

Following is a review by Prof. J.P. Singh of the novel Alternate Journeys by author Praveer Roy.

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Alternate journey begins with the Rig Veda Creation Hymn as an epigraph to the work, the Hymn that subsumes the conceptual polarities of the ‘Not non-existent and the existent’, ‘the breathless breathed objects own nature, an indiscriminate chaos concealed in darkness that was void and formless.’

The three central characters of the novel – Krishna, Kalki and Maya – constitute a ‘trinity of camaraderie’ and the trinity that is one. They are ‘connected in love and friendship, bounded by accident of time, three simultaneous births, unconnected in space, connected by destiny’. There is a configuration of accidents: they are born on the day of Neil Armstrong’s lunar landing in three different parts of India at half past eight in the morning of July 21, 1969. It was indeed a planetary event of ‘one step for man, one giant leap for mankind’.

Alternate Journey, a fictional experiment of epic proportions may as well be given multiple alternate titles. As an explosion of audacity of imagination in terms of the novelist’s juggling with expressions the work might as well have been titled, among other things, as ‘Midnight’s Grandchildren’ or as an ‘Alice in Wonderland for Adult Readers’. Somewhere in the sub-conscious realm of the writer himself, alternate questions have been popping up from the kick-off moment to the resolution at the goal post. Is it ‘flowing energy in quantized space time, punctuated by pronunciation, sprinkled by grammar, trim and proper’ Or is it only ‘reams and reams of boring unending repetitions of a frivolous drama of a czarist high society’ Or is it like Joyce writing an ‘odyssey of riddles’ Or is it a ‘clichéd Bollywood Masala’.

The novel Alternate Journey has alternate layers of profoundly complex philosophical and spiritual speculations. These speculations are quite unlike the speculations of the Market Economy and Stock Exchanges. The work is a holistic intellectual and spiritual laboratory. On different alternate levels, the novelist deals with the pathology of Existence and human violence for understanding the darkness and anarchy and chaos as the basic conditions of the universe as well as of human life. It may be, in terms of the novelist, an exploration of the ‘audacity of hubris’ or ‘chaos of Karma’ or ‘mathematics of destiny’.

The central female character Maya at the end of the novel in company of Krishna the Protagonist and Kalki the Alter Ego wishing for a book recording the collective destiny of the three among themselves, figures that they are less of singular identities, but ‘clones of each other’.

Krishna, the son of an Engineer in Botala Steel city is born in an ‘air-conditioned labor room of the company hospital’. Maya is born in a naval base dispensary ‘on an unwomanned Island in the middle of nowhere’. Kalki is born in the ‘timeless darkness of mines excreting energy from the bowels of the earth’.

For understanding the alternate life trajectory of this trinity as one single character determined by an invisible and illogical destiny, it is worth noticing the novelist’s repeated forms on this core dimension of the fictional parable. In ‘Illusion’s Chatroom’ – Illusion that is Maya chats – ‘I was wondering isn’t it strange that three of us are single, neither married, and apparently if our status in facebook is to be trusted, nor in a relationship’.

Krishna, right from the beginning in the St. Xavier's School is a questioning machine. Growing up for him is fun – a journey of discovery and exploration until 'adolescence kicks in and hormones started pumping havoc in his well-structured life'. This is the time of the emergence of conscious sexuality, and bloated and unfolding ego. Krishna is painted as a prodigy confused with many of his natural gifts.

Dreaming of grandeur and incapable of controlling his growing narcissism, he is a victim of his own demons (sic) and adolescent sexuality. That is 'masturbation' in this case and a recurring reference to the 'baton'.

Kalki, the son of a Yadav, a Tractor driver who married a Kurmi girl across the caste divide, is a gifted child with a natural flair for the canvas and the color, and happens to join the St. Xavier's school in the Botala Steel City. Right from this St. Xavier's days those two – Krishna and Kalki – happen to be the icon-breakers, rebellious and non-conformists. Their stone throwing at the school window panels is not merely a breach of discipline in a conformist schooling tradition, but also a symbolic protest of the potential Energy implanted by the cosmic designer in the human psyche.

As for Maya's birth in a tiny island base, the 'giant cry of a woman' coincides with Neil Armstrong's 'a giant step for mankind'. This weirdness of the simultaneity of births of the central characters forever remains as some kind of hallucination, joke or connection of destiny. In the plot structure of the novel, this historical co-incidence accelerates the coming together of these three protagonists or else why should three people born at the same time suddenly meet?

