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Someone Else's Memory: The Home and the World in Nirmal Verma's Vey Din (1)

Abstract I: Nirmal Verma's *Vey Din* was written in Hindi during the early sixties when the author was living in Prague. This paper addresses the complexities of his narrative which, at a deeper scrutiny, moves beyond a mere story of love and loss and articulates a profound preoccupation with the larger questions of our modern civilization and the human condition. The constant reference to an idea of 'home', mysteriously empirical and symbolic, becomes one of the pivotal forces in the novel through which both human relationships and people's histories are creatively negotiated.

Abstract II: Vey Din di Nirmal Verma è stato scritto in Hindi durante i primi anni Sessanta quando l'autore risiedeva a Praga. Questo articolo si occupa delle complessità della sua narrazione che, ad un analisi più attenta, si presenta non solo come una semplice storia di amore e perdita ma sviluppa un profondo interesse per le più ampie tematiche della civiltà moderna a della condizione umana. Il costante riferimento all'idea di "casa", misteriosamente empirica e simbolica, diviene una delle forze motrici del romanzo attraverso la quale sia le relazioni umane che le storie individuali vengono trattate creativamente.

When Asia meets the Occident, they often do not converse in the way scholars in the Academy do. There are no seamless, solidified and undifferentiated categories that mediate their conversation. The state of the victim is an empirical reality that neither needs essentializing, nor does it merit being permanently bounded in a cultural prison. Victimhood, therefore, is not something that often vitiates the conversation, though they might share

Jyortimaya. Sharma. Someone Else's Memory: the Home and the World in Nirmal Verma's Vey Din.
Le Simplegadi, 2009, 7, 7: 24-39. - ISSN 1824-5226
http://all.uniud.it/simplegadi

common concerns about ideas of freedom and enslavement, 'home' and the 'world', identity and history. Nirmal Verma's *Vey Din* was written in the early sixties while he was living in Prague and was published in 1964. The narrative never moves out of Prague and, at a very superficial level, it seems to be a simple-enough story of love and loss. This deceptive simplicity hides a profound preoccupation with the larger questions of our modern civilization and the human condition. It is a first-person narrative, where we never get to know the name of the narrator. We know he is an Indian and is affectionately called 'Indie' by his friends after they are sufficiently inebriated. In the early pages of the novel, we find him sitting in a bar, drinking Vodka, and thinking about his happiness. His quest to find that tattered rag called happiness unfolds in the span of three days in Prague. But any account of *Vey Din* ought to begin with Verma's loving description of the city, a city of dreams, as the neon sign opposite the travel agency in the novel announces.

A celebration of Prague remains a very distinctive feature of the narrative. It captures sites, sounds and smells in a way that brings the city alive, but also creates a yearning in the reader to be there and see it all for himself. The novel begins and ends in Prague. There are references to other cities, mostly European, but the narrator's country is barely mentioned, not by him anyway, but by others, and names of the cities he might have had an association with in the past are never mentioned. There is constant reference to 'home', but the idea of 'home' remains mysteriously abstract and symbolic. It is as if the writer is consciously trying to distance himself from an empirical, and hence, an embedded idea of 'home'. As far as the novel is concerned, everything begins and ends between the night of 21 December and ends on the morning of 25 December.

While there is a constant refrain about the desirability of seeing Prague in summer, there is an equally vivid description of the winter. The cold and the wind are constantly invoked. The snow in December is described as "white, silent snow" (Verma, 1991: 9). While walking in the night through the December

snow on vacant Prague streets, he remembers the bustle in the park behind a square-structured modern church. Of course, during the Prague winter there would be gloriously warm days that seemed to suggest that the winter was over, days that were "like an empty and mysterious page in a notebook otherwise filled" (Ibid.: 44). People called it a 'false spring' – the allusion to the short-lived Prague Spring is difficult to miss in hindsight. A warm and sunny afternoon before Christmas made everyone the narrator knew anxious about love and loss, love and betrayal, but also mostly desire things, as we shall see, that we can scarcely hold on to. This is how it is described: "A complicated happiness. Not even happiness, but a moment before that, which was like the infinite terror born out of a vagrant gypsy tune" (Ibid.: 54). This complicated happiness does not deter him from being acutely conscious of the play of snow, light, smells, trees and birds.

