"The world happened in slow motion; the shuttlecock rose and fell in slow motion," (124) notes the author of this short novel titled *A Strange and Sublime Address*. The story in this miniature novel also moves slowly while it presents vignette of a Bengali household. The narrative does not have much of action, so the protagonist or chief character is missing in it. What stand out are Chaudhari's evocative language and offbeat imagery.

The story focusses on a Rabi's home in Calcutta which is visited by his sister and her son Sandeep, who reside in Bombay. As the point of view is of children, Rabi is referred to as Chhotomama and his wife as Chhotomami. Other characters in the novel are Chhordimoni, Rabi's mother and his nephews — Abhi and Babla. Apart from them, there is the maid Saraswati who attends on the family members.

There are, in all, two such visits by Sandeep's mother which are recounted in this short novel of around 150 pages. The narrative gives details of common day-to-day experiences, except for a heart attack suffered by Chhotomama towards the end of the narrative. Apart from these, the common experiences narrated are the running of Chhotomama's old car, maid servant's sickness, family's visit to market, Chhotomam's bath-songs, etc.
The phrase 'strange and sublime address' in the title refers to the address that the child Abhi writes in his book: Abhijit Das,
17 Vivekananda Road, Calcutta (South),
West Bengal,
India,
Asia,
Earth,
The Solar System,
The Universe.
Such an address is commonly written by children. The world-view by children is reflected in the phrases, such as a “tired giraffe” (8) for the bathroom tap, and “pythons of cloth” (9) for the saris being washed.

The writer keeps the reader glued to the book through a witty narrative which has an ironic undertone. The imagery is the only and the most powerful tool in his arsenal of which ample use is made. The description of the tuition hour during which the Bengali teacher teaches Abhi his accented English is reminiscent of the ‘blackout’ hour during war:

“It was a pleasure to hear his natural eloquence in Bengali after his brave guerrilla invasion into the rocky terrain of English; silence descended as he drank his tea, no noise but that of passionate, noisy slips, and there was a temporary respite from the savage bombardment of those foreign words on this helpless, sleepy room. There was a lull, and an ‘all-clear’ atmosphere prevailed” (121).

Chaudhari has portrayed effectively some aspects of the Indian family system which bring out its uniqueness vis-à-vis Western set-up. Most of the novels written these days, and among them the ones written by NRI writers stand out, are meant for the Western readership; therefore, this focus is comprehensible.

Chaudhari comes out as a powerful imagist. His metaphors are fresh and vigorous, and what is more, these tickle the reader at times. The scene in which Chhotomama’s old car is pushed by the people to make it move is such a one:

The idlers were quite unexpectedly altered into purposeful, energetic men, as if someone had turned a key in their backs. They took position, like a small battalion — two by the window, two at the back and another reserve, who would do the indispensable work of shouting from the rear. At Chhotomama’s words, the team strained forward, and the recalcitrant car, after some stolid silent thought, decided to concede a few feet into the road” (38).

The humorous description hits a high when Chaudhari writes that this roadside drama even made babies in their mother’s laps, utter their first word! Thus, when the grown-ups snapped the chillies to prepare food, these made a “sound terse as a satirical reto” (10). Chhotomama spent five minutes “persuading his feet to enter the shoes, or the shoes to swallow his feet” (21). Children have their hair combed beneath “the dervishing fan” (33). Indeed, the humor in the novel makes it an interesting read. The Sikh taxi drivers’ Bengali smells of “onions and chapatis” (53)!

Young Babla, horrified at an insect entering his ear starts crying and the “cry turned into the high-pitched wail of the tragedian trying his best to move his audience” (96-7)!

When Chhotomama falls ill and is to be taken to hospital:

“The children floated like satellites in the distance, afraid to collide with the painful orbit of adult lives, and yet always being pulled toward it against their will” (129). The rubber tubes attached to the ECG apparatus “looked like coiled nerves that had mistakenly tapered out of Chhotomama’s skin, or thin tuberous plants that had started growing from his hands and feet” (130). Children’s understanding of the medical examination could not have been painted better.

The old men recuperating in the hospital are described thus: “…and each walked slowly and considerably past the trees, taking one step at a time, like a giant treading carefully between
one continent and another, anxious not to trample on an invisible city or a civilization. The children watched them in awe, and with another emotion they had not yet identified, which was pity. Each looked like an Adam who had been expelled from his sacred garden, and now, grown old, had been permitted to reenter, to relearn his old ways and his own, most simple, movements” (148).

However, at places, the imagery has the better of the children’s point of view. The hospital ward scene is a case in point: “The room was cool, and dark and ordered like the inside of an office: it was as if a bizarre board meeting were being held, with directors gathered silently on beds instead of chairs” (139).

On the whole, the book keeps the reader engrossed.

Notes on Contributors

Articles

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