

A Class Apart

A refreshing change in a literature that often tends to reflect the narrow, English-speaking world of its writers and many of its readers

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In my last review, of Ali Sethi's *The Wishmaker*, I bemoaned the outpouring of semi-autobiographical novels, where the personal and the political merge in the story of the protagonist - the individual's struggle reflects the larger issues that confront that nation. The heroes of such novels often bear a striking (and often rather unfortunate) resemblance to the author himself. In South Asian literature, much of this involves depicting, in some measure, the alienation and cultural disconnect experienced by those who migrate abroad, or who return to their homeland after a lengthy absence. While one such novel may be interesting and necessary, a succession of these ruins the reader's palate. It's for this monotony that I was glad when asked to review a novel which is very unique in this regard. Chandrahas Choudhury's debut novel, *Arzee the Dwarf*, seemed to me to be remarkably different from anything else that has appeared in recent years in South Asian English fiction.

The protagonist of Choudhury's work, Arzee, is a dwarf, employed as a projectionist in Bombay's Noor Cinema. He is lonely and lives in a dream; alienated on account of his size and his imagination from the rest of the world. Instead of the present, he is engaged with fantasies of his future - anticipating becoming head projectionist of the cinema, dreaming of marriage to a girl who's not too pretty, "else her gaze will stray!" In his spare time, he talks to the framed, faded portraits of film-

stars that adorn the walls of the Noor, he engages in conversations with Dashrath Tiwari, a taxi-driver, and Deepak, a gangster. But Arzee's dreams fall short - instead of promotion, his cinema is slated to be shut down. Arzee is on the verge of losing his job, and his dreams begin to crumble - he embarks on a journey of rediscovery as he wanders through Bombay - reliving his past and encountering strange

Arzee The Dwarf

by Chandrahas Choudhury

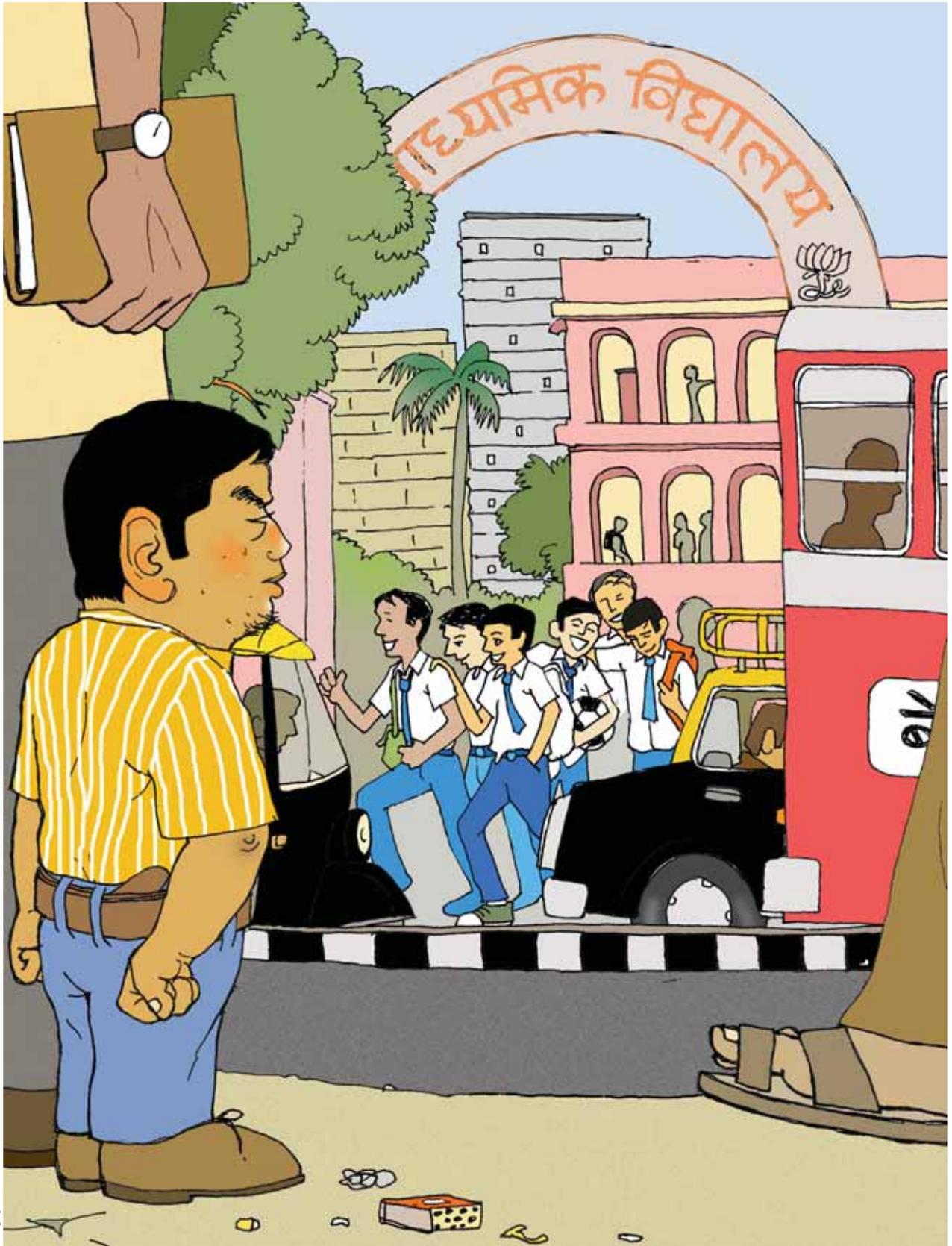
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new truths about himself.

