

**Lila**

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Evening. Dye from prayer flags mounted on bamboo poles runs into the western sky. They have fluttered here for over a century now and it is impossible to imagine the landscape without them: the mast of bamboo, the spinnaker of flag, the hulk of shack and the rudder of plough steered by a boy through scalloped earth. My jahajibhai. My shipmate. Though on terra firma, he still sways to the raga of the sea, preparing the land for the advancing season. Draw near him and you see that his skin is salt, his hair kelp, his fingers coral and those are the eyes of a drowned man. The sea. Sagar. Kala pani. Five generations of howling at it has left an indelible mark on him. Now it is a habit, this howling. The sea: sponsor, foe, lover, tormentor. You left him in transit between Calcutta and Nadi, between state and state you left him stateless. Why? The scrolling waves publish dumb sheets in reply. As always. No dues, no riddles. The boy tilts the rudder; he is guided by the earthworm, the koraning cicadas, the sun now the pallor of kavika, the starapples ripening against an olive sky. His sparring with the sea is familiar to both of them, but sometimes he forgets if he is pushing a prow through clods or a plough through surf. For the earth is like the sea here, always moving beneath him. It is leased. They call it the Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act. He calls it a disturbance in his soul.

Women are here too, sitting under a great banyan tree on pandanus mats, sieving flour for weevils, sheUing pods for nuggets, cracking the domes of dreaming pumpkins. And rising around them the sexual odour of 'rotting tamarinds, dark as their bodies, distracting them from coy thoughts of fired stoves, charred pots and chattering utensils. Like the boy with the plough who has departed, they too fold their mats, round up shoeless children and make for home, only to change sarees for the lila of Ram, about to begin on the banks of the river Nadi. They will throng around the playing field: farmers, merchants, bureaucrats, teachers, physicians, bankers, housewives, bus drivers, shoeless children, kava drinkers and, among them, the boy now minus his plough and the women now without their mats.

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The river Nadi. Wet horsegrass hangs over its banks and every morning the village women from Narewa lift up the tresses, grailing for freshwater shrimps. A grudging river flows here, purling over knuckly stones furred with moss and algae, passing Marchy angling for Malaya from the scarp of Hari Prasad's bellup, a milking station littered with cowpat archipelagoes through which the maggot ploughs. I want to call to him from the prison of this page, 'Marchy, sala fuckenarse, watch out you don't catch VD instead.' I wait for his grin, but Marchy is now somewhere in San Jose, trying to find his feet, feet of a vasu, feet disclaimed by both Fijians and Indians, and all that remains on the scarp are traces of flight: a tin of wriggling bait, three rusted hooks, ribbons of lead and the scarlet gills of fuming Malaya. They dredged the stream where he taught me the art of skewering bait without killing it and the wristy tug that always bore snapping fruit. The fish too have made their exit. But all this takes place in the future when I have learnt to tattoo a tune along the prison bars of this page.

For now, there is a bridge stringing the river like a bow; an archery of children leave it at irregular intervals for the cool hide of the stream below. They break the surface in flocks, vanishing underskin, before emerging with pearls in their steely hair. Voices reach them from across the playing field, now a bustling stage for the week-long enactment of Tulasidasa's *Ramayana*.

I'm there too, but not among the buzzing crowd, nor among the sweet vendors with barfibricks piled up on enamel basins, neither am I among kava brewers, wagging a tongue that grows fatter with each bilo until it becomes impossible to speak. I am regally enthroned on a gilded chair, attired in the embroidered garment of rajas, a tinsel diadem on my head. At ten years I'm already a prince, the youngest brother of Ram, who has been banished to the forest by Keikei, the mother of Bharat. Keikei covets the crown for her biological child. But Ayodhya will be governed by a pair of sandals belonging to exiled Ram, for Bharat loves his halfbrother more than his own mother. And so begins the lila. Ram, Laxman and Sita enter the dark forest. Bharat stands by the sandals, bereft, and so do I.

I have very little to say in the play, but between acts earnest women arrive with fluttering artis to describe hallowed loops around my face and to leave an imprint of holy ash on my forehead. I'm after all Shatrugun, the youngest brother of Ram, who is an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. I bask in reflected glory. There is no separation between the secular and the sacred here. Of course the women know I'm not Shatrugun, but for the moment - this evening, this week - I represent a walking image of the infinite. Even as a child I knew the measure of my responsibility as an actor in a play that is also a prayer. And I don't tread on prayers.

