Tale as Useful Artefact: Basavaraj Naikar's
The Thief of Nagarahalli and Other Stories

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I

"Every real story," Walter Benjamin declared in "The Storyteller", his famous essay of 1936, "... contains, openly or covertly, something useful". The great Jewish-German critic goes on to specify: "The usefulness may, in one case, consist in a moral; in another, in some practical advice; in a third, in a proverb or maxim. In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers."[1] Benjamin was of course writing about the tradition of storytelling that may be variously called oral, folk, artisan or traditional - the tradition which, he believed, lay behind the tales of the ostensible subject of his essay, the nineteenth-century Russian writer Nikolai Leskov, and which he carefully distinguished from the fictional mode of the novel: "What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature - the fairy-tale, the legend, even the novella - is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it. This distinguishes it from storytelling in particular. The storyteller takes what he tells from experience - his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale."[2]

The novel is commonly seen as a "Western form" - a judgment which may not be totally accurate, but nonetheless serves to differentiate that narrative mode from other, older modes which exist both in Western oral and rural traditions and in the various storytelling traditions that persist outside the Western world. European and American literature provide examples of "authored" short stories with a marked traditional patina: the short stories of Thomas Hardy, with their plots resembling folk ballads (as in "The Three Strangers" or "The Withered Arm"), point back to a tale-telling tradition that precedes the novel, while Mark Twain's mining-camp anecdotes such as "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" or "Dick Baker's Cat" are built around the simulacrum of a demotic speaking voice.[3] In the evidently different context of modern Indian writing, whether in English or in Indian languages, it is likely to be part of the reader's expectation that a short story will be ventriloquised through the mouth of a narrator resembling the traditional storyteller, or, at least, that something of the feel of such a figure will be communicated through a more "modern" or "sophisticated" narrative voice. A canonic example here would be Rabindranath Tagore's famous story "The Cabuliwallah" (originally written in Bengali), which communicates a clear moral message of shared humanity through an almost didactic first-person voice that gives the illusion of a storyteller haranguing his rapt audience.[4] At the same time, that usefulness - moral, practical or proverbial - which Benjamin identifies as central to the artisan tale may also be expected to be present at the story's kernel.

The short story as it has evolved over the last two centuries is, of course, a form that exhibits remarkable diversity, and not all critical and creative perspectives on it propose an affinity with the folk-tale. Twain, certainly, in his essay "How To Tell A Story," advocates, for the "humorous story," a deadpan, poker-faced approach that in some

ways recalls the traditional tale-teller ("I only claim to know how a story ought to be told, for I have been almost daily in the company of the most expert story-tellers for many years.")[5] There is surely, too, an echo of that same figure in Edgar Allan Poe's model of the short story as a narrative constructed around "a certain *single effect* to be wrought," that aims to spellbind the reader for the time required to take in the tale ("And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction"):[6] behind the more sophisticated painterly image, the concepts of "skill" and the "wrought" object suggest the traditional story-craftsman at work. Other modern approaches, however, diverge radically from the artisan model; one need only think of Franz Kafka's allegories of a meaningless social universe, Jorge Luis Borges' deliberate transgression of the borderline between story and essay, or the "poetic", impressionistic short story as practised by Anton Chekhov or Katharine Mansfield.

The "traditional," folk-oriented approach will, at all events, serve as the best way into *The Thief of Nagarahalli and Other Stories,* the collection published in 1999 by Basavaraj Naikar of Karnataka state (India) and shortlisted in 2000 for the Commonwealth Writers' Fiction Prize (Best First Book, Eurasia section). This volume consists of ten stories which, the author explains in his preface, he has selected from twenty years' production in the genre. Though all written in English, they are intended as specifically Indian, in both subject-matter and expression: "I believe in the view that we Indians must write in our native branch of English and should not ape the British 'masters'. Our imagery and style should be redolent of our cultural ethos." They are also clearly intended as useful, in something like Benjamin's sense: "The ten stories … represent various aspects of human relationships in our life. They range from the elemental to the social to the mythical dimensions of life." (5)[7]That which is typical and representative, that which signifies one or other of the "dimensions of life," may be considered to offer some tangible use-value to the Indian reader.

