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10-1-2016

Writing Sample

Vivek Shanbhag

Excerpts from the novel *Ghachar Ghochar*.

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Recommended Citation

Shanbhag, Vivek, "Writing Sample" (2016). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 568.
http://ir.uiowa.edu/iwp_archive/568

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Vivek SHANBHAG

Excerpts from the novel *Ghachar Ghochar*

I didn't put up a fight when the family began efforts to get me married. None of my attempts at romance had got anywhere. It was only Chitra with whom I'd got as far as having long conversations, and that too was over. My sister Malati's marriage had ended badly, making Amma more circumspect when it was my turn. 'Let's not get entangled with rich people,' she said, and so when we received word about the daughter of a college lecturer in Hyderabad, she was inclined to pursue the matter. The alliance was brought to us by a friend of the family named Sripati.

It was a Thursday, at about ten in the morning. I was about to leave home for the day when Sripati arrived. 'Wait, wait, wait, don't go!' he said. 'It's you I've come to talk to.' He chatted with Amma about mutual acquaintances, reported on his visit to the Raghavendra Swamy temple, delivered gossip from the attached monastery, ate dosais, proceeded by stages to make himself at home, and finally broached the subject. 'Look, this girl is good as gold. She's done her BA. The father is well respected. He has made his name in the university. We were actually looking at her for my sister-in-law's brother, but he never turned up from the United States. There's some talk he might have married there, but who knows ... Anyway, if you all agree, I can put the matter to the girl's father. Of course, I can't guarantee they'll say yes. Times have changed, it's not like the old days ...'

I looked at her photograph and found her prettier than the other girls I had seen. I decided to make her mine before other proposals came her way. It all went quickly from there on.

When we came to the matter of seeing the girl, I corrected Sripati with what I had picked up from Chitra's feminist talk: 'We should speak of the boy and the girl both seeing each other.'

He said, 'Yes, yes! Of course! I meant exactly that. Is it even possible these days to arrange a marriage with only the boy's consent? I must say you are both well-matched. Her father too thinks along these lines.'

A couple of days later, on Sunday, we booked a car and set off for Hyderabad. Sripati accompanied us. We met Anita and her parents at the hotel we were staying in, and it wasn't long before the match was agreed upon. I took Anita down to the restaurant for a coffee; that was the only time we had to ourselves. The wedding date was fixed before we left Hyderabad. It had all gone by like a dream.

On the journey back, Sripati told us at great length about Anita's father's idealistic views. This was probably meant to soothe Amma, who had taken offence at something he said. When Anita and I were away having coffee Amma had announced grandly that we didn't expect a dowry. It seems Anita's father said, 'I wouldn't give my daughter to you if you asked for one.' Amma, who'd been enjoying her own magnanimity, was not pleased.

As we were returning to the room from the restaurant, Anita had told me she would visit Bangalore soon so we could meet again. But her father had a heart attack shortly after, and she couldn't leave Hyderabad. We met next at our wedding. I did call her on the phone before that, though.

'When are you coming here?' I would ask, trying to sound flirtatious.

I wanted her to say, 'Now,' but only received a matter-of-fact, 'The day before the wedding.'

I'd persist: 'Come right now.'

'Don't be silly,' she'd say, and douse my ardour with cold water. I couldn't help wondering at times if she was truly enthusiastic about the marriage.

Our wedding day was a momentous one for me – a woman entered my life for the first time. Until then I had never even held a woman's hand. That day I discovered the exhilaration of getting married in the traditional way. What I'm saying might be incomprehensible to couples who have spent time together before marriage and for whom the wedding comes as a formality. They'd probably just laugh and call mine a case of sour grapes. And maybe they're right – it's true that things didn't happen this way because I particularly wanted them to. But a few details from the wedding day might help explain what I mean.

In the days leading up to the wedding I couldn't resist gazing at her photograph from time to time. That's when I'd call her on the phone. I had two photographs of her, both brought by Sripati when he first proposed the match. One of them showed her standing in a pink sari. Somewhat curly hair. Thick eyebrows. Broad shoulders. She seemed to be glowering at the camera, but there was something hypnotic about those wide eyes. I found it hard to turn away. She was in profile in the other photo, wearing a salwar-kameez, looking out through a window. She held a window-bar with one hand. Her face glowed with light from the window. This photo would drive me wild. That slightly upturned nose, the swell of her breasts discernible through the fabric of her dupatta. I suppose Chitra was right when she'd say men were incapable of seeing beyond the bodies of women.

On our wedding day Anita managed to look more beautiful than I'd been able to imagine her. She carried herself with poise. Her thick braid hung down to her waist. She was wearing lipstick. The first chance I got, I stole a sideward glance at the blouse under her dark-blue sari. We had few chances to speak during the ceremony, and these went in saying things like: 'So much smoke'; 'Who's that teasing you? A classmate?' There was a strange charm even in exchanging inanities. The ceremony required me to hold her hand at times, or touch her arm with my index finger, and these brief moments of contact would be the cause of an immense thrill. When it was time to tie the taali round her neck, I leaned in close and a whiff of fragrance went straight to my head. The scent of flowers and her close presence were almost too much. For a brief instant I felt unsteady on my feet. She stood there with her head bowed; flecks of turmeric dotted the down on her cheek. My fingers brushing against the back of her neck, I tied the knot.

