

Editorial Comments

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In the current issue of *Sanglap*, we are publishing a Gujarati short story titled “Blackie” by Abhimanyu Acharya. The story seems to be an addition to what we popularly call cross-over literature. Cross-over texts of diasporic encounters, conflict zones, and hybrid experiences in the context of India are largely written in English, with a few exceptions. The story is significant because it is suggestive of both the sensibility and temperament of people from Gujarati business communities supporting a young migrant from their community to settle and establish in the West and the cross-over experiences of the migrant struggling to get permanent residence. The story involves various borders of class, migration, or human-animal. The entry point to the story is, however, its sense of humour mixed with pain familiar in Rohinton Mistry’s short stories foregrounding the inaccomodable man disconcerted and misfit to the new cultural environment. The alienation of the narrator in this story comes from his gradual becoming of a servant, dependent on his master when he gets supported by a relatively established and wealthy Gujarati Mehta uncle, a close acquaintance of his family. This kind of patron-client relationship between a wealthy provider and a dependent has the feudal aura of Indian society, which continues in Canada in another form. We have heard in the story that working under a white man might be even worse with chances of racism. The story is titled “Blackie,” and we get to know from Mehta uncle that such words are prohibited from being used in that country dominated by liberal values, apparently anti-racist in nature, though such words we know are used randomly in India – their homeland. The Gujarati word ‘*kaliyo*’ is used to suggest the public use of such words in India. So, Mehta uncle’s pet dog cannot be called by his adored name Blackie in public. He has a proper Christian name – Jack. The delayed impact of colonialism and its dependency complex continues in new shapes and forms in the postcolonial diasporic experience. The trajectory of belonging is interspersed with signs of unbelonging. The story foregrounds the indeterminacy and fluid experiences that probe us to think beyond the easy binaries of colonial ideology. We witness how ambivalence is created through various inequalities of power – the narrator’s dependence on Mehta uncle, the dog’s dependence on the narrator when under economic pressure he unwillingly accepts to be its caregiver, or Mehta’s aspirations and associations with the West in terms of naming the dog or marrying a Western woman. ‘Blackie’ is the name that cannot be used in public. Yet racial divide and hierarchies born out of coloniality continue creating manifold forms of marginalisation, which the translation captures effectively. After all, the title of the story in the original Gujarati is “Blackie” as well. Blackness and whiteness are translated. Power differences endear as well as exploit the ‘other’. At the end of the story, where the dog is removed from Mehta by a conspiracy of the narrator to free himself from the ignominy and shame of serving a dog out of economic compulsion, acts as a reckoning and the reminder. The image of the gaze of the dog at the moment of its being taken away from Mehta and Mehta’s painful look flashes in the narrator’s memory long after the event when he gets permanent residence and becomes independent in Canada. Stories live beyond the determinacies of power in the horizon of care and compassion unachievable in the present and loaded with a sense of responsibility that is to come.

Blackie

by

Abhimanyu Acharya

(Translated from *Gujarati* by Viraj Desai)

Mehta uncle was my uncle's acquaintance. How they knew each other was a mystery to me!

I had to go directly to Mehta uncle's house from the airport; I was to stay there for two days. His driver, Pintu, i.e., Peter had come to pick me up by car from the airport. A dog rushed towards me as soon as I entered his house and grabbed my leg in its mouth. I screamed aloud!

"Blackie...come back. He is a guest. Blackie... come back."

A deep voice was heard from the room. It was Mehta uncle's voice. Blackie left my leg after listening to his voice and started licking me.

Mehta uncle came out and said to me – "Come in, my boy... come in. He is very sweet. He is like my son. Blackie... Enough"

Blackie stopped licking.

"So, how was your flight?"

"It was fine."

"Was on time. Manoj already called me. Wait, let's call him right now so that he stops worrying. Pintu will explain everything – where to buy a new phone from, where the grocery store is, everything. You freshen up. I'll take you to the store tomorrow."

"I'll have to go to college tomorrow."

"Is it the first day?"

"Yes."

"Then do go, but then there's no need to go to college frequently. You've come here to earn money, right?"

"Yes."

"Great then."

I went to Mehta uncle's store after two days. He was going to teach me everything for a week, and then after, I had to work every day for an eight-hour shift. Blackie too, was present in the store. Mehta uncle would take Blackie with him everywhere he would go. Blackie started licking me again. It felt awkward to stand still in fear this time. So, I started stroking Blackie's head.

"Wait... have you washed your hands?"

I hesitated. "I have just bathed....," I said.