II

Before considering the potential usefulness of Basavaraj Naikar's stories in greater detail, it is first desirable to examine the coherence of the volume as such, considered as a collection of interrelated texts whose signification as a whole should prove greater than that of the sum of its parts. It is here useful to fine-tune our expectations of such coherence by looking at the internal organisation of a number of other contemporary short-story collections by English-medium Indian writers, both resident and non-resident. For this purpose, a total of seven examples in the genre (stretching the definition of "Indian" slightly to include V.S. Naipaul) will now be summarily compared and contrasted.

The seven volumes of stories in question are: V.S. Naipaul's *Miguel Street* (1959), Rohinton Mistry's *Tales From Firozsha Baag* (1987), Nisha da Cunha's *Old Cypress* (1991), Salman Rushdie's *East, West* (1994), Vikram Chandra's *Love and Longing in Bombay* (1997), Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), and Anita Desai's *Diamond Dust* (2000). Of the seven authors, da Cunha is India-resident, Naipaul is a Trinidad-born British citizen of Indian origin, and the remaining five may be identified as non-resident Indians. Three of the collections employ a linking or framing

device, i.e. the stories are interrelated by common locations and recurring characters: *Miguel Street* is about the inhabitants of a single street in Port of Spain, Trinidad; *Tales From Firozsha Baag* comparably focuses on the dwellers of a single Bombay apartment block (the final story sending its first-person narrator to Canada); while the stories of *Love and Longing in Bombay*, though about diverse lives and narrated in the third person, are linked by being placed in the mouth of a single Bombayite storyteller. Naipaul employs the same first-person narrator throughout, while Mistry alternates first- and third-person modes. Those three volumes, as well as those by Lahiri, da Cunha and Desai, are examples of what might be called the "purpose-built" type of short story collection, i.e. most or all were first published in the volume in which they appear and the collection therefore gives the impression of an organic whole; Rushdie's *East, West*, by contrast, is conceptually more of a rag-bag, made up for the most part of stories first published at different times and in different contexts, though the author attempts to give his volume some degree of retrospective coherence by arranging his nine tales into three themed sections. Nonetheless, despite their purpose-built appearance, Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* and Desai's *Diamond Dust* are not necessarily much more coherent, taken as books, than Rushdie's collection: Lahiri's stories variously concern Indians in America, expatriate Indians vacationing "back home" and "real Indians in Bengal"; Desai's subjects and locations range from "pure Delhi," through "Indians in Canada," to totally non-Indian encounters set in Britain or Mexico. Da Cunha's collection, by contrast, enjoys the coherence that comes from her setting every story in Goa. If the collections vary in the nature of their spatial locations and - Naipaul's apart - deploy multiple narrative voices, almost all observe a certain unity of time (setting all their stories in what, for their initial readers, will be the present or near-past), the one exception here being Rushdie, who sets certain of his tales in the historical past or in an imagined nowhere-land.

If we now apply the criteria emerging from his fellow-writers' collections to Basavaraj Naikar's volume, it first has to be said that *The Thief of Nagarahalli* lacks any kind of overarching frame-narrative (of the type employed by Naipaul, Chandra and Mistry). There is no single first-person narrator to confer coherence on the volume: eight of the stories are narrated in the third person and two by (different) first-person narrators. Equally, unity of time as practised by most of Naikar's compeers is absent: two of the stories are set in the Raj era, one in a non-specific mythical past, and the rest, either explicitly or implicitly, in or near the present day; in other words, there is a temporal heterogeneity comparable to that found in the Rushdie collection. By contrast, there is a visible coherence in the matter of place: all the stories are set within in a restricted geographical compass, namely in various locations in today's Karnataka state, and, especially, the vicinity of Dharwad city. We thus find that concentrated sense of place which is absent from the Lahiri, Desai and Rushdie volumes, but conversely does characterise the collections by Naipaul (Trinidad), Chandra and Mistry (Bombay) and da Cunha (Goa). This suggests that if we are to seek interconnection in Naikar's story collection, it should be through that sense of place; and that, accordingly, what binds his ten stories is in some sense an essential Indianness, or, at least, a distinctively Indian approach to the tale-teller's art.