At lunch, when we had to feed each other sweets, the tips of my fingers touched her lower lip for a moment. The jolt this produced took a while to subside. I was still helpless when she brought a piece of jalebi to my mouth. I seized her hand and pretended to bite off her fingers. A few girls nearby went 'Aww, so sweet,' and I felt embarrassed by my own antics. The wedding photographer, hankering for such moments, made me feed her again.

While we were still at lunch, a large group from Anita's side came up to us and introduced themselves one by one. Then in the afternoon, an army of elders from both sides took turns sitting on a chair so we could fall at their feet and seek blessings. In the evening we went home exhausted. Fortunately the more annoying relatives didn't follow us home. We could have dinner in peace and retire to our room upstairs.

I had on a white cotton kurta bought specially for the night. My mind swirled with the possibilities that lay ahead as we made our way to the room. I found it hard to even look at her. I tried to act casual as I closed the door behind us, but slid the bolt in slowly so the others at home wouldn't

notice. When I turned around she was standing by the bed. The light-switch was next to the door and I turned it off. The room was now faintly lit by the haze from the street-lamp outside. I walked to her. I took a step closer. I could smell her scent now. I didn't know what to do next and I paused for a moment. Then I raised my right hand and placed it on her shoulder. One thing alone gave me the courage to touch her: we were now married. My hand lowered itself along her arm and stopped at her elbow. My left hand went to her waist and drew her closer. She moved towards me as well and we embraced. Her touch, her smell, the fragrance from the flowers she was wearing, the press of her chest on mine, her lips against my neck.

That single moment's intensity hasn't been matched in my life before or since. A woman I didn't know had chosen to accept me, in body and mind. Perhaps it is this instant that forms the basis of traditional marriage – a complete stranger is suddenly mine. And then, I am hers too; I must offer her my all. I want her to wield her power over me as an acknowledgement of my love. The rush of these feelings all together is too much to describe. Language communicates in terms of what is already known; it chokes up when asked to deal with the entirely unprecedented.

Similar feelings must have welled up in her too. Her face was buried in my chest. Her arms around me tightened. I could feel the bangles on her arms pressing into my back. Through touch, through the giving, yielding closeness of our embrace, this unknown woman began to be known to me. I've longed often for a comparable experience, but there seems to be none. That sense of strangeness, surrender, dependence, compassion, entitlement and a hundred other sentiments bundled together cannot possibly be relived.

I held her tighter still, then relaxed. I raised her face and through her lips gained my first taste of her world.

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Three days after the wedding, we left to Ooty for our honeymoon. A cliché, it is true, especially considering we were well-off and could have gone anywhere. But Anita said she didn't particularly care where we went, and Ooty had been a prominent setting for my amorous imaginings since I was an adolescent. We might as well go there, I felt.

We were to arrive early in the morning, but the bus broke down on the way and it was noon before we checked into the hotel we had booked, a place named Green Valley. With our room's door closed, we were away from home and truly by ourselves for the first time in our marriage. Not knowing what to do, but aware this solitude was too significant to be wasted, I began caressing Anita haphazardly. She shied away, played coy, and we ended up laughing and chasing each other around the room like children.

We washed, had lunch, and took a van to one of those sightseeing 'points' on top of a hill. Afternoon was turning to evening. The air was crisp and our breaths had begun to fog. As we strolled about, Anita occasionally took my hand in hers or I would hold her lightly round the waist. Before long I was aroused and wanted to take her back to the hotel. But there were four other couples sharing the van with us, and we had to wait for them. It was dark when we returned. The wait had driven me half mad. I closed the door and pounced on her. I tore off her sweater, her sari, her blouse. I yanked at her petticoat's drawstring but only managed to jam it up. My impatient hands couldn't get anywhere with the stuck knot. She tried too, but to no avail. 'Tchah,' she said, 'this string has

become all ghachar ghochar. Wait.' I stood there as she sat up, bent over the knot and carefully teased it apart.

It came to me later when we were lying there catching our breaths. 'What was that you called the petticoat string?' I asked her.

She giggled. 'Ghachar ghochar,' she said.

I'd never heard the expression. 'What's that?' I asked.

'Ghachar ghochar,' she repeated, her eyes shining.

'What does that mean?'

'It means just that. You wouldn't understand ...' she said.

I poked her bare side with a finger and began to tickle her, saying, 'Tell me now, tell me.'

She rolled about, helpless with laughter, and then went quiet with mock gravity. She said, 'There are only four people in this world who know what it means. My parents, my brother and I.'

The expression had originated in their house, made up by Anita and her brother when they were children. They'd been on the terrace one evening, rolling kite-string into a ball. Their parents were chatting nearby. The loose string strewn about had become so entangled at one point that her brother lost his patience, flung down the bit he'd been trying to separate and shouted, 'This has all become ghachar ghochar!' Anita had said, 'What language are you speaking?' From there it had entered the family's vocabulary, first used by the siblings and then by the parents. Anita couldn't stop laughing at the reminiscence; I joined her. She spoke of her family some more. She became grave when she came to her brother, who had lost a leg in a motorcycle accident. 'He got in with the wrong company and everything became ghachar ghochar,' she said. 'Otherwise he wouldn't have been roaring around on motorcycles.'

The next morning we woke up in a hopelessly rumpled bed. I entwined my legs in hers and said, 'Look, we are ghachar ghochar now.' She did not laugh. She must have thought I was making fun of her. Of course, those words could never mean to me all that they meant to her; nor would I ever utter them as naturally as she did. But she had shared with me this secret phrase that didn't exist in any language, and I was now one of only five people in the world who knew it.

Translated from the Kannada by Srinath Perur