"Then it's fine. He is very particular about hygiene, so only touch him after washing your hands."

"Okay."

I stroked it again. "Hi, Blackie... Cutie..." I said.

Mehta uncle got a little perplexed and said, “Don’t call him Blackie. His name is Jack. Jack. Understood?”

“But that day in the home, you were addressing him as Blackie.”

“Yes, we call him Blackie in the house. It is his pet name. But in public, we call him Jack. Because in public, if you call him Blackie and if a black person is around, then he can complain. It is called Racism. These things don’t exist in India, where people address random strangers as *kālio*

¹. It doesn’t work that way here, understood?”

“Jack.”

“Good... one has to be careful here. You’ll have to adjust. As they say, when in Rome, do as the Romans do. Like that.”

“Oh... like that,” I repeated after Mehta uncle. He understood my sarcasm and got perplexed again –

“Look, boy... you are going to work in my store. Humour is good but be careful. Okay?”

“Yes uncle, sorry.”

“Oh c’mon... no need to apologise! I like it when someone cracks jokes! Ha ha,” Mehta uncle cleverly backtracked.

“See... if you want your payment in cash, I’ll give it to you at the end of every day. Ten dollars per hour. Okay?”

“Okay. Does everyone take their payment in cash here?”

“Depends on their needs.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that you will get instant daily payments if you work in cash. You want your payment to be daily or monthly?”

“Daily.”

“Great then.”

Honestly speaking, Mehta uncle helped me a lot in the beginning. Right from finding me a house to getting me a job where I get paid in cash daily, he did everything for me. However, he was very calculative, although he never showed it. Sometimes he would crack jokes that I wouldn’t like. For example, the other day, a Canadian girl came to the store to buy cigarettes. As soon as she left, Mehta uncle said to me: “What fun would it be if she sat on my lap, right!”

And then habitually asked for a high five, laughing out loud. I gave him a high five hesitantly. He said, “Why do you get upset? Is she your sister?” Then he uttered some cuss words relating to sister.

This joke of his made me think, “Doesn’t Mehta uncle have a family of his own?”

When I gossiped with Pintu about it, he said – “His family is a bit complicated. He had a wife and a young son too. But something went wrong between the two... I think his wife caught Mehta with a girl half his age. I don’t know whether they got divorced or not, but they don’t live together.”

¹Gujarati slang used to address someone who is dark-skinned.

“So, he doesn’t have anyone except Blackie?”

“Yes, only that dog. Sometimes he does have call girls come over, but all that is legal over here. Not like our India. No one judges you here. No one gives a damn if someone is doing things in his own house, with his own money, and without disturbing others. Good in a way. Bad too, in a way.”

“Why bad?”

“I get fewer people to gossip with.”

“Mehta uncle is born and brought up in Canada?”

“Yes, born in India. He came to Canada almost at the age of ten. But the man carries with him a great nostalgia for India.”

Pintu was my go-to man whenever I wanted to know something about Mehta uncle. He was quite a gossipmonger, so he would find things out anyhow and would tell me too. He loved to gossip. And was Mehta uncle’s close confidante.

“Till when would you keep on working for Mehta uncle?”

“Until I get the P.R. Everyone only works till then. You have to show on paper that you have worked full-time for three years. Only then do you get the P.R. and Mehta knows how to juggle this document shit.”

“How many years have you been working for?”

“I have just applied, so...”

“Then what would Mehta uncle do without you? He relies so much on you!”

“What do you think? Why is that man doing so much for you?” Said Pintu smilingly.

I could now understand the whole game. All that Pintu said started coming true. Apart from teaching me everything at the store, Mehta uncle had also started calling me to his house. He had explained everything about maintaining his garden while narrating his experience at a strip club. And one day, while cooking Pasta for me, he told me about the signals Blackie gives when it needs to defecate. As Mehta uncle said this while sprinkling oregano in his boiling pasta, Pintu looked at me and smiled gently as he continued to chop carrots.

I started looking around for opportunities as soon as this happened. I started searching for a job. I also asked my other two roommates to look for a job for me. One said, “Okay, man, I will try. The other said, “Sorry, man, I don’t know.”

It was difficult to get a job here in Windsor. It would have been easier in or around Toronto. I was lured abroad and could see only one way to get my family out of the financial crisis – by earning in dollars. With the loan of one and a half million rupees that I had taken, my mother’s mortgaged ornaments, and my college fees, I would’ve been completely lost had Mehta uncle not given me a job. But I didn’t want to replace Pintu. I had no intention of becoming Mehta uncle’s slave. When I told this to Pintu, he said – “See, my friend, you will have to work here. This Mehta is Indian, and that’s why he takes care of us, gives us bonuses, and looks after us. If you were to work for a white man, then he would treat you as a labourer. Would keep on addressing you as ‘you brownie, you brownie’, understood? And all this is only until you get the P.R. Once you get that, your chances of getting a job would increase. Right now, you won’t get a proper job as you’re on a student visa. So, bear the brunt for now; what else?”