As a coincidence or determination of destiny all these three – Krishna, Kalki and Maya – converge in Delhi. Krishna gets into the IIT Delhi, Kalki joins the Hindu College and Maya is admitted to the LSR as Psychology Honors Student. Tarang, the LSR Festival that Maya organizes, by quirks of destiny provides an occasion for their chance encounter. This chance encounter gradually develops into a definite trajectory of adolescent sexually. Maya's first impression of Krishna is of a 'real stud' and the 'budding computer scientist' thinks of the organizer as 'prettier than the models'.

Krishna introduces Kalki and Iyer to Maya. Iyer too, is from the Botala Steel City, but has no specific role except the vacuum-filler in the crowd pulling the universe of the novel. Maya initially does not like Kalki, but somehow gradually connects and this love-hate relationship once again underlines the alternate currents of the Psychic Libidos: 'They both had deep eyes and their stare had a fierce glare – two wild animals in adjacent cages'.

Gradually a number of characters crowd the canvas and keep playing the subsidiary roles until the end of the story. They are Iyer and Sejal, Raj and Shilpi and Vinod and a prominent maverick Hindutva icon called RDS.

As the plot unfolds, Krishna refuses to seek his pastures across the seas and joins an Indian IT Firm called the 'source'. In a very short span of time he steers the firm to its height and is made a Director on its Board. With huge bonus and stock options, with winning projects after projects and with source's soaring resources size and reputation as well as with its 'army of clones', Krishna's life is metamorphosed into that of a multi-something holding a hoard of money to splurge and play the muck's game in the IPO world.

However, as the story proceeds Krishna is bitten by an academic bug. He informs Raj that he would like to quit and do Ph.D. in Physics. He had this bug gene in him and it has strangely enough bitten back badly, 'to formulate the Theory of Everything – holy grail of modern Physics of combining Quantum and Relativistic Mechanics to formulate a theory of the working of the Universe'.

Naturally, Krishna joins the Physics faculty in the Bombay University, but feels dissatisfied, and manages to seek admission into the Physics faculty of the school in the United States with a number of Nobel Laureates under its roof. Again a physic flip-flop, a wave of surging disenchantment and he quits the school and joins a Bank as the Vice-President in the United States itself and becomes a part of Manhattan Society's pecking order.

Meanwhile Kalki joins as a Pracharak of RSS, the Hindu outfit. He is a doer and not a speaker and the 'Gods of the Parivar' like Advani himself have noticed and praised him. He has participated in the Babri Masjid demolition with Uma the Sadhvi and has possibly been sent to 'Bala the Sainik' for golden tips.

As the plot is structured on the macro-canvas of modern history Kalki's role goes on expanding. He gets through the Central Services, joins the IB, and is entrusted with the organization of moving nuclear warheads from Bhabha Atomic Research Centre to the Pokhran test site. He is critical of the coffin gate scam and refuses to lift the block in front of the plane in Maulana Masood airplane hijack case. Now the Hindutva core in the Govt. wants to get him out of the system lest he should prove self-destructive. RDS and Advani feel that Kalki should be given some international exposure to increase global intelligence collection capabilities. It may be a ploy to ease out Kalki. By the end of the millennium, he is sent/ deputed to Geneva and becomes a part of UNHCR officialdom with a covert briefing that he has to work as an intelligence officer to collect information about the fast expanding web of the Jihadist terror networks.

As for Maya, she is appointed in Jean Pierre's creations, a French Fashion House with a wide range of products from clothes to accessories, the Luxury Conglomerate that defines the high culture of international capitalism, from Connaught Place to Dubai to Paris, that also happens to be the destined trajectory of the third unit of this Trinity.

The element of Philosophical determination, however, acts out its own destined role. Maya, before leaving for Paris to join the creations headquarters has become an unwedded mother. The girl who has just been given a symbolic function is named Prithvi and her birth is noted as Eleven-Nine-Two-Thousand and one.

'Born of multiple fathers and of no father, and born to reclaim the Mother Earth'.

The Trinity across the country plays its own individual roles and finally converges back to India relocating in either Mumbai or Delhi. While outside the country Krishna, Kalki and Maya have become one through their virtual relationship on the chat room where they have become the Protagonist, the Alter ego and the Illusion respectively.

Back to India, Krishna has established the Prithvi Trust where all the money made by them is to be routed through the Mauritius route. The world has gone through financial crisis by now and Jean Pierre's creations has been sold to Prithvi Trust. It looks as if Krishna wants to be a Diamond Daddy to Prithvi. Prithvi seems to universalize the perennial process of time. History as a dialogue between the Past and Present addressed to Future.