Standing at the highest point in Prague at the *Petrinska*, and then descending the slopes of Letna, the narrator looks at the quiet glow of December. He notices tall terraces illuminated in the Sun, the spires of churches, and thinks of, what seemed at this height, a motionless commotion down there that seemed to him distanced and far removed. He could hear the sound of the river Vltava, which was like a "mild patting sound", like a "weak persuasion" (Ibid.: 94). In similar fashion, churches, streets, castles, gardens, pubs, monasteries, cemeteries, walls and parks are vividly strewn across the pages of the novel.

The narrator has very little inclination towards food. We constantly read about uninteresting meals comprising of omelets, tuna fish, salami, and always, stale brown bread. But drink, almost literally, lubricates the narrative. Beer bottles are constantly opened and the contents eagerly consumed to satiate parched throats. After the narrator gets a temporary job as a tourist guide during the Christmas vacation, he ends up at the Pelican with the money advanced to him by the tourist agency and drinks Polish Vodka. He notes: "It is said that Vodka is a sign of happiness. So, while drinking it, I began to think of my happiness" (Ibid.: 17). On his way back that night to the students' hostel, he buys a bottle of

Slivovitz brandy. There is invocation of bars and cafes like the Slavia and the Rilke Rendezvous, and the evocative Vinohradi Street. There is, at another point in the novel, a tribute to *Cognac*. It plays with thirst, he says, and opens up the accumulated words of the day (Ibid.: 71). Drinking Tokai with Raina summons awkward memories for both of them.

Prague too had its own unique sounds and silences. This was especially so on a Sunday. Every city, he says, has its unique Sunday. All other days are just other days in every other city, but a Sunday is one's own, even in an alien city (Ibid.: 77). He lies on his bed and listens to the sounds of the tram's wheels and the church bells, the shriek of children playing in the snow, the faint sound of old women whispering in the garden outside the church, the whisper of the flowing river. He smells the aroma of coffee percolating, the putrid smell of rotting leaves and watched the smoke billowing out of chimneys lying in bed. This is his Sunday in Prague, and it is his own. Prague was the 'city of your dreams', as the neon sign outside the tourist office announced. While the narrator's Czech friends could often get sentimental about the city, the foreign students improvised on what the city meant to them. It was the mother of cities, the golden city, the city of a hundred towers, the city of tears and nightmares and the city of empty pockets and full bladders (Ibid.: 25).

The narrator in his duffle coat with wooden buttons, bought in London during a visit, gave him the appearance of a hooligan. Seeing him wear this, girls would laugh at him while children ran after him. Despite his life of genteel poverty, negotiated through hopes of finding casual employment and subsisting on beer and stale brown bread, did not heighten his sense of being foreign or being in an alien city. In fact to be foreign in Prague in the early sixties could generate considerable amounts of envy as well as tolerance among the locals. Mr. Jackson, the head of the travel agency, says to him that foreigners were lucky because they enjoyed the "best of both worlds" (Ibid.: 17). Ironically, the head of a travel agency is stuck in Prague. There is a hint here that traveling abroad for him and many others like him might not be after all that effortless. When the

narrator is offered a Czech-made cigarette by him and refuses, Jackson wistfully says: “I think you do not like Czech cigarettes…What are these in comparison to American cigarettes?” (Ibid.: 14).

Among the locals, however, there is curiosity about the foreigner and what his foreign land represents. Much of this is predictably in the form of stereotypes and caricatures. The head of the travel agency, a kindly soul, suggests that the narrator spend Christmas with his family rather than being alone in Prague on that day. But he also has a hidden agenda in inviting him: “My wife would have been happy to see you – do you know she has never seen an Indian to this day? She thinks all Indians wear a turban. She would be disappointed seeing you. She would be happy later, but she would be disappointed initially” (Ibid.: 15). Later, Jackson repeats that his wife thought all Indians were either magicians or maharajas.