Basavaraj Naikar has himself, in his critical essays and in relation to his translations from the Kannada, stressed his companionship with what might be called a humanist or exemplary tradition of autochthonous Indian writing. Writing on Nirad C. Chaudhuri, he has praised the Bengali writer for his social realism ("Chaudhuri has been able to give a clear and convincing picture of the Indian society in his works")[8] and his "concreteness of diction,"[9] while endorsing Chaudhuri's view that the Indian writer in English should, despite the possible pitfalls of the alien language, "be native both in theme and in style,"[10] preferring the style of "an Indian who … has not de-Indianised and Anglicised himself."[11] Similarly, commenting on the fiction of another classic English-medium writer, Mulk Raj Anand, Naikar observes: "He must be congratulated for the creation of a number of character types which are indigenous to Indian society."[12] As a critic of Indian writing in English, then, Naikar clearly admires what is realist in scope and reference and is rooted in local tradition; and, indeed, similar criteria emerge from his comments on older vernacular literature, as in his praise of the classic Kannada poet Sarvajna (a selection of whose aphoristic three-line poems he has translated):[13] "The very name of "Sarvajna", which means "the omniscient", testifies to his comprehensive knowledge and vision of life."[14] Naikar expresses a certain humanist perspective which, though rooted in India, does not exclude more universal reference. Thus, in an essay on Raja Rao he evokes Shakespeare, declaring that "*The Serpent and the Rope* can be designated as the tragedy of philosophy of an Indian Hamlet"[15] (and we may here recall that in 1971 Raja Rao published *The Cat and Shakespeare*, an eminently South Indian novel which nonetheless reaches out in its title to a wider literary universe).

The critic Naikar defends an inclusive model of social realism and of the useful text which the reader may expect to find carried over into his creative writing. The ten stories that make up *The Thief of Nagarahalli* are nothing if not diverse, but all reflect the time-honoured tradition of the tale-teller's art. The title story, set "in a village called Nagarahalli situated thirty-five miles away from Dharwad," (9) in the days of the Raj, centres on a thief whose skill is such that he may, paradoxically, be considered an artist in dishonesty. "All For Gold," the collection's other Raj-era story, tells of an extramarital affair followed by a bloody revenge. "Mother's Husband," the most archaic narrative in the collection, re-enacts archetypal passions in a mythical setting which is, nonetheless, still recognisably Karnatic. Among the stories located in the contemporary world, "The Invisible Face" and "Coffin In The House" both investigate the deceptiveness of social appearances, as respectable individuals are revealed to have dark secrets; "Her Husband Went to America" broadens out the frame of reference to take in India's relations with the wider world, though far from happily as an émigré spouse employs a cruel trick to desert his wife for an American bride; while "The Anonymous Letter" strikes perhaps the lightest note in the collection, offering up a vignette of South Indian university life in a tale of minor intrigues around an atmospherically evoked provincial campus.

In their diversity (multiplicity of themes) framed in a certain continuity (the Karnataka setting), Naikar's stories may be read, for the most part in a classical realist sense, as typical and representative of a certain Indian cultural, social and psychological reality. In addition, the collection acquires a deeper coherence from the

presence of a recurring theme, namely that of human identity. Through their diverse narrative strategies, these stories examine such crucial questions as how an individual can create and maintain an identity within society, how far that identity is malleable to our will or mutable at the hands of outside forces, and whether people's social masks correspond to their hidden drives and desires.

The specifically Indian typicality of Naikar's writing has been finely brought out in an essay published in 2002 by Asha Choubey, "*The Thief of Nagarahalli and Other Stories*: Essentially Indian Stories." Taking an authenticist approach, Choubey argues that Naikar's ten stories may be interpreted in terms of a psychological model. This is not that of Freud or Lacan, but the eminently Indian model of the nine *rasas* (emotions or states of spirit), as first adumbrated in the classical Sanskrit treatise on the theatre, the *Natyasastra* of Bharata[16] -*sringara* (eroticism), *karuna* (compassion), *bhaya* (fear), *santa* (tranquillity), etc. Thus, "the title story evokes hasya or comic along with vira or heroic in the daring exploits of the protagonist, it ends admirably in santa with the bold thief having reconciled himself to his defeat at the hands of one of his rivals"; while "'Her Husband Went to America' works through sringara and karuna or compassion but ends in santa," and "'Mother's Husband' has elements of sringara … as well as adbhuta or marvellous." Choubey concludes: "Naikar's stories are closer to Indian sensibility as after all the upheavals, there comes reconciliation with the prevailing situation. And Indian optimism is evident in the fact that this final reconciliation comes not from passive submission to fate but from recognition of human courage and fortitude despite fate-imposed limitations."[17]

Within this context, as identified by Choubey, of Naikar's "essentially Indian sensibility,"[18] it may now be useful to broaden out the analysis, returning to Benjamin's more general conception of traditional storytelling while striving not to lose sight of the subcontinental perspective. Accordingly, I now propose a more detailed examination, with particular reference to Benjamin's notion of the tale as a useful object and repository of "counsel", of the three stories not mentioned so far, namely: "She Wanted a Child", "When the News Came", and the book's closing story, "Fulfilment".

