaadi Me Zaroor Aana (Hindi)

Director : Ratnaa Sinha

Cast : Rajkummar Rao, Kriti Kharbanda, Govind Namdev

Rajkummar Rao is one of those new age actors that have made his entry into Hindi films with a solid foundation of stage acting. His other movies like City Lights, Bareilly ki Barfi and Trapped have really solidified his stature as a seasoned thespian who can single handedly pull through an entire movie, unfettered.

Set in the middle class milieu of Kanpur, this film ventures into the issues of dowry and a young lady's aspirations to realize her career ambitions at the cusp of the marriage preparations. The bride abandons her nuptial ceremony to pursue her ambitions. In a rarest twist of events, few years down the line, the abandoned groom to be turns out to be her boss who goes to any extreme to make her life miserable. The climax is something I won't divulge. You can surely watch it with your family. This is a crisp movie with nice dialogs. Rajkumar does an excellent job in transforming from an affable guy wearing his heart on his sleeves to a ruthless matter of fact bureaucrat, exacting his revenge.

Stars : 4 out of 5

Macher Jhol (Bengali)

Director : Pratim D. Gupta

Cast : Ritwick Chakraborty, Paoli Dam, Mamata Shankar

A very coming of age movie featuring a celebrity chef who comes back to Kolkata to attend to his ailing mother. Amid broken relationships with the protagonist and his wife and father, this film is about love. To attend to his mother's wish to repeat the same dish that he had cooked for her when he was a teenager, Dev goes to any extent to create the same magic. However, after repeated failures, he finds the true reason why his mother was discarding his dishes. The film has quite a few shots in Paris, where Dev is the head chef in a star rated restaurant. "Macher Jhol" portrays Paoli, the wife of Dev whom he estranged years ago to struggle for his dream. If anything, it glorifies the character of a wife who has sustained rejection due to no fault of hers, reared a son, with no information (read "burden") to the father. It elevates her to a level so strong and magnanimous, that she even provides advices to Dev after all these years when solicited.

Overall an excellent movie that has a taste of a true European movie, akin to De Sica or Fellini's gendres.

Spirit of Fire



