

Laila Wadia***The butterfly effect***

According to Chaos Theory, the flapping of a butterfly's wings might create tiny changes in the atmosphere which, over time, could cause a tornado to occur. This type of sensitivity to initial conditions is popularly known as the "butterfly effect" and is exactly what Anita Desai's visit to Pordenone brings about in one of her fellow-nationals in this short story.

I was out with Fifi on her five o'clock walk. Generally speaking, when I'm out with Fifi on her afternoon business, I walk briskly, hands buried deep in the pockets of my overcoat, neck retracted into a furry turtleneck collar. Fifi is rather partial to bicycle tyres and thick stockinged calves, so I took it as a sign that she should choose to relieve herself in the midst of the vaulted archway of the Corso, between Christofle and Max Mara, right beneath *that* poster. A bill that would never have caught my eye had it not been for the fact that the Pomeranian in my custody was notably constipated that day.

A famous Indian lady writer would be visiting Pordenone and giving a series of lectures, the poster advertised. An Indian movie would be shown. And she'd be given the keys of the city. As Fifi's signature sneeze gently brought to my attention the fact that she was done, I pondered over the newfound information and realized that I didn't know cities had doors and locks.

But then, even after working here for the past five years as a domestic servant for the Marsons, there were so many things I didn't know. For an Indian of humble origin such as myself, every day was a new dawn at the school of life and I had things to pick up from everyone – starting from the baker and his vast array of breads and ending with Fifi and her ladylike sneezes. But what I did know all too well was that I was homesick - in a way that no amount of basmati rice and curry powder now available at the supermarket down the road could cure. My heart was a mouldy canvas no dog-eared photo album could colour, a ravine too deep for long-distance phone calls to fill. As a dewdrop needs the sun to sparkle, I needed to see a familiar face. A face from the motherland – warm and brown like fertile soil of my native Bihar. I longed to hear a familiar language, to look long and deep into a pair of soulful eyes from home.

Mrs Marson, the lady I worked for, would never have understood. Just as I couldn't fathom how she could spend four hundred euros on a cardigan, she thought it was standoffish of me not to spend my Sundays rubbing sari'd shoulders with the women of the tiny Bangladeshi community that had sprouted in town. To her, all dark-skins were the same – and she thought of us as robots – hands without hearts, phalanges without feelings, humanoids without a past. Only once did she ask what had brought me – unmarried and thirty-four - to this corner of north-eastern Italy, and I have a feeling that it was simply to check that there were no skeletons in my cupboard.

Papa has to have a hernia operation next month and the farm work has come to a halt, my sister Prema's prospective in-laws are getting restless because they haven't received the full dowry, and Mama says to do my best to send the money by the 15th - so I can't ask for a day off because it will be cut from my salary. What's more, I have to pay Mrs Marson back twenty euros a month for the sweater I ruined by putting it into the washing machine.

"Moth! You're worse than a moth! Not even that dreaded insect could have turned my precious cashmere sweater into this lumpy mess!" - I can't get her screeching out of my head.

It's no use coming up with the excuse of having to go to the doctor's because that is a sure way to bring the evil eye upon myself - as it is my hands and fingers ache from morning to night because of the cold.

I could never tell her the truth. I couldn't dare to ask if I might have half a day off to go to a literary conference. I can just about see her face clouding up with incredulity and the subsequent downpour of scorn.

"Time to sit pretty at a conference but no time to clean the house!" she'd huff and remind me of all the most unfathomable places dust might tend to gather in.

What's more she hates anything in print. If she catches her husband reading the newspaper she drives him insane until he is forced to put it away and join her in watching "Domenica In" or something else on television. I read the few novels I brought with me from home under the covers at night.

I'll have to use Fifi as my alibi. And that'll mean having to tell only half a lie. I'll say the dog has a stomach ache and needs to be taken to the vet. There's always a huge queue at the vet's because Italians will do anything for their pets, so she won't get suspicious if I'm away for a couple of hours.

Fifi, bribed to the teeth, sits in my straw bag merrily chewing on a bone. Almost every chair in the room is taken. I slide into a seat in the back row and, peeking through the swirls of brandy-coloured hair of the lady in front of me, I catch a glimpse of the lady writer from my native land. She smiles. I check my watch, only to find it's my heart ticking so loud and fast. She wears a baby pink sari with a black cardigan thrown over her shoulders. I bet it isn't cashmere. Fifteen minutes. Fifteen precious silent minutes go by and I fidget with the hem of my woollen trousers. Five years. It's been five years since I last wore a sari. Mrs Marson doesn't like me to. She says it would attract too much attention, from the sort of people we don't want: snoops from the tax department or labour office...

Fifi is behaving herself. I'm trying to. Eight scholars are now on the podium, talking so fast that my head is beginning to spin. The lady writer sitting beside them is the epitome of poise. Not a word has she said so far, but many a time has she nodded - retrieving her name, that of some fiction character or the title of one of her many books from the tidal wave of information with which the lecturers are flooding the hall. At a certain point one of the speakers gets up

and starts waving his hands about like a Bombay policeman directing traffic. To me he's a bad inter-continental phone connection – I get one word out of every three that he sputters in Italian - but I gather that for some reason he's upset about the way foreigners are treated in the West. I'm so touched that he should worry about us that I want to cry.

“Literature is for all, not just for the elite,” he bellows, “why are there no foreigners amongst the audience?”

I sink as low as possible into my seat and pray to Lord Rama no one is looking my way.

Next is the turn of a lady professor who says she wishes to speak about India. But what she says is a mystery to me - like when you go out to restaurant and ask for spaghetti with clams and have to go hunting for the clams with a magnifying glass, is how Mr Marson would put it.

Fifi is getting restless. My fingers are beginning to ache. An hour and a half has gone by. When is the writer going to get a chance to speak? Oh, how I long to hear one of the native tongues of my country. English, of course she'll speak English, but maybe every now and then she might toss in a few more familiar sounds.

She is finally handed a mike. And at long last my ears are filled with the sweetness of June-ripe Alphonso mangoes and the warm fragrance of fresh *jelebi*. She speaks of home, of my motherland so far from reach, so close to every nerve ending. A number of issues does she bring up: decolonization, the end of Western cultural domination, gender equality and the equality of all lands, creeds, colours and classes.

Smiles ring the room. So do happy nodding faces. Fifi barks her approval, I clap till my palms are spotted with crimson and get up to leave while the room is still throbbing with applause. I walk out of the conference hall holding my head up high, or, more aptly, I float on air. What I am is a butterfly with wings of dignity. Words can do that to you.

Laila Wadia lavora come Collaboratore Esperto Linguistico di lingua inglese presso l'Università di Trieste. E' anche una scrittrice bilingue e ha pubblicato numerosi racconti in italiano.