Yet I become aware of something else during the lila: theatre or natak. I recognize the artifice, the conventions, the genealogies, the intricacies of plot, the departures, the moral quarrels, the vedic quandaries, the sexual codes, the circular diagram of the yatra. The natural recedes as I assume a deliberate mask, and so begins the act of my first naming in Hindustani. Naming occurs when we become conscious of the process itself, when we begin to reflect on the names we carry within us.

In the beginning was the lila and the lila was in shudh Hindi, the Hindi of the poet Tulasidasa. I wrestled with my lines because they were in a language I did not grow up with, did not fully grasp. There was a further tangle. Tulasidasa's Hindi was interspersed with incantations in

Sanskrit. But my trouble with this shudh Hindi that I had to memorize brought about an awareness of the different Hindi I spoke at home, in the streets, among friends. Fiji-baat, a Hindi that grew out of the girmit experience, at once vital, ribald, earthy, poetic, ironic, impure, maligned, a hybrid monster of a Hindi that drew sustenance from Fijian and English, among other languages, a Hindi that made the proper names of other languages improper, the better to enlist them for its own unfolding. I loved it then; I love it now.

Mounted on a platform draped in glittering crêpe, war between monkeys and rakshasas raging around me, I lived in a theatre of languages. But even before the lila on the river bank, before my first act of artifice, there were other tongues that desired to name me and I desired to be named by them, for the language of instruction in primary school was English. A proper naming in this English however takes place some years later because, for a time, I treat it as a language of essays and exams. It is a curricular language and lacks fizz.

Meanwhile, in the streets of urban Fiji another English is emerging, a vigorous English, an English spoken mainly by vasus but fast becoming an English of most urban dwellers, especially those from the less visible classes. It is called veranda English, a truncated English used initially by colonial types to converse with servants from hammocked verandas. No, that's not true. Rather it is an English that servants forced colonial types to employ when speaking to them from imperial verandas. The formulation matters. Like Fiji-baat, veranda English has mutated into something different and this is obviously an ongoing process. I can hear it wafting across clotheslines, hovering above tanoas, being stitched up in garment factories. It circulates everywhere: rowdy watering holes, low-cost housing estates, vocational school compounds, teeming vegetable markets and especially inside taxis shimmying along Mark Street. It is impossible not to be named by it. Veranda English is the language of yet another naming. Neither pidgin nor creole, it aspires to a collateral status but has some way to travel *yet*. It melts in my mouth like molasses.

What impure dreams of babel, of a mela of flickering tongues, distracts Shatrugun from his game of dice, while about him, in a gory tableau of war, Laxman is suddenly felled by an arrow. The action freezes as a distraught Ram consults with Susena and his physician tells him of an inhospitable mountain where grows the herb of healing and resurrection. Near death in exile, potential healing in exile and, earlier on in the lila, the possibility of love in exile, at least for Laxman. Shatrugun searches the audience for the boy-farmer, the one of the plough who has felt the sea move beneath him. How long before the place of exile becomes home, and return a crueller banishing? Crueller precisely because return to an origin is like entering the negative of a photograph where every recognition is a misrecognition. A white figure, a landscape in outline, a skeletal pose - in the negative we dimly recognize a ghost, a place, a pose never encountered. It is a kind of haunting, a structure of claitvoyance, whereby we recognize that which we are not, for we have become visible elsewhere, in another landscape that is not negative but the real thing.

Shatrugun spots the boy in the crowd. He is standing under a breadfruit tree at a distance from the watchers, surrounded by planets that fell from a leafy galaxy and falling wept the lime of grief and now lie rusting in its arboreal shadow, the rust spreading minute by minute, as if through an invisible chemistry, till one day there is nothing left but familiar earth and above it the idle suspiring of wind through freshly printed leaves. All at once the boy's hair turns to resin, his arms become boughs and his feet sprout roots that are driven miles into the earth, till they emerge on the other side of the globe and hang down like nerve ends in space. Drive your

roots deep enough and you end up in infinity, says the breadfruit tree, which has borne witness to the boy's transformation. But infinity does not nourish, retorts the boy-tree, and promptly withdraws his roots to a patch of land beneath the breadfruit tree. And then his roots are too close to the surface and he reverts to the condition of a boy-farmer with feet and is instantly seasick.

