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Autobiography of a Semicolon

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Panel: The Shape of Your Paragraph: Genre and Its Constraints

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Subodh SARKAR

Autobiography of a Semicolon

The autobiography in poetry, as I write it, demands an ultimate ease and élan, but whenever I attempt a page or two in my pre-dawn writing hour, I feel I am on a morning walk with my unruly dog on a leash. My writing quickly alternates between left and right, between prose and poetry, dialogues and confessions, diaries and documents, taking all genres into one unified whole. Or I would say, more precisely, one unified chaos—which I sumptuously enjoy.

Akhilesh, a forgetful poet-friend—who confuses his own home address for someone else’s, talks to someone else’s wife as his own, and tells his real wife that in his eyes all women look alike—having read Book One of my autobiography, tells me, like a spokesman for Bernard Shaw, that all autobiographies are lies. The first poem I wrote thirty-eight years ago was not a lie; the last poem I wrote a week ago is not a lie either. I never wrote a single poem which did not pop up from a coffin of truths. I have written many bad poems, but I have never lied to my readers.

But I know for sure that lies are necessary for art, a delicious sauce on a vile dish. No poem, no fiction, no autobiography, no play, is great without lies. We need aesthetics to clothe our poems; we must at least be scantily dressed to walk down the street. This clothing is the gatekeeper of aesthetics.

As I look back at the sequences of my thirty-five years as an author of twenty-nine books of poems, I feel I have been a little semicolon all these years, just a small piece of language. Like a bartender, I attended a fixed table of geniuses; I was asked to pour wine into the glasses of Pablo Neruda, Mayakovsky, Miroslav Holub, Jibanananda Das, Apollinaire, Allen Ginsberg, Nicanor Parra, Nâzim Hikmet, Amiri Baraka, Shuntarō Tanikawa, and Ted Hughes, eleven in all, a perfect magic number. One evening, one of them (I cannot remember which), told me to go and collect my own language: “Hey, young man,” he said, “go run and collect one semicolon from the world.” Since then I have been walking with a huge semicolon on my back for the last thirty-five years, like carrying a cross. I am sure my autobiography is going to be the autobiography of a semicolon who grew bigger and bigger, in order to witness my hunger in childhood, which was a holocaust in my stomach; the Naxalite Movement in my tender age; Communist violence in the name of upholding justice for the poorest of the poor; and lot of blood on the staircase leading us to eternity.

There was recently a midnight knock on my door. In this age of android phones we do not expect surprise visitors. Annoyed, I opened the door, only to find a pretty young woman about my son’s age in jeans and a jacket, holding a bottle of wine in one hand and a Voltaire paperback in another. She whispered to me, “May I come in? I just landed from the sky; I want to live with your semicolon.” She took a seat and told me, “You are not my daddy; I have a daddy somewhere hidden in a desert. You have never seen me before because I am your Nemesis.” This is how Book Two of my autobiography begins, with a visit from the Muse, in couplets, reexamining my truths in different places: my bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom. In a lush green landscape I am one poet, but in a time of holocaust I am the other. But the million-dollar question is: People seem to believe that poetry is good in the bedroom—but would it also be romantic in the bathroom, they ask?

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