As for the humanity of characters, they are never the stark or block figures. Like real living vibrating earthly creatures, each suffers from self-combustive compulsions and in many cases, it seems as if there are more love triangles than pimples on a teenager's face.

However, just the description of the bare bones of the story or a skeletal presentation of the plot will not do justice to the novel of a magnitude of Tolstoy's War and Peace. What is required is an understanding of the writers ontological and existential concerns structurally reflected through the chinks and crevices of the narrative plot.

The first such concern can be felt through the writer's pathological analysis of violence that is deeply implanted in the human psyche and reflected through the group and individual behaviors of the human race. In fact, the novel opens with the basic premise 'Violence has no logic, violence has its own logic, violence has types'.

The Universe of Discourse in the novel is littered with violence all around from the Botala Steel City to Paris Streets and US Trade Towers. It is a kind of Tabulation Sheet of Violence. Some of which are, violence on the strikers in the Steel City of Botala, violence during the Mandal agitation in Delhi – a result of the shame of identities, anti-Sikh riot following Indira Gandhi's assassination, Bhopal Gas Tragedy, Kashmir Valley, Siachen, Kargil, Rajiv Gandhi's Assassination, Kosovo, Paris, 9/11, 26/11, Gujarat & Godhra Crimes.

In its initial stages, the story unfolds and underlines two kinds of violence. The first is the brutality of police violence on the agitating students in Delhi University. This is an account of indiscriminant savagery of 'the state like the Ogre Mahisa rising from every drop of blood', 'like a pack of impatient hyenas attacking a prey during its last breath'.

In fact in such an asymmetrical fight between the organized state 'Mahisa' and the unarmed agitating students, the police are not individuals, but are the 'unity of the consciousness of the mob of the state'.

Sometimes the same Ogre Mahisa assumes the form of the mob fury of the masses. Krishna the child has been an eyewitness to the horrendous sight in the Steel City of Botala. Madness took over the public sanity. A Sikh garment shop goes up in flame, the Sikh owner is dragged out and clothes of his daughter hardly twenty is torn and gang-raped before the father, breasts cut-off and stripped stark naked in the public.

The Bhopal Gas Leak is another variety of violence, may be different from the type perpetrated by the clones of congress and the Ogre Mahisa who assumed a hydra-headed form during the anti-Sikh and Gujarat Godhra riots.

This violence in Gas leak has 'no assassination, no riots, no mutinies, no wars, no weapons of mass destruction' true, but this long sustained deliberate gross negligence is no less a form of the Ogre Mahisa. 'Poison leaks in the air of incomprehension of logic of Karma, thousands died and thousands continue dying'.

A no less unsettling spectacle of violence - the Dance not of Shiva, but of Mahisa – is witnessed by Krishna on the Ground zero itself. It was a terrible experience of 'panic and chaos, of dust and rubble of blood and gore'. In fact, it was an experience so terrible in its immensity that 'his ability to be shocked again in future was wiped out'.

'Mahisa danced his dirty dance in the heart of the land of gods and no mortal was anywhere safe anymore, and the world changed beyond recognition forever'.

Krishna's disenchantment with the 'Land of Gods' (U.S.) alternates with the disillusionment of Kalki and Maya. Experience of Kosovo's violence has shattered Kalki's illusions and he has now been convinced the Ogre Mahisa is powerfully lodged not only in Asia, but also in the heart of Europe and elsewhere.

Similar is the case with Maya. Along with Prithvi and Jean Pierre, she had been caught in the crossfire in riots of burning cars in the suburbs of Paris. Ironically enough, it is true that 'she was not unknown to public violence, she came from a land where rioting is the entertainment of the Kaleidoscope of the turning wheel of Karma'. But trapped in her illusions she had a feeling that 'Paris was a city of love, city of expression of art, the city of consciousness of human civilization'.

She, like Kalki and Krishna feels like running away from the façade of reason and civilization.

It is this violence, surrealism and absurdity of human existence that virtually drives both Krishna and Kalki to the edge of insanity. A feeling of listless drift, consciousness of the cocktail of human egos, frittering away of the higher urges in the human soul – all these lead Krishna to put questions to the cosmic intelligence like Eliot's 'Love song of Alfred Prufrock'. Krishna is curious, 'Is there a pattern, is there causation, what makes it all happen?'

Krishna's state of metaphysical listlessness is just like that of Albert Camus in 'The Myth of Sisyphus' - 'In a Universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is in an irremediable exile...This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity.'

Krishna, too, like Camus deprived of illusions and of light tears open his clothes, gets stark naked and walks out of his apartment in the freezing cold to the end of the dense forest. May be in a fit of meditation he feels one with the Universal Energy, but by the first rays of the dawn he is a changed man. He has, as it were, changed to making 'no attempt now to find meaning beyond the practicality of existence'.