Shatrugun has strayed. In his extended reverie he has missed Hanuman's flight to the mountain and his triumphant return to Lanka with the enchanted herb. The heaving crowd, the sweet-vendors, the dripping village children, who are now in the audience, begin to celebrate as the herb works its magic and Laxman rises grandly from the dust. Laxman, the object of universal anxiety, when unmasked is an impoverished shop assistant toiling long hours for Narotam and Sons. The role, the herb ennobles; the lila gives a heroic purpose to the drudgery and monotony of his life. The lila's narrator, droning the poem from a makeshift shed, revs his narrative at this point and then an impassioned bhajan erupts from somewhere in the darkness, as the Wailoaloa Ramayan Mandali pays homage to Hanuman, saviour of Laxman and Commander of Ram's army, and sets the context for the next scene.

Shatrugun, however, has once again drifted into the future, by a few months on this occasion, and begins to resurrect pictures of an event that brought about another naming, a partial one in Fijian. There is a white room; it is spartan except for a large kauri table with arthritic chairs scattered around it. The chairs will soon groan under the weight of card-players, for it is nearly one o'clock and the kava is brewed - only the boss has yet to arrive. And since they always reserve the first bilo for him, they wait. He arrives five minutes later than usual. The bilo is served, hands are clapped and the game begins. The men are predominantly Fijians employed by the Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji as drivers and supervised by my father, who is the officer in charge of transportation. When I'm not at school, he brings me to his workplace and leaves me with his drivers.

I sometimes help them wash the creamy government vehicles, but prefer to sit in the shade and listen to them converse among themselves. They speak a Nadi dialect I catch my father using whenever he talks to them. English and Hindi are seldom spoken here, and so all my energy is spent trying to understand the world around me. My father is a master of the dialect, I find out later, but for him that is unimportant. He is a practical man, ordinary, provincial, relaxed, unintellectual. Like his drivers. Language is for him an evanescent butterfly and not a thing to cast in bronze. He speaks it and it is gone. Whereas I plunge the living butterfly into a vat of molten ore in search of an aesthetic that is durable. I prepare for my arc by eavesdropping.

The flood in the tanoa ebbs but I scarcely notice the recession, for I'm busy savouring morsels of Fijian. The game of cards has become a field of flying hons mots, slapping thighs and crater-wide grins. It's a world that is closed to me but open to my father. I'm like a knight near the dark tower, satisfied with the occasional curse or syllable hurled at me from the turret, but forever waiting for the drawbridge to lower. They call my father 'boss' without irony because he isn't a massa, he's a vulagi who saunters through the thickest of their culture without affectation. At home the tabuas pile up, sinnet-bound crescent moons that the drivers offer him annually. They are under no obligation to do so, for he is neither a big man nor a chief, and they probably can't afford them, for tabuas are expensive commodities.

They do it out of an inexpressible affection, a tofa to a stranger who uses their language as if it were his own, with verve, intimacy and a sense of relish. He names himself in their language and the language names him in turn. They recognize this contract of soul and that he is forever altered by it.

Once in high school, I choose to study Fijian instead of Hindi. I'm in a group of seven non-Fijians who make that choice, but the teacher isn't interested in us and we, *in* turn, are interested in smuggled issues of *The Phantom*, that white ghost who walks in Bengal among servile pygmies and sobbing willows and has a private beach of carated gold. What delirious visions of capital enthralled us then, kept us from mining the golden rasa of language? Teacher and pupil - there was an abdication of responsibility on both sides. But the streets didn't let us down. Now and then straggler word-bees would fly up our nostrils and make honey in our heads. Ko iko cakacaka tiko na Adi Bee. The honey trickles down our tongues, never enough but always sweet. Vinaka vakalevu, Degei.

Kumbhkarana's sleep has been disrupted; he doesn't like it. Sleepless for six months he had just dozed off when Ram, marching his army of simians over a stone bridge, triggered off the war in Lanka. The war's trophy is Ram's wife, Sita, abducted by an infatuated Ravana, brother of Kumbhkarana and king of Lanka. Kumbhkarana slumbers. Each hiatus in his snoring is filled by the din of pounding mace, whimpering children, tearing flesh and splintering bones. Cursing and spitting, the ogre rises; he has a handlebar moustache, a small loaded priapus and enjoys listening to Frank Sinatra. Shatrugana is perplexed. Surely he is in the wrong lila, guns and Frank Sinatra seem odd in the present set. Kumbhkarana cracks the butt of his gun on the skull of a crouching monkey. The monkey turns and flees, bleeding. *I did it my way*, the ogre crows to the moon.