The winter had already started setting in when it was time for Pintu to leave. One day in the store, Mehta uncle told me – “Did you buy winter clothes?”

“No.”

“Good that you didn’t. I have a few spare ones. I was almost your size back in the day. So, they would fit you. Come home tonight.”

I went to Mehta uncle’s house that evening. He said to me – “Pintu has gone to the bank today to get his paperwork done. Will you do me a favour? Till then, I’ll take your winter clothes out.”

“What?” I asked.

“It’s time for Blackie to take a dump. Take him to the garden. I’ll get you the organic plastic bags. Once he is done pooping, put it in the bag and throw it into the garbage, right?”

I hesitated. Before I could say something, Mehta uncle handed me the organic plastic bags and said – “It’s totally safe. You will be fine.” And went inside to take the winter clothes out.

I went near Blackie. It was for the first time that Mehta uncle had trusted me with Blackie. I looked at Blackie carefully. It was a Labrador. The entire body was black, but there were white spots near the stomach. As if that part of that body had leprosy. It was signalling in the direction of the door by putting its front leg in the air for a long time now. I caught its leash and started walking towards the garden. I was surrounded by the fragrance of the colourful flowers as soon as I entered the garden. Blackie stopped right in the middle of the garden and then took its leg up and pooped. The rot of its stomach fell on the yellow leaves fallen from the maple tree just like the last remaining drops of water dripping from a recently closed tap. I kept staring at it for a while but then turned my face over. In no time, a foul smell cutting through the fragrance of flowers had spread everywhere. Blackie’s job was done, and mine had begun. I first masked my face with a handkerchief, bent down, grabbed the poop with one plastic bag, put it in another, and then threw both the bags into the garbage bin.

Mehta uncle was sitting on the sofa with the bag of winter clothes as I came back inside with Blackie’s leash in my hand.

“I found everything-jacket, cap, muffler, gloves... and oh! Come to talk of gloves....did you clean Blackie’s poop without wearing gloves?”

“Yes.”

“Oh no! Shit! I forgot to tell you. There are special gloves for it. Use them from the next time, okay?” He said smilingly.

I got angry, but looking at the bag of winter clothes, I said nothing.

Next time? What does ‘next time’ mean? I had to keep on cleaning Blackie’s poop every time? As soon as I got back home, I straight away kept the winter clothes in the cupboard and decided not to wear them until it became extremely unavoidable as if I did not want to take Mehta uncle’s help.

Days passed. Now light snowfall had started, and it would have been utterly foolish to step out wearing a fall jacket in minus seven degrees temperature. And at last, I took out my Columbia winter jacket, which Mehta uncle had given me, and wore it when I went to his house. He was to discuss something important today, but I knew beforehand what that was.

Pintu was dressed in new clothes, and uncle had worn a blazer. A bottle of champagne and cake were lying on the table.

“Let us celebrate! Pintu has got the P.R. Yippee!” Said Mehta uncle as he poured champagne for us. As soon as we started drinking, Blackie started barking.

“Oh, Gentlemen! So sorry. It is nature’s call for Blackie. Will you go, please?” Mehta uncle looked at me.

On seeing my displeased face, Pintu said, “Oh! I’ll take him!”

“No, no, you relax. Today is your day. You won’t do any work.” And Mehta uncle looked at me again.

I got up. This time I wore the gloves, took the plastic bag and guided Blackie to the garden with its leash in my hand. That day Blackie showed a lot of affection toward me. He kept on licking me continuously. I looked into its eyes – I couldn’t find anything but innocence and love. I was torn between my growing affection for Blackie on the one side and my irritation with the fact that I had to clean his poop on the other.

As I went in, Mehta uncle told me to replace Pintu. Twenty-five dollars per hour. Plus, a bonus. I had to live with him so there would be no expense of rent as well, and I had to drive his Mercedes after I got a driving license with his help, take him everywhere. And yes, I would also have to look after Blackie and the garden. I calculated in my mind – Twenty-five dollars per hour; that means two hundred per day, one thousand for five days plus a weekend bonus of two hundred which means twelve hundred per week and almost five thousand dollars per month. If I would earn at this speed, I could pay off my fees in three months, could repay my loan in a year, and then my mother’s jewellery...