III

Like several other stories in Naikar's volume, "She Wanted a Child" might superficially be considered a somewhat journalistic production. It is a tale that, certainly, reads as if it were based on a *fait divers* from a local newspaper. The story runs thus: Manjula, a young woman two years married in the Kannada town of Chitradurga, is still childless. She is offered and accepts a job at the post office in Dharwad. Desperate to conceive, she takes a lover, only to have it confirmed that she is infertile. Finally she uses a stratagem to steal a newborn baby from the hospital, but is caught and arrested. The tale ends with the baby restored to its rightful parents.

Material like this may seem the stuff of provincial scribes, and, indeed, we are told that "the news of a theft of the child by a stranger had appeared in headlines in all the leading newspapers" (124). However, it is Walter Benjamin himself who warns that the storyteller's art is, inherently, something totally different from the methods of the journalist: "Every morning brings us the news of the globe, and yet we are poor in

noteworthy stories. This is because no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation. In other words, by now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information. Actually, it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it."[19] It will here be interesting to consider how Naikar's art of storytelling manages to raise his narrative above the level of the mere "information" criticised by Benjamin.

"She Wanted A Child" opens on a highly traditionalist note, manifested in a sharp reprimand cast at Manjula by her unpitying mother-in-law: "'You have not even a single child to keep the lamp of our family burning. I don't know what is wrong with you. At your age, I was a mother of three,' complained the mother-in-law in the kitchen." (112) This opening, in both its directness and its traditionalism, may be compared to the celebrated first sentence of Vikram Seth's novel *A Suitable Boy*, in which a mother declares to her younger daughter, on the occasion of the elder one's wedding: "'You too will marry a boy I choose', said Mrs Rupa Mehra firmly to her younger daughter."[20] Naikar, following in the wake of Seth, immediately establishes his characters as typical and representative members of a society in which traditional values are the norm.

This is of course a classically realist narrative strategy, and social and descriptive realism are very much to the fore throughout this story. Quintessentially South Indian details are present as the characters eat idlis and dosas or sip "sweet hot coffee." (116) Typical elements of subcontinental urban life appear in, for instance, the din of the traffic in the town of Hubli ("Auto-rickshaws were honking and hooting and trucks and buses were roaring past the Lodge" - 117), while Indian bureaucracy is gently satirised in passages whose detail might recall similar scenes in Raja Rao's *The Cat and Shakespeare* ("The constable asked the typist to type out the First Information Report. When the FIR was ready, the constable pressed two rubber stamps on it and got it signed by the sub-Inspector" - 123). The reader is constantly reminded of the events' location in a specific place and time, and it is also noteworthy that on two occasions it is stated that the (literate) characters are conducting their business in Kannada - not, therefore, in English, the language in which the tale is nonetheless being narrated.

It is, then, within a specifically Indian (South Indian and Kannada) context that Manjula's human drama unfolds. Within this context, it is no doubt legitimate to seek in it the kind of useful message that Benjamin finds in the traditional story. From a conservative point of view, Manjula would be viewed as a disturber of the cultural order: appropriating a child who is not her own by deceptive means, she separates it from its biological parents and thus creates a rent in the fabric of society. That rent is made good at the end, with the miscreant locked away in jail and the natural parents reunited with their offspring. Indeed, it is with those parents' joy that the narrative ends: "The Sub-Inspector narrated in brief the whole story of the theft of the child and how the thief was under arrest now. Fatima and her husband thanked the PSI and his staff profusely and returned home with a great sense of satisfaction." (130) It so happens that Fatima and her husband are Muslims (121), and although the dimension of faith does not receive major emphasis in the text, the theft by a Hindu of a Muslim couple's child could nonetheless be read as metonymically symbolising the disruption not only of the social order as such but also of that element of it which concerns harmonious

intercommunal relations. At all events, on a metanarrative level the "great sense of satisfaction" which the relieved parents feel after being narrated "the whole story" by the policeman could be taken as reproducing, in the form proposed by Edgar Allan Poe, the "sense of the fullest satisfaction" felt by the reader at the end of a successfully negotiated short story. That satisfaction would here also, for both characters and reader, reflect the feelings of gratification produced as the social equilibrium is safely restored.