Shatrugana shuts his eyes against this anachronism and finds himself exiting a phone booth in Sydney, amid pillows of smoke and bolts of electricity. The dock inside the booth reads 1979. He stays for twelve years among nasal accents, fair dinkums, lilt of other accents: Greek, Koori, Vietnamese, Italian, Lebanese. Each one pours a trace of pollen dust into his ears. These are names among his other namings. While in exile he listens to ghazals and qawalis, paying attention to the lyrics in Urdu. Already a trace language in Hindi, Urdu names him Shah Jahan instead of Shatrugana. He gleans phrases, conceits, metaphors, rolling them on his tongue. He enjoys the rasa, the flavour, and resolves to be an aficionado of the language in his next avatar. Ghazals and qawalis become part of a naming in Urdu.

After twelve years, Shatrugana re-enters the phone booth, red paint curls and blisters on the four walls and abracadabra, in a tempest of smoke and electricity, he is back in Nadi, circa 1989. Thereafter he will become a traveller in a red booth, at home only in transit. Kumbhkarana is still crowing about how he did it his way, still looking for a pure grove of taukeism through the lens of English and Fijian, languages that carry the impure viruses of other languages, other ideas, other ways of seeing.

On the banks of the river Nadi, sixteen years in reverse, Kumbhkarana falls. He is a vain and silly ogre, a caricature of himself, and so his fall is neither celebrated nor lamented. Shatrugana watches the melodrama of the fall from his pavilion in Ayodhya. Scattered about the ogre, as far as the eye can see, are uprooted forests, broken elephants and a sea of people without feet.

Having journeyed through the past and the future, having been named in many tongues, in full and in part, Shatrugun sits in Ayodhya, a carnival of voices rioting in his head. Shudh Hindi has long been altered by these voices, so that his lines are no longer scripted by Tulasidasa. Instead they are the lines of a diasporic self, releasing the perfume of cowpats, wet mongoose pelts and gecko droppings. They bend as easily as sea palms in the trades. Shatrugun's lines are infected by the voices of Navoci women, Rewa street sweepers, Sydney drunks, Urdu ghazal singers, Nasinu kava drinkers, Bombay film actors, Maiolo canecutters and Suva market vendors. Yes, language is a carnival and not a battlefield, but a carnival is not an apolitical circus. A carnival is a site of quarrels, choices and positions, both within and without the self. It is the way we assemble these voices to forge a text that matters in the end, for what we leave in and leave out, what we articulate and silence, betrays an ideological strategy, a way of naming a world we may love and dislike. My voices and choices are meant to alter from within the architecture of the great colonial bungalow. English is part of an enforced legacy I've grown to love, but extensive renovations are in order. In fact, the new owner will most certainly remake the bungalow in his own image. And this image is impure, eclectic, almost certainly heretic. The way of purity is the way of gas chambers.

Ravan is dead. Lanka burns. And Ram, Laxman and Sita return from exile to Ayodhya. As they embrace, Ram and Shatrugun know that one has wandered in forests while the other has wandered in memories, and that both bear myriad names within them. And so their brotherhood is forged in a convergence of impure voices in the canefields of Ayodhya, by the banks of the river Nadi.

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### Author's biography

Sudesh Mishra is the author two critical monographs, including *Diaspora Criticism* (Edinburgh University Press, 2006) and five volumes of poetry, including *The Lives of Coat Hangers* (Otago University Press, 2016). His recent research publications include 'Through the Eye of Surplus Accumulation: Joseph Conrad's 'The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' and 'Typhoon,' in *Tracking the Literature of Tropical Weather: Typhoons, Hurricanes, Cyclones*, A. Collett, R. McDougall and S. Thomas (eds.), Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017; 'Global South and the Anachronistic Heart of Modernity' in *Cambridge Critical Concepts: The Global South and Literature*, Russell West-Pavlov (ed.), New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming; and 'Narrating the South Asian Diaspora' in *Oxford History of the Novel in English Vol.10: The Novel in South and South-East Asia*, Alex Tickell (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

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