Something similar but disastrously and shockingly more violent happens with Kalki. He is entrusted by the U.N. authorities to prepare a report on the immigration situation of the world. Though Kalki had always been the doer – the execution man – and not the thinking or reflective man he has to start his fourth parallel life of probing intellectual identity. The question that has been haunting his mind crystallizes in his U.N. report.

The questions which have been blistering his core consciousness relate to the degree of the evolution of human society that could positively impact the negative momentum of history. The novelist like Eliot's Alfred Prufrock squeezes these disturbing questions into a single interrogation – 'Is it within the grasp of the collective human wisdom to foresee and influence the future of history?'

Kalki's final report on immigration turns out to be as unsettling as the tremors of the Earth's Crust: 'A new world Utopia where everyone is an immigrant, a new society with rootlessness as the only root...'

'...the agenda for the United Nations... has to be a transnational liberal democracy that slowly replaces the system of nation states and violence of identities. If the modern world doesn't want to collapse in violence, it needs to dismantle its immigration control in silence'.

This report turns out to be shocking and stunning for the U.N. authorities. To Shashi, it appears to be a mad man's recommendation for turning the international body into a 'Congregation of Fakirs Sadhus and mystics'. Kalki refuses to change the report. His disenchantment along with some other facts in the Espionage world stir up the images of pain, death, violence, mass riots, assassinations, manipulations, wars and terror. As an anodyne, he injects himself with drugs and the awareness of the pain of public silence makes him turn ragingly mad. Kalki cuts off his tongue! This is the process of reversal of the public violence into the violence of individual insanity.

The violence inherent in the Economic System, no matter how one brands it – Market capitalism crony capitalism, neo – liberal democracy – takes its own toll symbolically in the person of Jean Pierre, the owner and director of the Fashion conglomerate creations. In the aftermath of the financial storm and total crash of the world, Jean Pierre is facing penury and bankruptcy. An impulsive painter he has been writing as it were his own self-portrait likely to be titled 'The Portrait of An Artist as a Dying Man'. He Shoots Himself.

In an era of post-structuralist and post-deconstructionist aesthetic formulations when fictional slogans like 'metafiction' or 'surfiction' or 'fabulation' have become the critical buzzwords, it may be difficult to evaluate the narrative art of Indian fiction writers writing in English. For the purposes of critical understanding of the Alternate Journeys, the strikingly first response may be to place it somewhere as a traditional construct shaped and enlivened by varied streams of creative experiments.

Alternate Journeys as a narrative structural construct may be judged as traditional since it has a rational temporal sequence. It begins at a certain point of time and crisscrossing and leapfrogging through various turns arrives at a certain point of time. However, it has a freewheeling narrative invention and partly seems to have a first kinship with what Robert Scholes calls 'Fabulation'. Fabulative novels violate in many ways the standard fictional expectations by drastic experiments with subject matter, form, style and fusion of the fantastic, the mythical and the nightmarish.

So we have the mythical threads here – Krishna the creator – charioteer, Kalki the creative – destructive incarnation and Maya the Illusion but also accompanying energy of the primal force. That is the reason that she gives birth to Prithvi – The Hope and child of an unknown or in mythical terms, a beginningless existent and non-existent father.

Interlaced with this core mythical substratum is the integrated symbolism of the wind and waves and shore. This is what Maya is: an aspiration not to be bound by conventions and fear of social ostracism, viewed in this light the fiction presents an experiment in revolutionary sexuality, far more revolutionary than any live-in relationship.

The experiment with the stream of consciousness technique or what may be called Interior Monologue, through the virtual world and Diary Recordings among other forms, is again a powerful device. Interior Monologue here is more of an interior questioning device – the self quizzing the self, the Atman provoking the Ogre Mahisa, the individual questioning the society.

About the Author

Praveer Roy was born in Patna in 1973 and raised in the Steel City of Bokaro, where he attended the St. Xavier's School, completing his Junior College in Science. Praveer completed his graduation from Delhi University; he is a Chartered Accountant of India and is qualified to be a Certified Public Accountant in the U.S.A. He is also a certified software developer.

Praveer completed his MBA from the Indian School of Business Hyderabad, in its founding class.

In his professional life Praveer has worked for various companies in varied industries and roles in India, Middle East, U.S.A and Europe. He is an ardent traveler and adventure enthusiast. Currently Praveer is on Sabbatical from Cargemini Consulting where in his last role he was consulting global financial services clients.

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