However, the narrative may be read somewhat differently if it is considered from the point of view of the disturber, Manjula. From this vantage point, the question of personal identity would come to the fore. Manjula feels deprived of her "normal" or "natural" identity as a woman by being childless, and clearly believes that, despite being married and employed, she can effectively have no identity in society unless and until she has borne a child - or, at least, appears to have borne one. Her solution to this dilemma is to concoct strategies. The first - her extramarital affair with her work colleague, Sekhar - is presumably posited on the possibility that her husband, not she, might be infertile. This strategy fails when, showing no signs of pregnancy after three months of intimate relations with Sekhar, Manjula consults a doctor only to be told she is infertile. The next day, she does not report for work; Sekhar, significantly, is from that point never mentioned again in the text. This detail of omission suggests that he has all along been merely a pawn in Manjula's strategy, and she now tries a second one. She enters the maternity ward at the local hospital, where she impersonates a newly arrived doctor, drugs all the women in the ward with specially prepared sweetmeats, and finally walks off with Fatima's baby. Unfortunately, her ingenuity is far from complete, and ultimately fails her: she does not notice what a policewoman at the bus station immediately does, namely that the child looks nothing like her ("she is quite fair in colour, but the child is dark" - 127). Nor does she manage to create any kind of rapport with the child, which she is clearly using as she used Sekhar: "Manjula … sat there trying to breast-feed the child. But the child used to cry continuously." (126)

Her best-laid plans were doomed to failure, and finally, instead of gaining a socially-approved identity as a mother, she loses all trace of such identity, reduced to the condition of a felon. Despite this fate, however, Manjula's actions could be read as the trajectory of a protest - blind and self-defeating no doubt, but still a protest - against the whole notion of a socially imposed identity. If Manjula is infertile, then she cannot assume the one identity that her society considers acceptable for her, and the ultimate blame for the whole episode may be shifted on to a society that fails to offer its female members a sufficiently diverse set of approved identities. Yet again, though, from a more traditionalist point of view it might be said that Manjula was rebelling against her karma: if it was her destiny, because of events in her previous life, to have to live as a childless woman, then her error was to rebel against her destiny instead of accepting it. On this reading, her true identity in this life would be identical with her karma. Naikar's text thus presents the question of a woman's identity in society and the world, through a narrative that permits more than one reading of the problem, while finally leaving it to the reader to judge. The storyteller's tale thus reveals itself as, in the

traditional sense, a useful artefact, leaving the reader to reflect creatively on the whole unsolved question of the individual's true place in the world.

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IV

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In the next story that I shall examine, "When the News Came," Naikar uses a number of strategies similar to those of "She Wanted a Child." This narrative too reads as if it had sprung from a newspaper *fait divers*. Chennappa, a truck driver from the Kannada village of Navilur, bids farewell one morning to his wife Rudravva and their young son Chandru, and departs on a routine mission. A week later, the police summon his wife and confront her with the corpse, identified by due process as her husband's, of a truck driver killed in a road accident. The face is so mangled as to be unrecognisable. Rudravva officially becomes a widow. However, after another week has passed, Chennappa, whose mission had been unilaterally extended by his boss, returns to Navilur, only to find his home deserted and himself ostracised as a ghost. Accompanied by a friend from an adjoining village, he asks the police to clear up the mystery. It transpires that the cadaver was in reality that of a different truck driver, also called Chennappa, from the locality of Kavalur. The body had been misidentified by clerical error. Chennappa is reunited with his wife and son and all return to their home village.

Here as with the tale of the infertile Manjula's baby-snatching, the story's journalistic origins appear likely enough. Indeed, the title itself contains the word "news" - and that "news" could variously be interpreted as referring to the news of the highway death, the village rumours of Chennappa's ghost, or the final revelation of his return. Another element that links this story to "She Wanted a Child" is the prevalence of local colour and typically Indian detail ("She lit the lamp before the framed picture of Lord Siva and waved the burning joss sticks before the deity" - 132; "The driver of the jeep had to struggle hard to manoeuvre his vehicle through the narrow and crooked lanes of Navilur" - 133); also present, as before, is the satiric presentation of bureaucracy. Furthermore, this tale too ends with the restoration of the order that had been disturbed. Chennappa returns to society, his wife ceases to be a widow and their son regains his father: "'Both of you have a sort of rebirth now,' said an elderly woman in the gathering. The next day Chennappa, Rudravva and Chandru went back to Navilur in a bullock cart." (147) However, the disturbance of order is of a rather different order here than in "She Wanted a Child"; and if here too the usefulness of Naikar's story may be found to reside in its exploration of the problem of identity, the context diverges substantially from that of the preceding story.