Peter, the janitor in the hostel, who collects stamps from the foreign students, only to sell them later to pay for his supply of beer, asks him if India was as cold as Prague and the frequency and bathing habits of the Indians. “Very rarely”, replies the narrator, “Only when it rains, people emerge outdoors to bathe” (Ibid.: 20). The ticket collector in the tram prohibits him from whistling, something he does at that moment to divert his mind from the biting cold. He feigns ignorance of the language but is soon discovered. He resumes whistling, this time as an act of defiance; the ticket conductor comments that all foreign students were the same. Another time, in another tram, an old lady conductor asks him where he came from. `India’, he replies. She sighs deeply and says predictably, “It is very far” (Ibid.: 76-77).

Each and every individual in Prague who happens to be from a foreign land, away from home, seems to be caught in a predicament unique to himself. Each of them attempts to negotiate his relation with ‘home’ while making sense of being in a city not one’s own, though not any longer alien. The narrator, who came to Prague as a young student, is now a young adult. He came to Prague hardly expecting to stay for as long as he had done. He battles with complex

emotions and must make sense of love and lust, desire and fulfillment, freedom and lack of it, choices and the absence of them. Young adulthood brings a fear that the narrator likens to reading a pamphlet of an aviation company that says: “Once in the sky, you are on your own” (Ibid.: 79). His predicament is not that of Melnakovic, the oldest resident of the hostel, who has a wife and children in Leningrad, but cannot return because of “political reasons” (Ibid.: 22). At one point he feels that “those who have a way open ahead of them are not able to be entirely happy” (Ibid.: 47).

There are other instances in the novel where the narrator peremptorily dismisses the idea of ‘home’ and a return to what is normally seen as ‘home’. It seems he is an exile by choice. Take for instance, the moment when Raina, with whom he has had an intense and very fraught three-day affair, asks him what he will do when he returns home, he brusquely answers that he never thinks about it. Even earlier, when she once suggests that he can go home whenever he likes, he dismisses the idea by saying, “I do not think about home. I think after a certain age, one cannot go home. You cannot go back to that home in the same manner as you had left it” (Ibid.: 89). Another time, she asks him if he ever got homesick, and he answers that he liked being in Prague. For him, returning home is a possibility, an option, but he cannot think of home beyond the physical possibility of returning to it. His close friend, a Burmese student named Than Thung (called TT by everyone), is lonely and miserable in Prague, hates the city, but does not even remotely entertain the idea of going back to Burma. TT’s most treasured and pleasurable moments consisted of reading old Burmese newspapers as well as old copies of *Life* and *Time*. TT knew the Czech language better than any other foreign student and yet he would never be caught reading a Czech newspaper. This is how a conversation with TT goes:

> “Do you remember home?”, asked TT.
> “No”, I said. I used to always say no so that I would have to say nothing more.

> "Sometimes I feel very suffocated", said TT.
> "Everyone feels so in the winter", I replied.
> "Now, I don't even miss home", TT remarked.
> "We are very lucky", I quipped.
> "I think Franz is luckier than us", he said.
> "He is luckier than us because he lives in Europe itself", he concluded.
> "Many people live in Europe but they are not necessarily more fortunate", I argued.
> "But they are not lonely like us…", TT said.
> "We are not too lonely…we can go home any time", I replied.
> "I never think of going back", he said.
> "But you never liked Prague", I countered.
> "That is a different matter. I don't like Prague, but it doesn't follow from this fact that I want to go back", said TT (Ibid.: 120-22).

