

# The queen's necklace

Breathless in Bombay

By Murzban F. Shroff

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It isn't always a good thing to load a debut volume of short stories with an overly explanatory Introduction. A few lines stand out: "I confess Bombay has never failed to fascinate me." Well, yes. Please don't bother writing about something that bores you stupid. "The story of Bombay is the story of struggle and sacrifice." Fair enough. But which city's story isn't exactly the same? Authorial intent is spelt out, as is a writerly plan of action. "I walked the streets; I met people." This urban perambulation is happening, perhaps, while the rest of the lit-brigade are at home, drinking beer and playing skittles. The quest for authenticity needn't be so baldly admitted to. You've written the stories, Mr. Shroff. Let them speak for themselves. And let the reader decide.

I was almost put off the book by the overly prolix Introduction. Luckily, the feeling passed, which is a good thing, because the stories themselves are worth a read. As with most collections, particularly debut ones, the quality is patchy. Some are great ('The queen guards her own', 'This house of mine', 'Meter down', 'Jamal Haddi's revenge'); some are flawed yet memorable ('Babu barah takka', 'Traffic'); while some just piss you off ('Haraami', 'Love in the time of AIDS', 'The great divide').

It is perhaps a mark of how engaging Shroff's prose can be that the good stories work for the same reasons. His Bombay is meticulously observed (he did a lot of walking, obviously, and met a lot of people). The inward-oriented world of the Parsi baug in 'A different bheil' is beautifully captured in the spare prose he utilises here. It is a world he is comfortable describing, the characters are people that he has met or knows, and his characters are driven by motivations and memories that seem integral to themselves. There is no commentary and no pious moralising, unless it comes from the characters themselves (it is set in a baug). What we feel is empathy and a deep need to see what happens next. The author succeeds in making himself invisible and we are left with the story itself, to see whether it sinks or swims. That authorial invisibility is hard to pull off and even harder to sustain, and in his better stories, Shroff maintains it with effortless ease.

But don't go attributing this felicity purely to provenance. The Parsi/Irani milieu that Shroff is sprung from isn't the only one he so easily describes. Jamal Haddi's evening in the neighbourhood boozier is meticulously charted, as is his interior journey away from his wife, and the external one he makes to the prostitutes' cages in Kamatipura. That Haddi redeems himself to some degree doesn't render the ending trite; we care enough about him to believe in his change of heart.

In the same way, the longish 'The queen guards her own' could easily have been an exercise in schmalz. All the accoutrements are there: a horse-drawn buggy (a Victoria) on Marine Drive (hence the 'queen', from the queen's necklace), a horse that's an ex-champion racer, a buggy-driver who loves his horse, bless him, a prostitute tricked into the trade and her child, whom the driver also loves. All the constituents of the pantheon of Bombay's 'underworld' find their places as well. There is a villainous teacher of beggars, a pander who specialises in

paedophilic sheikhs (love them), a hard-driving brothel madam and an almost unbelievably tele-friendly neighbourhood don, who is the perpetrator of an acid attack. There's even a good Irani restaurant keeper with a heroically capable wife. So far, so '70s Bachchan in waistcoat and bellbottoms courtesy Kachins, with supporting cast draped by Maganlal Dresswala. But the story acquires its own slow weight as the story makes its measured way towards what we feel, inevitably, to be the only

feeling of empathy that lasts beyond the end of the book. The pat hard ending of 'Meter down' doesn't detract from the power of the narrative. Even as we acknowledge that the taxi driver protagonist is only getting what's coming to him, we feel for him as he discovers the helplessness of the relentlessly screwed. It is a condition that attacks us all: how we negotiate it is where our future lies.

But then, if the relentlessly screwed are everywhere and to be thus shafted

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resolution. Perhaps our parents felt like this about Manmohan Desai's oeuvre as well. It doesn't matter, finally, because Shroff manages to elevate this slice of life in Bombay beyond the merely technicolour. He pulls off the biggest trick there is, which is to make these people real.

Sure, Shroff is pulling the strings, but he isn't onstage. The beautifully observed co-mingling of middle- and working-class Bombay in 'This house of mine' is written in the first person, but that only serves to make it more immediate. The problem and its final resolution are the stuff of urban life, and again, that recognition sparks a

is a pre-condition of, at the very least, our own Indian urban moment, why make such a fuss about it? There must be an answer, obviously. Otherwise, why write a collection of stories? It is in this searching for an answer that the smooth progress of this book is halted by a series of flat tyres. Engagement is one thing, pious posturing quite another. Perhaps it is the glut of 'big' Bombay books the past decade has seen. Perhaps it's merely first book disease, but this volume develops a bad case of preachiness at the most inopportune moments. Shroff points to a divide, one that he explicitly sets up in 'The great divide', between privileged

Bombay, and the space and indeed country everyone else inhabits. This is so obviously true, it doesn't need restating. It's a story so often told, anything 'new' would by necessity be in micro-measures of subtlety, because the rhetorical flourishes are all done. The small detail, the nuance of human contact, the glimpse of quiet strength and humanity in a place you'd least expect to see it: these should and will inform the next 'big' book about Bombay. Indeed, these moments suffuse whole stories in this collection with their gentle glow. But, when it comes to the time for Shroff the author to make his appearance, what we get is the axe.

'Haraami' tells a tale of a man who inadvertently gets a woman pregnant. The fallout of that is well mapped and entirely believable. What grates is the commentary, including a final set-piece at the marriage of the woman (post-hymenoplasty, of course) where the narrator (again in first person) gasses on about who the real *haraami* is in the whole situation.

In the unintentionally hilarious 'Love in the time of AIDS', an earnest and eager young man falls for a socially committed young doctor, who is helping raise education levels about HIV. It is 1986, and she dresses up as 'Condom Man' and haunts colleges, handing out rubbers whilst singing bluesy ditties and playing the guitar (told you there was an axe). Creditable and credible enough, you'd think, down to her getting hauled off by the cops because she's corrupting the young. These things all happened and continue to happen. There are even Parsi doctors in Bombay who miss the "discipline" of the British like the rest of us would miss a kidney, and who deliver medieval injections known as "*dhamaklados*", guaranteed to slay any malingering virus. It's a great setup, a Bombay anyone would recognise. But why, then, does our hero jump off the doctor's bed before having his buttocks thus jabbed, and why, when the doctor asks him why he's being such a coward, does he have to say, "I'd be one if I stayed?" He's off to save his rubber-clad love, you see, heroically making his way down towards Grant Road, past far-sighted hawkers already selling mobile phones, even though it's still the mid-'80s. And I won't even begin with 'The great divide'.

Shroff has an incredible subject: Bombay herself. Painted, garish, beautiful: she's every inch a queen. This collection is a worthy attempt at capturing all that's vulgar and regal about her. The parts that work are brilliant. The parts that don't, however, suffer from a malaise that the author needs to correct. He isn't delivering a series of lectures here; he's muscling in on a conversation that some pretty heavy hitters have been engaged in for quite a while now. Anita Desai, Kiran Nagarkar, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Chandra, Suketu Mehta—the list goes on and on, and that's just writers. In prose. In English. If you want to be heard in that din, then you need to have something new to say. Perhaps a more careful editing process would help. Or, perhaps, merely an admission that Bombay as literary subject needs no or very little ornamentation. As Shroff so capably demonstrates, the stories are already there. Let them and the city speak forth.