Arzee is a welcome change in a literature that has, for the most part, been susceptible to reflecting the narrow, English-speaking world of its writers and many of its readers. Although Indian writing in English is prolific, it has largely been restricted to a certain socio-economic class. Writers have a propensity to hail from the same English speaking, cultured, middle class milieu. They tend to attend the same schools, colleges and, in most cases, go abroad for a foreign degree. Amit Chaudhari, in the introduction to the *Picador Book of Modern Indian Writing*, phrased this

phenomenon perfectly, in the form of a question - "Can it be true that Indian writing, that endlessly rich, complex and problematic entity, is to be represented by a handful of writers who write in English, who live in England or America and whom one might have met at a party?" Amit Chaudhari was arguing for a definition of Indian writing that extends beyond what is produced in English and acknowledges vernacular literature. But as far as Indian writing in English is concerned, I think he's not far off the mark in suggesting that writers belong to an insular circle. As a result, certain themes, perspectives and concerns are omnipresent in Indian writing in English. Similar characters can be met with in many books, in a central or minor role, and have spawned genres of their own - the beleaguered bureaucrat/ policeman, the frustrated housewife, the narrow horizons of the girl on the brink of marriage, the worlds of the immigrant and the diasporas. These books have also reflected the lives of a large section of their readership in India - all of these characters have emerged from our neighbourhoods and surroundings. These are familiar characters. An uncle or father might be a bureaucrat. A mother or sister is a frustrated housewife, who, in years past once was a hopeful girl on the brink of marriage. Many have children - foreign educated and living abroad - or have themselves for some portion of our lives been part of the diaspora. The narratives that deal with history can often be similar -



detailing the breakup of a joint family, a loss of wealth and influence, followed by the slow, inevitable decline into the sordid middle-class life.

This is in no way a unique or necessarily negative phenomenon. American literature, for example, is over-run by an epidemic of books that are either novels about novelists or novels about the disappointing love lives of academics with literary inclinations, as Joseph Heller points out in his *Portrait of the Artist, as an Old Man* (which, remarkably enough, is a novel about a novelist and his partly imaginary sex life).

There's no real harm in exploring topics that have been explored before in literature, even if it's been done to the point of cliché - but the stock topics and characters of Indian novels in English have begun to breed wariness and fatigue in readers. One can't help feeling, as one encounters the latest reincarnation of diasporic tale, with a protagonist who feels alienated and stranded between cultures, that one has read this story before. The symbolic characters of the bureaucrat, the frustrated house wife and the immigrant - are no longer relevant today, as they fail to reflect the conflicts central to the lives of the younger generation. Once, such types and the values they embodied were the fulcrum of our communities, without which our society could not function. But the policemen and home-bound mothers of yesterday have bred, and are now giving way to, the financial analysts, divorcees, and BPO workers of today.

