

From Monk to Mahatma: Godmen in Literature

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The 14th century English poet Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, a story book mostly in verse, is still read with relish. For one, it gives a representative picture of the contemporary society, warts and all, in witty and humorous couplets. It is well known that the medieval Church reeked of corruption and the Pope of Rome sold pardons to sinners assuring them of a place in heaven to boot. His agents would travel all over Christian Europe to sell pardons (letters addressed to God to pardon so-and-so since the fellow had given so much amount to Church!) and Chaucer describes one such friar's ways: "He was an easy man in penance-giving/ Where he could hope to make a decent living." His satirical justification of the friar's ways is interesting: "Therefore instead of weeping and of prayer/One should give silver for a poor Friar's care/He kept his tippet stuffed with pins for curls/And pocket-knives, to give to pretty girls." What is more, this poor friar was

But strong enough to butt a bruiser down
He knew the taverns well in every town
And every innkeeper and barmaid too
Better than lepers, beggars and that crew.

(Chaucer 9)

In our own country too, the priests and godmen have been the butt of ridicule. In early Indian English literature, we have the inimitable G.V. Desani whose novel *All About H. Hatterr* is considered a classic for its off-beat, extravagant witty prose which is admitted to be the precursor of Salman Rushdie's style of writing. The protagonist, Hindustanwala Hatterr, a Eurasian of mixed stock, has quite a few unsavoury experiences after he lands in India. He has come in search of spiritual enlightenment and meets no less than seven gurus known for their specialization in spiritual field, but each meeting turns into an adventure that disillusioned him further.

On one occasion, Hatterr, as reporter of a newspaper, goes to interview the 'Sage of Wilderness' to get guidance about meditative practice (*tapasya*) for which the sage is renowned, and indeed appears to be so what with his bony body even as his disciple is his opposite in physique. When Hatterr requests the Sage to utter some words of wisdom, the Guru demands offering (*dakshina*) in advance!

"Canst thou, my nephew, spare me thy trousers, thy jacket, thy shirt, thy shoes, thy cuff-links, thy watch, every accessory thou hast on thy person? Speak if thou wilt."

Before I could say for what old (sic) how, the disciple approached me spontaneously, with a dirty towel in his hand, bearing the orange textile imprint of India's G.I.P. Railway, fully expecting of me a posthaste denuding!" (Desani 52).

Hatterr has, however, been hypnotized into surrendering all that he has, in return for that sole towel! It is later revealed that the two in the ashram were brothers dealing in old clothes back in Lucknow and this was their ingenious way to collect stock! In fact, all the saints portrayed in the novel happen to be charlatans only.

Similarly, Rohinton Mistry, in his *A Fine Balance* portrays a certain Bal Baba. The word 'Bal' is actually *baal* in Hindi which means the hair. This Baba accepts the hair because he collects these and sells these, having been a hair cutter himself before donning the attire of a Baba! How a person can achieve the status of a sadhu or saint in India is beautifully described by R.K. Narayan in his novel *The Guide*, wherein we find the protagonist Raju, a convict, mistaken for a saint because of his saffron clothes and he too accepts the newly devolved holy status and starts delivering sermons until one day when he confesses his true credentials. In Khushwant Singh's novel *Burial at the*

Sea, we find a female guru riding a tiger – in naked state – evoking lust in the protagonist. Singh was known for his frankness about sex in real life and his erotic representations.

In these times, with the proliferation of self-styled godmen like Asa Ram, Ram Rahim, Virendra Dikshit, Ram Pal et al, some of whom have been convicted and put behind bars while others are facing trials for heinous crimes like rape, murder, subversion, etc., the fake spiritual industry is in for a strong bashing from literary writers.

It should not be taken to mean that there are no serious godmen portrayed in Indian English fiction. Arun Joshi's Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel *The Last Labyrinth* portrays Som Bhaskar, a successful businessman with a happy family, who is a rationalist and a misanthrope. He has ruthlessly conducted business, but is later fed up with material success, suffers from existential pangs and in his search to satisfy his inner cry "I want, I want," ends up meeting a female divine named Gargi. It is Gargi who guides him that Anuradha, whom he desires, would be his route to salvation and Anuradha does try to transform Som, though unsuccessfully. There is also mention of a story narrated by Anuradha which is related to a Sufi Pir who would drink heavily believing that when he is drunk, "Allah comes to me, stares at me but says nothing. So I drink the more. One day He will speak to me" (Joshi 54)! Such are the mysteries of the spiritual world!

As we proceed in our search, we come across Anita Desai, one of the leading novelists of India. In her novel *Journey to Ithaca*, we find an Italian named Matteo and his German wife Sophie taking lessons in spirituality from an Indian female guru referred to as the "Mother" only. Matteo tries meditation the way he is taught by the Mother. His relentless pursuit of self-ordained goal pays off as is evident in the following passage:

"Then, as he continued to gaze at it, he saw that what was perfectly balanced there in a cleft in the tree was not a stone at all but a circle, and it contained within it another circle, and another, that there was no beginning and no end to them; they were infinite; there were infinity. [...] and to his dazzled eyes they revolved within each other and yet remained perfectly static, maintaining a total

balance and harmony that could be divine" (Desai 68).

But despite having lived long enough in the ashram, Sophie is not convinced. She goes after the past of the Mother and is able to locate her antecedents as a dancer who later renounced the world. The story shows the power of faith, for where Matteo succeeds, Sophie fails to have the glimpse of divinity.

Works Cited

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Potter's Wheel

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*Like the fresh budding primroses
 Innocent, sensitive, unripe promises
 Me too, had all those ingredients
 Of becoming a great success-
 Nature had indeed been benevolent
 Blessed me, bestowed me
 With everything a man could have dreamt...
 But a victim of my fatuous flaw
 I always hovered between two poles-
 My potential for a stunning success
 And my passion for being a great man...
 Social engineering, deft at taming man flat
 Impacted my impressionable intellect...
 My wisdom, deflected, decided on the zing
 I should dump my soul, do everything
 to please others, serve others, the in-thing...
 The potter's wheel, a miracle it kneads
 Destiny of millions, it craftily steals...
 Instrument of happiness, my new self
 of everyone, hollow shell, except myself...
 Where are they? Social fabricators!
 You can't make them happy
 all the time, ever and ever-
 no. I didn't learn the eternal truth, never...
 My passion, intense and sincere
 torn between 'me' and 'them'
 lost in the maze, nowhere to nowhere,
 always hanging in the grand cable-car
 standing still in the air without power...*

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