For TT, home was a place he did not think about or wanted to return. Home had something to do with geographical proximity, but also had something to do with a sense of loss. Was it because his widowed mother was getting remarried, that he had got a letter saying so, and was caught entirely unawares of her plans? In the case of the narrator, a letter from his sister remains unopened through the entire course of the novel. Why is the idea of home so troubling, almost irksome, for the narrator?
The idea of 'home' for him had suffered an emotional, intellectual and temporal disconnect. It did little to help him connect with others, to share a common bond and history:

> "We leave home in those years when the association of home with childhood is lost, while a new relationship with home in adulthood does not get established. Now home seems very unrealistic, as if it belonged to

> someone else, and was someone else's memory. Here it meant nothing. Whatever meaning it had earlier gets blurred over days, months and years. It was now meaningless – even laughable at times" (Ibid.: 26).

To grow up, therefore, is to find the idea of a fixed 'home' meaningless, and, at times, even laughable. To be an adult was to abandon the idea of comforts that home accords and be on one's own. This rupture may not be of great help to oneself or to others, but it compensated in terms of clarity and a release from entertaining ideas of absolute certainty. It was the realization that an individual invariably remains in the dark about another individual (Ibid.: 155). Following King Lear, we do not reason the needs of strangers and those familiar to us, but there were limits to our understanding and to our ability to reach out to their complex histories:

> "There was a tradition among foreign students to leave each other's personal life alone. Not because we respected each other's privacy, but we knew that whether we interfered or not, it would make little difference. We were not cynics. A cynical person considers his understanding to be above everyone else's and takes pride in it. We did not have much pride or even self-esteem to boast of and show off. We knew each other to the extent where we would know the limit beyond which we could not help the other. You could help but not to the extent the other needed help. And if you cannot help to the extent help is needed, then, to whatever extent you might help, it does not make a difference" (Ibid.: 46).

There are others in the novel as well, equally engaged in making sense of 'home', the world, and of love and loss. Franz was from East Germany on a scholarship to study cinematography in Prague. His mother had remarried and lived in West Berlin, where he visited her occasionally. She often helped him financially as well. Franz was always dissatisfied with his tutors in the cinema

school and was on the lookout for a visa to go elsewhere, maybe to Poland or Sweden or West Germany. He thought of the film school in Prague as a kindergarten. The film school on the pretext that it was not 'healthy' and robust enough rejected every theme he suggested on which he could make a film. His childhood had been spent during World War II and he often narrated anecdotes about the War in an antiseptic fashion. His girlfriend, Maria, was Czech, whom Franz was refusing to marry. Without being married to him, she would not be entitled to get a visa to leave the country with him. For the sake of getting a mere visa, Maria would not marry Franz. For him, they just lived together. He, on the other hand, had made his mind up to leave.

The narrator and his friends try to make sense of the predicament of Franz and Maria. For TT, Franz was like any other German, not because he disliked Germans, but because Franz, the German, was leaving Maria just because she could not get a visa. For the narrator, it was inconceivable to imagine Franz living in any other city than Prague. He could not think of Franz without his friends, without himself. "We always associate certain cities with some people. Once you have removed that person from the city or dissociated a city from that person, you can never decide which of the two eventually get emptied" (Ibid.: 75), he observes. Is there something that Franz is running away from? Is he trying to forget something? Is there something from his childhood that continues to haunt his adult life? In his case, is the association of `home' with childhood too strong for him to disengage it in his adult life? The narrator mentions a chance remark by Franz that throws light on what might be the cause of his general sense of disenchantment. Drinking in a bar one night, Franz suddenly says to him: "You must not spend your childhood amidst war…It does not leave you for the rest of your life" (Ibid.: 74).

Maria on the other hand had the "courage of a sleepwalker, who moves towards danger despite being confronted by it directly" (Ibid.: 52). She never harboured a desire to seek alternatives and prepare for contingencies. The narrator describes this `courage' in the following manner: "Some people keep a

rough draft in the way they live…There is always a neatly arranged copy ready for them to use. Maria did not have this. Whatever there was, it was 'last', in its 'final' version. She did not need to correct it. Can someone be so desperate in such an effortless way…I hadn't know this before I met Maria" (Ibid.: 52). Will the narrator's own life mirror some of these tensions? Is the novel all about a set of parallel lives that have a common thread running between them?