Our society is in a state of flux, and as it becomes increasingly mobile and fluid, literature is responding to these changes by portraying the students of IITs and IIMs and call centre employees as the new heroes of today - as in Chetan Bhagat's overwhelmingly successful books.

Arzee the Dwarf is perhaps the most unlikely and intriguing of this new breed of heroes. Choudhury has to be congratulated for having the

courage and the vision to portray sympathetically, without exoticising or varnishing, the kind of character who is so distant from Choudhury's own class and background. It's interesting to note that many of those who will read this literary tale of a dwarf will belong to an English-speaking upper middle class - far removed from a character like Arzee. And, in that light, Choudhury's decision to make his characters speak grammatically correct, often poetic, English is an interesting one. Unlike other authors, like Rushdie and Chandra - who have delighted in using the 'exotic' polyglot lingua franca of city streets in their works - Choudhury has resisted this urge. In a recent interview, he explains his reasoning: "If Arzee was to be linguistically authentic, then we would have a situation where Arzee is shown speaking Hindi at home, Deepak [would speak in] Marathi, and Phiroz [would speak in] Gujarati. This would madden even the most committed proponent of authenticity... What is important is not so much what language the characters are speaking as whether their speech seems persuasive, striking, true to character."

Whatever his reasoning, it seems that his decision to stick to a uniform English - and English that is not so different from the kind we read and write - brings us closer to Choudhury's characters. They become easier to identify with - in short they become like *us*. This is noteworthy because, to me, it's another indication of increasing social mobility in India. In times past, classes, castes and communities were depicted differently - in TV soap operas, in literature, in films - reflecting the prevalence of a classist-elitist mindset. Marathi playwright Vijay Tendulkar's play *Kanyadaan*, portrayed the real conflict at the heart of the liberal middle class - the clash between age-old caste-based prejudice and modern egalitarian values, between tradition and education. In *Kanyadaan* - prejudices, history and

tradition continue to work in concert to mould characters and mindsets within class and caste contexts - and the play points out the difficulty of empathy across class/caste lines. Differences can't be transcended - no matter how much an individual might want to. In *Arzee the Dwarf*, whatever the reader's background, he or she *will* identify and empathise with the main character. Moreover, the novel implies that differences between Hindu and Muslim, Parsee and Christian are superficial and can be transcended - ties, relationships, and affections can exist and flourish across boundaries.

Arzee the Dwarf isn't an angry novel; it's a subtle, intricate work. Choudhury presents, beautifully, Arzee's point of view - infusing in the narrative the sense of how Arzee's smallness shapes his perspective of the world, alienates him from society, and also oppresses him. Arzee's smallness is a burden, and makes him bitter. Arzee, in Choudhury's words, "takes offence easily, even when none is meant." Choudhury captures, perfectly, the irony of how Arzee's insecurity on account of his size, makes him self-centered to such a degree that he believes that truly accidental, unfortunate events are purposefully contrived to keep him down. It's paradoxical - because his very smallness makes him attribute to himself a larger importance.

Choudhury, a Cambridge-educated writer and critic, (his book reviews appear in *Mint Lounge*) demonstrates a knowledge and deft use of literary devices and technique in his critical pieces (<http://middlestage.blogspot.com>) and in his fiction. His language is polished, poetic and erudite - "A light mist, like that seen when sugar is poured into jars, had appeared while they were drinking tea in the Café Momin. The sky was sown thickly with clouds, massy as cauliflower heads, and Arzee saw that the wind was taking them in the same direction

as him. Under the watch of stony-faced buildings, trees were rustling and sighing; on the steps beneath shutters and awnings, dogs had their snouts tucked into their tails..."