Chennappa's identity as a member of society is structured, above all, around house and family. This is clear from the first page, when, just before he sets off on his fateful journey, "Rudravva served him hot steaming *rotis*, *dal* and fragrant rice." (131) Returning to the village in all innocence, he discovers he no longer has a home: "He found that his house and the neighbouring houses were all locked … He did not know where to spend the night. So he went back to the temple of Virabhadra and lay down in the open hall there." (139) He sleeps the next night at a bus station. Bereft of his home, become a waif or stray, he has effectively lost his identity. Such a theme is not uniquely Indian: in nineteenth-century French fiction, Honoré de Balzac explored

something similar in *Le Colonel Chabert*, his novella about a soldier long believed dead who makes an unexpected return. Naikar nonetheless gives the motif a specifically Indian twist by also focusing on the predicament of Chennappa's beleaguered wife Rudravva. The news of her husband's apparent death catapults her from the accepted social status of wife to what is, in traditional Hindu society, the highly problematic position of widow. Widowhood descends on her, as an elderly neighbour "took a small chunk of stone and broke the bangles of Rudravva and wiped the vermilion dot from her forehead." (136) She is obliged to give up the signs of her married woman's identity and see her son become an orphan. It is thus, for her, an enormous triumph when, at the story's end, her married status is restituted through the restoration of the all-important symbols: "The womenfolk assembled in the kitchen and helped Rudravva put on her nose-ring, sacred *tali* and *kumkum*." (147) This collective gesture serves to welcome her back into the community of socially legitimated females.

The vicissitudes in the life of this couple - from homelessness to the return home, from widowhood back to wifehood - appear as the outcome of chance compounded by human error. In other words, the cultural order is disturbed, not by a deliberate act of revolt like Manjula's in "She Wanted a Child," but by a pile-up of circumstances beyond any individual's control. It is, at least on one level, chance that dictates that Chennappa is absent longer than expected, and chance too that not only kills a man on the highway who bears the same name, but also mangles that stranger's face so as to make the cadaver unrecognisable and therefore misattributable. It is human error - clerical error, bureaucratic error - that has the body officially misidentified, thus temporarily exiling the living Chennappa from society: "The Sub-Inspector now realised the possibility of a wrong entry in the register. He called Constable Patil and asked, 'Patil, are you sure that you have made the right entry in the register? This gentleman tells me that there is a man called Chennappa in Kavalur also.'" (143). Finally, the same Sub-Inspector apologises to the object of the confusion: "'Because our constable wrongly mentioned Navilur instead of Kavalur, all this mix-up has happened'." (144) It could of course be argued that, rather than attribute the events to pure chance, a socially and politically aware reading should take account of the labour relations that allowed Chennappa's boss to extend his mission time unilaterally, of the infrastructural conditions that led to the other Chennappa's death at the wheel, and the political system that may arguably leave undue scope for bureaucratic error. However, such interpretations are for the reader to supply. If this story leaves a useful message, or counsel, in visible and accessible form, it appears to be the notion that the identity in society of ordinary men and women is not a fixed or stable given: rather, identity is subject to the winds of change and chance, and can be blown apart and fragmented - and also reconstituted - in the most unexpected ways.

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The story which closes the collection is, significantly, entitled "Fulfilment," as if once more to confirm Edgar Allan Poe's notion of the well-told tale that rewards its readers with "a sense of the fullest satisfaction." Here, Naikar's writing, though remaining essentially within a realist frame, takes on additional connotations, drawing on the riches of India's literary tradition, that may be considered symbolic or even mythical. The narrative, set in modern times in an unnamed town in Karnataka, unfolds

as follows. One evening, Bharati, only daughter of the widower Kasinath, a devout and conservative retired judge, goes with her father to the theatre to see a performance of a classical Kannada drama. She falls in love with the lead actor, Chandrasekhar, and, even though he is an untouchable and she a Brahmin, elopes with him. They consummate their love-marriage, set up home in his village and raise a son. Her father reacts to the shock by giving up his worldly position and becoming a sadhu. After several years of marital bliss, Bharati's husband, falsely accused of a crime, is obliged to disappear for twelve years, after which time he returns home and the couple are united.