The loss of 'home' and being on one's own propels us into getting involved in other people's histories. These affect the individual despite the lack of sharing a common fund of direct experience. Other people's histories cumulatively are also the history of nations, cultures, wars, struggles and unspeakable cruelties. It casts a shadow on lives that an individual hardly ever accounts for or is prepared to face. When the narrator (we shall now call him N) meets Raina, a divorcee from Austria, and her son, Mita, in Prague during the days leading up to Christmas, he initially sees his role only as an interpreter and guide. His feelings are soon transformed into an unspoken fear as well as anticipation and desire for her. There is a considerable age difference between them, but the thought of her and his desire for her takes a hold on him. He describes his infatuation for her in this way: "You knock on many doors, open them, and find that there is nothing beyond them…you could do this life long. Then, suddenly someone pulls your hand and draws you inside a door that you had not knocked. That person catches you and you are unable to leave" (Ibid.: 100).

Whatever transpired between them, the kiss initially, and then sex the day before she leaves Prague, is something he does not want to let go. He thinks of the first time as a child he had seen the sea, and had wished that there would be a moment when an incoming wave would never return. But the wave always went back. "At this age", he says to himself, "it is more difficult to lose something as it is difficult to hold on to it" (Ibid.: 111).

His desire for her and his longing for her was the kind of happiness one finds in leaning against something. "To lean against a thing", he says, "that might in itself may not be happiness, but you can derive happiness from it; if you are not

too greedy…" (Ibid.: 131). But this happiness was hardly uncomplicated. It was a bundle of several contradictory emotions: "The fear and pleasure of desire…It is neither truly fear nor happiness – it is divided between the two, it is neither of the two…It seems like a white piece of bare bone shining on dry, hot sand" (Ibid.: 137).

What complicated his elation and his desire was Raina's past. She had a husband, with whom she shared Mita's custody. But more than that, she had earlier come to Prague with Zach, her ex-husband. He had brought her to Prague while working on a book on Gothic architecture. Walking through Prague with her, he sees the city with new eyes at one level, but also regrets that she had seen the city earlier with Zach and not through his eyes alone. The wonderment of seeing a thing for the first time was lost for her as much as the experience of showing it to her in his way. More than anything else, Zach is always a presence between them.

Raina has lived through the War. She was sent from Vienna to Cologne to work in a textile factory making uniforms for the German soldiers. That is where she met Zach. She talks of her separation with him with the slight possibility of new beginnings with him all over again. After all they live in the same city, meet at weekends, cross each other on the street and share Mita's custody. She has a past that she chooses to forget at will. After Raina and K kiss, she says to him: "This is very strange. This has never happened to me before. Listen, sometimes walking with you I feel…that I am not I…Like the war never happened…like…like there is no Vienna behind me" (Ibid.: 98).

This sense of living in the moment does not last long. While descending from the slopes of Letna, they see graffiti on the wall, close to which they have been sitting. This is how the conversation goes:

> "Raina: They wrote just like this on the walls…Have you ever seen the camps? I mean where they were? Their site…
>
> N: "What kind of camps?

Raina: In the days of the War. The camps were everywhere. Before dying, they used to write on the walls.
N: Have you ever met a man…I mean who was there and did not die?
Raina: Zach was there in the early years. Later he was sent to our factory. I had once gone there, they are empty now. There are just some names on the walls…you can see them" (Ibid.: 106-07).

He has seen the camps only in films. It was difficult for him to imagine that he and his past had anything in common with that of thousands like Raina and Zach who had been through the experience of the War. But also, N now realizes that what he could not see and understand was tied to her past. "There are some homes", he thinks, "which even when one enters them exude the sense that one is still standing outside. An open door means nothing" (Ibid.: 108). He wanted to know more. He wanted to enter a house where he would feel at home. Raina and he disagree on the extent to which one needs to know:

"Raina: Whatever we know and the extent to which we know, that is enough.
N: I don't believe this.
Raina: This is true…You will not believe it now. We do not think so in the beginning, but later, it is just misery".

