



INDIVIDUAL AND IDENTITY IN JAYANTH KAIKINI'S 'NO PRESENTS PLEASE'

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Abstract

Jayanth Kaikini's short story collection 'No Presents Please' won the prestigious DSC prize for South Asian Literature in 2019. The collection has sixteen short stories written in Kannada and was translated into English by Tejaswini Niranjana. This research article explores the theme of 'Individual and Identity' in two stories- the title story of 'No Presents Please' and another story titled 'City without Mirrors'.

All the stories in this collection of Jayanth Kaikini are set in Mumbai, in its middle class milieu, and the city becomes an innately indispensable character. In the story 'No Presents Please', Asavari Lokhande and Popat grow up unaware of their identities but it is this or perhaps the lack of it which disturbs Popat and eventually their imminent marriage. In 'City Without Mirrors' the protagonist Satyajit Datta has no one to call his own but considers himself married to Mumbai. Like most of Mumbaikars, Satyajit came to this city seeking employment, changed many jobs, houses and street food sellers; till the need for a 'room of one's own' made him rent a tiny area in the terrace of a three storied flat. Having crossed the ideal Indian marriageable age, Satyajit, in his forties still stayed single, enduring jokes about his single status. But an unexpected proposal stirs his sober life and though he doesn't meet the girl, her father and readers continue to hope.

The quest for identity is every being's birthright and next to food, clothing and shelter; identity is the fourth element an individual strives and seeks all through his life. Mumbai as a city has always welcomed diverse immigrants who have made it their home. The city doesn't strictly segregate people and there is little time to do so as in the race to survive- days, nights and years roll by and in the process strangers become friends and family appears strangely alienated.

Keywords- Individual, Identity, City, Relationships.

Introduction- Jayanth Kaikini had made a name for himself in the Kannada literary world as an avid poet, writer and lyricist much before his short story collection 'No Presents Please' won \$25,000 as the DSC prize for South Asian Literature; the first time a short story in translation was chosen and the prize money shared equally with its translator. The collection had also won the Atta Galatta Bangalore Literary Fest Prize in 2017.

Having made Mumbai his home for twenty years from 1976 and continuing to spend few months there, Jayanth Kaikini traces the metro as not just a busy Bollywood junction but a shelter to survive when life's other opportunities run dry. Mumbai also provides solace for strangers as they seek personal and professional identities in its expanding terrain and trains that try to connect distant people and places.

Research Analysis- Asavari Lokhande and Popat are two such nameless entities who have grown up amidst foster homes and strangers. Her name is not Asavari Lokhande but a music



teacher by that name drew the adoration of this little girl who was jocularly nicknamed 'Lokhandebai's Asavari'. The teacher left but the girl got stuck with her name and luckily the nameless orphan grew up with a name and identity she could proudly proclaim as her own.

Popat unfortunately was stuck with a Marathi nickname for a parrot and this endearing pet name didn't bother him initially. Everyone has a name and he too had one, there was no one to make birth certificates or even enquire. Popat happily survived his childhood and youth unaware of his parental identity, his pet name which eventually became his name didn't lead him to life seeking quests, but marriage did.

Eager to please Asavari who would soon become his bride and homemaker, Popat takes an album of sample invitations to choose one for their wedding. Mumbai's half built Ghatkopar fly over, its dust and curious onlookers don't bother either as they are completely absorbed in selecting an invitation with an attractive design and reasonable price. An onlooker suggest the young couple seek partially hidden hideouts for their privacy but 'the soon to be married couple' shun such obscene gestures.

Popat is in a hurry to return the borrowed invitation album back to the printer while Asavari flips through the sticky album's plastic cover, scrutinizes its gaudy and wrongly worded wedding invites. They finally choose a light coloured card with an image of two birds symbolically bonded. As it invariable happens in Mumbai, a stranger who is now their confidante, convinces them to add the customary tagline, 'No Presents Please'.

Neither Popat nor Asavari have any parental names to invite on their behalf nor family or friends to burden them with gifts but 'No Presents Please' adds a personalized touch to their otherwise sober card and they agree. While they are checking on their names, it hits Popat that Asavari has both a name and surname worthy of mention while he has neither. This triggers a discord in their otherwise stable relationship and all the joy of their wedding preparation is lost.