The realist mode evidenced in the stories discussed earlier at first predominates in "Fulfilment." Typical details of Indian urban life are once more foregrounded: "Bharati was gazing at the posters which were decorated with colourful lights thus providing a sharp contrast to the dull effect of the corrugated iron walls and roof of the theatre. The loudspeaker was blaring a popular Kannada song" (180); "They waited for their driver who was puffing at a *bidi* near a *pan*-shop. It was only when Kasinath sounded the horn that the driver Hussainsab grew alert and rushed towards the car" (182-183). Despite this realist atmosphere, however, the theatre performance itself introduces a different dimension, connecting the latter-day events to a much older symbolic tradition: "From inside the stage the smoke of incense rose in gyres and the bell was rung … The harmonium-master played the benedictory tune and all the actors together sung it from behind the main curtain" (180). The play itself, by the twelfth-century Kannada dramatist Basaveswara, centres on a social and cultural scandal of its day, "a marriage between the so-called untouchable bridegroom and a Brahmin bride" (181). The ancient drama sets the scene and provides a precedent for what will then happen outside it, the apparently improbable love-match and elopement between the untouchable actor Chandrasekhar and the Brahmin girl Bharati.

Bharati's very name suggests an older tradition, recalling Bharata, the theoretician of the *rasas* whom we have evoked earlier in this essay. As the narrative advances, its archetypal Indian connotations become deeper and more evident. The lovers get married in a Hanuman temple (188), in a reference harking back to the beneficent monkey-god of the *Ramayana*. Bharati's father replicates a time-old tradition by metamorphosing from judge into sadhu: "Kasinath collected a few clothes and a couple of silver bowls, gave the key of his home to a neighbour and set out on his pilgrimage to the Himalayas" (192). The sudden unexpected turn in Chandrasekhar's life - exile from home and separation from wife and child - takes on connotations of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* (Rama and Sita exiled in the forest and then separated; the Pandavas banished from their kingdom). The theme of lovers separated by chance - for chance alone can explain the false and arbitrary pinning of a crime on Bharati's upright husband - also (if we recall the story's theatre theme) points back to another great work of the Indian tradition, Kalidasa's drama *Shakuntala*, with its passionate lovers, king and woodland girl, who come together across a social gulf, are separated by a fatal bout of amnesia, and are finally reunited in the play's closing consummation. Basavaraj Naikar's characters are thus made protagonists in a love-drama that is eminently and anciently subcontinental, right up to the tale's closing moment when "both of them remained in a paradise of silent sweetness" (193).

The counsel or use-value that may be drawn from this story of Naikar's can, once again, be said to centre on the question of identity. For all three protagonists - Bharati, her father and her husband - identity proves to be something that is not fixed or static but can, rather, evolve and mutate in unexpected ways, affected by both choice and chance. Bharati chooses a love-match, and thus a life totally outside the traditional limits that would otherwise have determined her existence. Her father has denied her a college education, and her expected future would have been an arranged marriage. It is meanwhile clear - and here Naikar shows considerable artistry via discreet understatement - that if there is a precedent for Bharati's act of revolt, it lies not in the alien influence of "Western liberalism," but in the Indian and Kannada tradition itself - in Basaveswara's play from the twelfth century, which long ago dramatised the possibility of a love-match crossing caste boundaries. Chandrasekhar, as much as Bharati, chooses to give his life an unexpected direction by surrendering to the unexpected love-relationship and taking it all the way to marriage; later, when he is pushed into exile and disguise ("he went to Bombay in the guise of a beggar" - 189), his life is once again reshaped, but this time by forces totally outside his control. Kasinath, for his part, finds himself a prey too to the unexpected, to the shock of his daughter's elopement, but manages finally to transcend it through an act of conscious choice: the decision to become a sadhu and centre the rest of his life on the spiritual. He thus creates a new identity for the final years of his life. This choice is, at the same time, an option available to him within Indian tradition (the life of a sadhu is even recommended to men of advanced years whose offspring have grown up), and he takes the decision after consulting a high religious authority, in fact being "advised by H.H. Sankaracharya" (192). Kasinath, then, makes a life-choice that is legitimated by mainstream Hindu tradition, whereas his daughter's life-choice may be said to stem from a dissident or critical strand within that same tradition. The intertwining of chance and choice in human lives may be said to form the kernel of the counsel that this story offers the reader. Here the reader may wish to think back to the ancient literary tradition, and to the arguably parallel teaching that emerges from *Shakuntala*, where choice and chance combine to generate the characters' complex vicissitudes.[21]