I smiled. Mehta uncle poured another drink and said, “Cheers!”

*

Pintu left for Toronto. Blackie was extremely affectionate with me now, and Mehta uncle completely relied on me. Blackie would often start licking me to show its affection for me. I had noticed that Mehta uncle’s behaviour with me had radically changed after Pintu was gone. I had never seen him talking so amicably earlier.

Once, I overheard him telling someone over the phone that he has three sons – Adam, Blackie, and me. That was the first time I came to know that his son’s name was Adam, and I understood Pintu’s agony for the first time. I had something to gossip about but no one to share it with.

I would get more and more irritated every day by cleaning Blackie’s poop. I didn’t care about anything else, but this one thing used to put me in a black mood.

One day I called Pintu.

“Hi brother, how are you doing?”

“Nothing, man! I just got something new to gossip about Mehta uncle, wanted to tell you.”

I heard Pintu’s laughter. “What is the gossip?”

“Mehta uncle’s son’s name is Adam. That means he would’ve married a white woman. I have been working here for almost two months now, but the bastard has not had any call girl come over yet.”

I could hear Pintu laugh even harder.

“You managed to find out something interesting!”

“Oh! Not only that. Mehta now cares for me like his son. He considers me his son.”

“Yes, he uses this trick every time. He would tell this ‘son-thing’ to someone over the phone in a way that you hear him. He did the same with me, but I didn’t know about Adam.”

“It means that this Mehta is a complete bastard! There was another thing too.”

“What?”

“I can’t clean Blackie’s poop anymore, man. It completely blows up my mind every day. I can barely control myself. What to do?”

“Yes, that is a very painful thing. There is a way to get rid of Blackie. I thought about it often, but I could never gather the courage.”

I got excited, “What way?”

“If somehow Blackie bites you, then the people from the municipal corporation would take it away under the Dog owner’s liability act. When it was young, it bit someone. At that time, the municipal corporation had warned Mehta that if this was repeated, then they would take it away. You can legally claim compensation from Mehta. But then Mehta would never get Blackie back.”

“Brilliant,” I exclaimed.

After that, I started spending more time with Blackie for a few days. I started noticing all its activities. Blackie had grown extremely affectionate of me, to an extent where it would seem as if I was his master and not Mehta. Mehta uncle was pleased to see this. He gave me twenty dollars extra on that weekend.

I was waiting for many days to be left alone with Blackie. At last, the day was here. Mehta uncle had to go somewhere in the evening directly from the store. He would be away for two hours. I got back home with Blackie and tied its leash to a maple tree in the garden. I looked at the road and could see a man coming in my direction from far away. Perfect! My job will be done by the time he reaches here.

I picked a rod lying in the garden and started hitting Blackie on his stomach where there were white spots.

Blackie got petrified. He could not understand what was happening. At first, he got frightened and tried to run away in fear but could not go far because of the leash. I kept hitting him, thinking of the foul smell of his poop and Mehta uncle’s cunningness. First, it started crying, “woooooowooooow,” and when the beating still didn’t stop, it held my leg in its mouth like it did when it first met me and bit me. Its teeth pierced my heel, and the blood started flowing. I cried out of pain, screamed, “Help, Help,” and went away from Blackie. It tried coming after me to bite me again but couldn’t because of the leash. The man walking in my direction had now reached near the house. He heard the screams and called the ambulance.

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I was hospitalised for three days, got vaccinated, and had to take injections. Abiding the law, Mehta uncle paid the bills. And I worked in Mehta uncle’s store for two more years until I got another job. But I never saw him smiling even once in those two years. Neither did I get any bonus.

This was long back. Now I, like Pintu, have come to settle down in Toronto. And I have the P.R. too. But I see the marks of Blackie’s teeth on my heel everyday while bathing, which reminds me of two things –

A teary-eyed Mehta uncle stroking Blackie’s body and head with love when the people from Municipal Corporation arrived, and the way Blackie gazed at me till the end as the car took him away.

(‘Blackie’ is the English translation of a Gujarati short story written by Abhimanyu Acharya. The original title of the story in Gujarati is ‘Blackie’)

Bionote of the author – Abhimanyu Acharya, is a playwright, short story writer, and translator based out of Gujarat. He is currently undertaking his Ph.D. at The University of Western Ontario on theatre in Western India. His collection of stories in Gujarati ‘Padchhayao vacche’ (Between the shadows) was published in 2018 to critical acclaim. His play ‘Vesha’ won the

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