There is an awkward silence between them. The silence is broken by the following exchange:

"Raina: Do you believe?
N: Believe? In whom?
Raina: All those things…that do not exist.
N: I do not understand.

Raina: All those things that are…but we must not invest any hope in them" (Ibid.: 107-08).

On the third day, while walking with N on the streets of Prague in the night, she tells him that she would be leaving the next day, that they ought to forget what happened between them the previous day. He asks her if she always met people in this fashion and she answers in the affirmative, saying that it was difficult for her to be alone for long. Having said this, another cycle of questions on her part ensues:

"Raina: Do you believe?
N: Believe in what?
Raina: What we have got in these last three days?
N: I don't understand why you ask this question repeatedly?" (Ibid.: 162).

It is now N's turn to ask questions. He wants to excavate her past in the hope of making sense of the present and holding on to it:

"N: What happened in Cologne?
Raina: In Cologne?
N: You lived there for three years?
Raina: Nothing happened…I was much younger and I met Zach" (Ibid.: 162).

When she met him the war was going on. Zach was one of the few who had been released from the concentration camp and made to work in the textile factory. They started living together. At that time, they never thought that the War would end. After the war, they continued to live together, but they felt that they had lost something forever. She was assailed by a strange fear occasionally. What was that fear all about?

> "Fear from the peace at home. In Cologne, we never thought we would remain alive. Death at that time was close and also easy. That is why, perhaps, we started living together. Many people die during a war and there is nothing strange about it, but there are things that die after the war, in times of peace. We were among them." (Ibid.: 162).

Peace and freedom had been difficult gifts to come to terms with. Domesticity had ruined the bond that had developed between them during the War. Raina felt as if both she and Zach were living in a concentration camp in the same house. Outside the house, neither was alive. They could have continued to live in that fashion, but she decided to opt out, knowing full well that she was "not worth anything, not even love. Peace had killed it" (Ibid.: 164). She now lived for the moment. She tells him that she believed in nothing more than what she had got in the three days she had spent with him.

Before leaving Prague, Raina tries to make sense of their separation by telling him a story about a Polish Jew, who was with her in the barrack in Cologne. Those were days of hunger and deprivation. The Polish Jew, however, always remained cheerful. Raina, then, narrates an exchange between them:

> "That Pole gave us cigarettes, and then, laughing, he said that happiness is of two types – a large happiness and a small happiness. The bigger happiness always remains with us, while one gets the smaller happiness sometimes – smoking a cigarette, warming oneself near a fire in the cold, those for him were smaller joys. And bigger joys – to breathe, merely to breathe in the open air – there was no greater happiness than that" (Ibid.: 178).

The Pole was later shot and killed. Many years later, Nirmal Verma, talking of his years in Prague, felt that Adorno was only partially correct in saying that there

could be no poetry after Auschwitz. Adorno, suggests Verma, ought to have said that there can be no history after Auschwitz. Similarly, events like crushing of the Prague Spring also called into question the three central tenets of the modern European civilization: liberty, human emancipation and rationality.
In the end, human life is about striking that fine balance between the 'large happiness' and the 'small happiness'. Writing to his brother, the painter Ram Kumar, on 12 January 1967, Nirmal Verma talks of the fragility of holding on to happiness in a world where all certainties are ephemeral:

> "At twelve o'clock, we drank champagne [celebrating New years eve on 31 December 1966] and then roamed around Wenceles Square. The thought that this would be my last year in Prague strayed on and off at regular intervals inside me. Then, after drinking I thought, this is true…beautiful things do not stay for long – at least not in my hands…They disappear…Or I spoil them myself" (Verma, 2006: 18).

NOTES:

1. Presented at the XXI European Conference of the Hebrew University of Jerusalemat Prague, 6-9 March 2008. All translations from the novel are by the present writer.

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