Reading the book, I was reminded of the oft-used quote used to describe Jane Austen's works, taken from a letter to relative - "The little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush as produces little effect after much labour." A great deal of labour and skill has gone into creating a refined piece like *Arzee the Dwarf* - though at times, it feels a little too polished, a little too smooth. Like Austen's novels, there are very few references to politics and events contemporaneous to the novel's time. One character, Deepak, a gangster, refers briefly to the Hindu-Muslim issues and the conflict in Kashmir, but for the most part, current events rarely seep into the novel. Jane Austen succeeds, despite the absence of external references, in creating a 'real world' because she still depicts the social stresses that arise from such events - her books feature innumerable regiments and officers, as the England she lived in was engaged in the Napoleonic wars, and she skilfully depicts the tensions that result from the return of gazetted, moneyed, heroic soldiers on a society governed by rigid class distinctions.

Larger social conflicts and tensions are vaguely present in the background of Choudhury's narrative, but remain undeveloped. Can one imagine an apolitical Mumbaikar - or for that matter, an apolitical Indian? Politics permeates all dimensions of life in India - it's hard to escape. As a result the world Choudhury has so carefully constructed seems a little unreal and abstract. Moreover, Choudhury has obviously chosen to endow his main character with a mixed background - Arzee has a Hindu father and Muslim mother, and is by birth (in a strange plot-twist) a Christian. I felt that, in designing Arzee this way, Choudhury was trying to make some statement or reveal some elusive social truth - but

which failed to be realised in his book.

My main bone to pick with Choudhury's book stems from this. His novel is tantalising - it seems like a glimpse something deeper, a revelation, is to be offered. But ultimately, the ending is hinted at, but not shown; a revelation fails to materialise - leaving this reader feeling a little cheated. Choudhury is a subtle writer, and perhaps the epiphany is there, hidden in the text - but in a manner that is too understated for most readers. Arzee does undergo a personal crisis. But there's no real confrontation or conflict - it's impossible to have one in such narrative, since it is governed almost entirely by Arzee's perspective and wouldn't be able accommodate a different, conflicting viewpoint.

His depictions of women are also problematic. A theme in his novel is the blurring of reality and the imagined, and the difficulties that result. Arzee is in love with Monique - who at times appears real, but at other times seems like an imagined-fantasy woman. She is beautiful, elegant and (best of all), she rarely speaks - isn't that every man's dream? Besides 'fantasy woman', the other women adhere strictly to categories - the overpowering 'Mother', the 'Whore' and the perfect 'Wife' (Deepak the Gangster's spouse). All the women are submissive and, whether they be his mother or the whore, the fulfilment of his desires is their priority. Even the beautiful Monique waits for Arzee to act and make choices, and is happy to follow his lead.

No book is perfect, and this is Choudhury's maiden effort. One gets the sense that Choudhury, in this novel, is trying out his hand and I suspect this 'small', yet skilful novel will be followed by something even more accomplished and grander in scale. *Arzee the Dwarf*, I hope, is the harbinger of change, in terms of literary Indian writing in English encountering a greater variety of characters and stories in the

future. In earlier times, English was the voice of a small section, and a limited range of themes, settings and characters was only natural.

But India is changing. English has been seen, for a long time now, as the means for a better life and greater opportunity. Social theorist Ashis Nandy estimates that this population - migrating in search of economic opportunity or fleeing hardship and violence - might be as much as 60 million. In such circumstances, cultural and familial ties weaken, and English is increasingly the unifying language. The decline of vernacular languages is an oft-heard lament. It is a source of fear to some, and positive change for others. For many years English and vernacular languages have warred - and have come to symbolise different life-styles, cultures and values. Many see the possibility for an 'Indian' identity that supersedes regional loyalties and identities, that bridges the great divide between urban and rural - and this no doubt, has some connection to a universal lingua franca that can be used in all of India - whether it be English or Hindi.

Yet, vernacular literature is invaluable for many reasons. One - it presents the voice of a different class, of minorities and individuals who are often marginalised. It also has a tradition that spans centuries - preserving and evolving storytelling styles, descended from the unique styles of our own epics, myths and the fairytales. One can only hope that in the growing use of English - these concerns, themes and styles do not disappear. A few writers, like Salman Rushdie in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* have used story-telling styles and devices that originate in ancient Indian literary traditions - such blends, I hope, will bring a new richness to Indian writing. In *Arzee the Dwarf*, I see the possibility for a larger scope for Indian writing in English to present the voice of the underdog, the marginalised and the unique. □