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Manoa, Volume 19, Number 1, 2007, pp. 88-90 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/man.2007.0036>



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Whose Story?

It was only after his story was published in the school magazine that I learnt Annu had an important-sounding name: Anil Kumar Chattopadhyaya. Class Six.

Annu had always wanted to become a story-writer. He could always spin out stories. I was convinced that he would become a poet or a writer. Not everyone can be a poet; poetic inspiration is a divine gift. Annu had the rare quality that only a genius has.

Even when we played gilli-danda, Annu would sit apart, either lost in thought or busy scribbling in his notebook. I was always curious to know what was going on in his head, how he made his characters come alive, how he wrote about them on the piece of paper before him—how they lived and breathed. Annu sent them wherever he wanted to, made them do whatever he wanted them to, and as they moved from place to place, the plot of a story got created—wonderful! Story-writers are marvelous; they can kill whom they want, give life to whom they want. Aren't they like gods?

Annu laughed. We were in college by then, and he said, "No, that's not true. My characters are not imaginary; they are not under my control. In fact, I am under their control."

Annu even talked like a writer. I always liked that. I felt very proud when his stories were published in the Sunday editions of *Pratap*, *Milap*, and *Jung*.

I showed the newspaper to my mother and said, "See, a story by Annu—Anil Kumar Chattopadhyaya. That's his name."

"Really? Read it to me."

I read the story to her. It was about a poor cobbler. My mother had tears in her eyes.

"Arrey, that is the story of Bhiku, the cobbler in our lane. The same thing happened to his mother."

I didn't know that, but I immediately repeated what Annu had told me. "His stories are not imaginary, Ma. He doesn't create characters, but finds them in real life. To do that, one must not only keep one's eyes and ears open, but also keep the windows of one's mind and intellect open."

My mother was very impressed by my speech, which was really Annu's.

There was a large jamun tree in the lane. Bhiku, the cobbler, used to sit under it and repair the shoes of the entire neighbourhood. It was Annu's favourite haunt. Annu's clothes might have been dirty and unwashed, but his shoes were always well polished.

Bhiku was teaching his son, Ghasita, how to stitch the toe strap of a chappal. When I read the story out to Bhiku, his voice choked and he said, "Son, only people like you can understand our pain. Now if you people don't tell our story, who will?"

My respect for Annu increased that day. He was truly a born writer.

After finishing college, I left Delhi and went to Bombay, where I got a job. Annu started helping his elder brother run the baithak from where he distributed Ayurvedic and homeopathic medicines. His elder brother worked in some government office. He used to run the dispensary for two hours every morning and evening. He had recommended Annu for many jobs, but had been unsuccessful in getting him one.

Once, when I went back to Delhi to attend my sister's wedding, I met Annu's elder brother. He was very ill. He said to me, "Why don't you make him see sense? Ask him to do some work. What's the use of writing stories?"

I kept quiet. He coughed and wheezed for a long time. Then he said, "If only that bitch would leave him alone—he would come to his senses."

I asked Annu who the bitch was.

He replied, "Fiction. Bhai Sahib always curses it. He doesn't understand that just as he treats physical illnesses, I treat social and mental illnesses. I lance the pus-filled boils of society, light the path of people who are lost in darkness. I give them weapons to break the chains of their mental slavery."

I felt like applauding him. He talked for a long time and told me that his first book was ready for publication. Many of his stories had appeared in some of the country's leading magazines. He often got requests for stories from journals, but he couldn't write for all of them. He had even begun writing a novel, but he hadn't finished it because he hadn't been able to get enough time away from the baithak. His elder brother, who had two children, had been ill for some years. Poor souls! He was thinking of writing a story about the children.

During our conversation, he talked about great writers. I had heard of some of them—Saadat Hasan Manto, Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi, Krishan Chander, Rajinder Singh Bedi—but the ones he mentioned later were new to me: Kafka and Sartre. Some of the things he said, about Kafka's symbolism and Sartre's existentialism, went over my head. I thought that fiction had been left far behind. But Anil Kumar Chattopadhyaya, trying to explain things to me, said, "The importance of a story doesn't merely lie in the development of its plot and the characters involved in it, but in its exploration of the consciousness..."

I didn't, of course, understand what he said, but I couldn't help being impressed by its profundity.

Anil once came to Bombay to attend a writers' conference. I took out the autographed copies of his four books to show him. I used to feel very proud whenever I showed them to my friends. They were books by an important writer—and now he was staying with me! I asked him if he had finished the story about his elder brother's children.

He gave me the sad news. "Bhai Sahib died. Relatives got together and persuaded me to marry his widow. Now I am the father to his two children!"

Anil stayed with me for a few days and then left.

I read about him often in the newspapers. Whenever he published a new book, he sent me a copy.

Years later, I had to go to Delhi again. I took my wife with me. I had promised to introduce her to my friend, the writer.

That evening, Annu was sitting under the jamun tree and getting his shoes polished by Ghasita. That was still his favourite place. We began talking about fiction once again.

"The most important thing about the new kind of story being written is its concern with the changing reality. The real is not only that which can be seen. In fact, reality can't be seen with one's eyes alone. A story isn't merely about logical relationships; it is rather an exploration of the subconscious of the characters."

Amazed, I listened as Anil Kumar continued to talk.

"During the last fifty years, there have been many changes in Urdu fiction. Our stories have made so much progress that they can be compared with the best in the world..."

Ghasita said, pushing the polished shoes towards him, "Whose story are you talking about, Bhai Sahib? The people with whom your stories are concerned are still where they were before. I now sit in my father's place, and you run your brother's baithak. What story of progress are you talking about?"

Handing over the shoes, Ghasita became absorbed in stitching the toe strap of a chappal.

Translation from Hindi by Alok Bhalla