She fails to understand Popat's sudden crazy desire to have an identifiable name at par with 'Asavari Lokhande'. The man she had known was not the Popat who suddenly stood alienated due to lack of a creditable name. His bizarre laughter and quest for identity terrifies Asavari. Can they now go back to being their previous selves and spend their future together? Jayanth Kaikini allows the reader to contemplate how the story would proceed.

In the story 'City without Mirrors' Satyajit Datta is a typical Mumbaikar with a small job and room/house of his own. In his twenty years stay at Mumbai, he had frequently changed jobs, houses, street food vendors without sticking to anything in particular. There are no references to past relationships either, but the presence of the Telugu boy aimlessly kicking Pepsi cans and enquiring for buses going to Cudappah stirs the universal quest for one's identity. Satyajit empathizes with the dirty street boy near Johnson Park who deftly kicks pepsi cans and continuously enquires bus drivers if they are going to Cudappah. The boy is cared by local sex workers and the bus drivers mock if his father hails from Cudappah.



The lack of wife, children and family didn't bother him much except when people with abundant concern or curiosity question and he would invariably reply, "I am married to this city. Where's the space for another relationship?"

Even those who were initially bothered seem to have left the stubborn single man alone until one morning, Shalini Sen's father heard about him from a far off friend, climbed three floors and left his daughter's horoscope and other details. Satyajit was in a great hurry to go to work and there was no decent place to make the old man comfortable in his one room flat. Yet the proposal made him feel wanted and desirable, like getting gallantry award without going to battle. Unaware of Shalini's previous marital status Satyajit dreams of this girl who may eventually stay with him in this tiny room.

Satyajit feels sorry for her father, Sanjeev Sen, the retired railway employee who climbs three floors, brings homemade chutney powder and insists to pay for his lime juice at Satkar Hotel outside Church gate Station. Sanjeev Sen comes all the way from Borivli, tempts the bachelor with food packets and even on their disastrous meeting at a wayside hotel insists that he pay for his glass of lime juice. He assures of showing his daughter's testified medical certificate to prove her virginity after she walked out on the third day of her marriage fifteen years back. The reason cited is Shalini's incompatibility with her husband and in-laws.

Satyajit is initially shocked about his future wife's married past but gradually recovers to call her father for an informal meet. The next day he goes to the salon for a clean shave and dreams of a 'wife' as he looks at mirrors surrounding him.

But Sanjeev Sen meets him alone, as Shalini had disappeared in anger. Presently untraceable, he assures of bringing her. And again Jayant Kaikini allows the reader to contemplate whether Satyajit will accommodate someone in his heart and room or just be a wanderer and 'mouth marriage is not for me' dialogues?

Conclusion-Jayant Kaikini's characters are the bourgeois middle class Mumbaikars who typically lack grandiose aspirations in their personal and professional spaces. The characters in the selected short stories, 'City Without Mirrors' and 'No Presents Please'-Asavari Lokhande, Popat, Satyajit Datta, Shalini and Sanjeev Sen even the supporting strangers who form a formidable social setup own small jobs, rooms and dreams. But they are invariably caught in their large quest for identity.

In the title story, 'No Presents Please', Popat is traumatized when his bride-to-be Asavari Lokhande owns a impactful name and surname unlike him. Though both are nameless orphans, it is her adopted 'name' and the 'identity' it creates which unmask the affable Popat, revealing his inner self in quest of a similar status.

In the other story, 'City Without Mirrors', Mumbai seems to abound with mirrors everywhere, not just in the hotel Satyajit orders lime juice for Shalini's father but the city endears strangers in a way that one sees a reflection of oneself in them. No wonder the lonely Satyajit considers himself married to the city. Even as Sanjeev Sen left his daughter's horoscope as one 'leaves



his laundry', Satyajit is already dreaming of Shalini- applying *vicco* turmeric or nail polish at her friend's house, dancing 'garba' at Navratri, immersing Ganesha's idol and joining the chorus of 'Morya', returning to her 'chawl' in a swaying truck, leaving home in the middle of a meal, slowly acquiring the posture and silence of her mother and becoming like a book in the corner of the lower shelf which no one reaches out.

In his solitude, Satyajit is already living with Shalini, the girl whom he has not met and who refuses to meet him. Will these individuals meet sometime or will their search remain a mere quest similar to the dedication of the story 'City Without Mirrors'?

To all those orphaned and undelivered letters lying in post offices, addresses unknown, unable to return.

References

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