Naikar's tale is, in fact, both traditional and contemporary, sketching an emancipatory possibility for India's womenfolk while rooting that very emancipation in an alternative reading of the tradition. From the contemporary angle, an interesting analogy exists with the closing tale in another story collection published almost at the same time as Naikar's, namely "The Rooftop Dwellers," the concluding narrative of *Diamond Dust*, Anita Desai's volume (as mentioned above) of 2000. Desai's story tells the fortunes of Moyna, an independent-minded young girl from the provinces who arrives in Delhi seeking work, and manages to survive triumphantly as a single woman in the capital, keeping herself afloat in the difficult environment of the publishing world, with the help of a cat and an emancipated female friend and despite substandard rooftop accommodation and an unsympathetic landlady. Moyna, unlike Naikar's Bharati, seeks her freedom not through a love-match but through the world of work - "such was her determination," says Desai's third-person narrator, "to make her new life as a working woman in the metropolis succeed," even though "her mother did not understand … the attraction of living alone, in Delhi and could think of it as only a poor substitute for living at home."[22] Anita Desai's approach is, certainly, more

ideological than Naikar's, with an evident feminist undercurrent; it remains worth remarking, however, that two virtually contemporaneous collections should conclude on the same theme, a young woman's creation of a new identity for herself through a successful defiance of cultural norms.

VI

The three stories by Basavaraj Naikar that we have examined in detail all fall clearly within the terrain of the traditional story, focusing from different angles on the subject of human identity and thus offering the reader counsel, or useful material for reflection. Further analysis would no doubt find similar features in the other stories in the volume. Naikar has, while remaining faithful to the Indian tradition, succeeded in endowing his narratives with a broader universality that pays tribute to the age-old human faculty of storytelling. Closing his volume, the reader, satisfied yet also stimulated to thought, may legitimately recall the celebrated words with which Benjamin ended his study of traditional narrative: "The storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself."[23]

NOTES

[1] Benjamin, "The Storyteller" 86.

[2] Benjamin 87.

[3] See Hardy, *Selected Short Stories*; Twain, *Short Stories*.

[4] See Tagore, *Collected Short Stories*.

[5] Twain, "How To Tell A Story" 266.

[6] Poe, "Tale Writing. Nathaniel Hawthorne" 446.

[7] Naikar, "Preface" to *The Thief of Nagarahalli and Other Stories*. All subsequent running-text references in this essay will be to that book, as its main subject.

[8] Naikar, *Critical Articles on Nirad C. Chaudhuri* 6.

[9] Naikar, *Critical Articles* 106.

[10] Naikar, *Critical Articles* 103.

[11] Naikar, *Critical Articles* 114.

[12] Naikar, "The Image of New Woman in Anand's *Gauri*" 1.

[13] See Naikar, trans., *Musings of Sarvajna*.

[14] Naikar, *Sarvajna: The Omniscient Poet of Karnataka* 4.

[15] Naikar, "Coming Together: the Central Problem in *The Serpent and the Rope*" 52.

[16] The *Natyasastra* is thought to have been composed at some point between 500 and 700 CE. There is some dispute as to the number of the *rasas*, with some commentators arguing that there are eight rather than nine, with the ninth, *santa*, best characterised as the absence of emotion and therefore not a *rasa* proper. Useful on-line accounts of *rasa* psychology may be found at: <http://www.nadanam.com/general/g_navarasa.htm> and: <http://

www.saigan.com/heritage/dance/rasa.htm>. For a general discussion of Bharata's treatise, see Rajan, "Introduction" to Kalidasa, *The Loom of Time* 28-33.

[17] Choubey, "*The Thief of Nagarahalli and Other Stories*: Essentially Indian Stories" *passim*.

[18] Choubey *loc. cit.*

[19] Benjamin 89.

[20] Seth, *A Suitable Boy* 3.

[21] For the role of chance in *Shakuntala*, cf. Rajan, "Introduction" to *The Loom of Time* 50-52.

[22] Desai, *Diamond Dust* 161, 207.

[23] Benjamin 109.

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