

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

The Tamil Hero and His Tribe Abbas Zaidi

I had to pull up as I took the right turn to enter Queen's Street. In front of me was a corpulent boy a teenager panting, terrified and pedaling laboriously on a bicycle. A furious-looking woman, bare-foot and in a long, flowing black-and-red tunic, was chasing him with a long, greenish bamboo stick in her hand and shouting. The sweat on the boy's brown torso was shining in the sun; he was wearing something like white bikini briefs from which his enormous bottoms were trying to squeeze out. On the roadside stood a man wearing nothing but a dark orange loincloth, red joggers with long white socks and a huge black moustache, watching the chase; his mouth was wide open. They all looked Tamil.

I managed to drive past them safely and found the house that the government had allotted me. Close to my gate stood a thin bare-footed boy, also Tamil-looking, about ten years of age. He was wearing a Batman costume, holding a Batman mask in one hand and a big toy machine gun in the other; an enormous fake moustache was his most pronounced facial feature. He was looking up at the mango-laden tree inside my house. He fired the gun at us and ran away.

Atiya and I got out of the car; it was a hot tropical afternoon. I looked around. The houses were huge with very big side lawns. But the front lawns were rather small, so the only neighbour one could really have was the one living in front. I unlocked the gate and we went in. Atiya liked it immediately: there were a number of rooms on the ground floor and upstairs, and all household facilities were provided. Our housemaid was supposed to arrive in a month's time, so keeping up the house would not be a problem, I thought. I could not have asked for more; but I was a bit puzzled. Haji Khatri, the housing officer, had laconically told me that no one had stayed in that house more than a fortnight. Upon my query, he said with a chuckle that people would just request a transfer without telling why.

Was it a haunted house? Not at all, Haji Khatri loudly laughed as he said no.

I was too tired to think about the matter after having lived in a miserable tiny 'standard' room of Prince Hotel for three months, awaiting my posting. Moreover, Atiya was seven months pregnant and needed a better place. I never told her of Haji Khatri's statement. After travelling 400 kilometres from Tilong City – the capital of the Kingdom of Tilong situated on the northwest tip of the island of Borneo – to Lumut I wanted to leave everything behind.

As I relaxed in the living room, Atiya started placing a doll house, a baby walker and a number of toys in a corner; she had bought all kinds of toys in case it would be a boy or a girl. At that moment, a pungent rose scent hit my nostrils. I got scared. Perhaps the house was haunted, I thought. The doorbell rang. I opened the door with some fear. It took me a few seconds to recognize the visitors: they were the four characters that I had seen moments before. The woman was wearing a glowing star-studded orange *sari* and the pieces of jewelry were laden on her from head-pins to tinkling anklets like the mangoes on the tree that stood in my lawn; the man wore a blue polo shirt, denim jeans, a huge diamond ring and a number of thick gold chains around his neck; the fat boy was wearing a formal suit and two gold pins were fixed to the tie. The little Batman was now in a police uniform, minus the moustache; there

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was a cigarette stuck at the back of his left ear; a set of shining, golden handcuffs was hanging down his neck.

They barged in and made themselves comfortable on the sofas. Before we could start a conversation, the Batman went up to Atiya, tilted his elongated head to one side, put his hand below the ear and jerked it up in such a way that the cigarette flew up in the air. With an acrobatic move he bent backwards and the cigarette landed between his lips. Then with the speed of light he dashed to the corner where Atiya had placed the toys, and rushed out of the house with Shrek's wife and a Barbie, leaving her breathless.

The woman almost shouted at Atiya in Tamil followed by the man who spoke in delectably unforgettable English, 'Don't suppress your brain! Guru is just a naughty goon for this day today. We will steal your toy from his active possession when he is sleeping carelessly during night.'

At that, his wife spoke to me in Tamil in a high tone, if not somewhat shrill. She shook her head as she spoke, a typical Tamil style. Now the man addressed me: 'Actually, Guru was born in the premature manner before the right time in the village. You must be knowing that the village is 47 kilometres situated from the government hospital. It was a strange situation to be in. My wife's midwife said Guru is not surviving, but we take him to our village priest who said he will survive if we reciting some special *mantras* for two months without seeing the sun. My wife Arti and I did that. It was extremely painful for us and my in-law family, but Guru was surviving so that is why we not say something or anything to him so that he no become depress and stop eating too much and become extremely weak. But you will have your toys back.'

The man was Kumar, his wife Arti, and his elder son Dilip. Without my asking he said that he was 45, his wife 28 and the kids the same age as I had thought. He lived opposite my house. To my happy surprise, I learned that Kumar was a vehicle body repair mechanic in the mechanical engineering department in the same college where I had been posted. He said that the college was five minutes' drive from Queen's Street.

'What is your nationality?' Kumar asked suddenly.

I said I was a Pakistani.

'Same same your wife?'

'Yes,' I said.

'Yes?'

'Yes.'

'Any other important informations and advices?'

'No.'

'Good.'

He became deeply thoughtful for a while. 'All the shops here,' he began, 'are Tamil and all the Tamils here have come from Tamil Nadu like I which is the greatest and beautifulest state in India. Our shops are so cheapest and best and in so many plenties that you can purchase even the urine of a lizard from inside them!' he proudly said. Meanwhile his wife kept nodding. After that he asked me to accompany him to the shops just outside the Queen's Street to familiarize myself with the people and the place. I wanted to stay home. Arti said something emphatically to me as if making a point. At that, Kumar nodded and firmly grabbed my wrist and almost dragged me out saying,

‘No need to ashame! I am introduce you with all the shopkeepers and workers. They will be becoming very cooperative with you. Your wife only phone them and they bring everything on special discount as well as on loan and installment and sometimes free on festival occasion.’

There were many food stalls and general stores just up from Queen’s Street. Kumar told me that the stalls and stores were all owned by the Malays, the locals. The stalls were run by Filipino men and women, and the stores were run by the Tamils, all men. However, the Filipinos and the Tamils actually owned the businesses and paid money to the Malays for using their work licenses.

On seeing Kumar, a number of Tamils came out rushing and flocked around him. He seemed to be their undisputed leader. They addressed him as ‘Sir’ or ‘Professor’. I thought I also heard ‘Your Honour’; I am not sure. Kumar talked to them for a while, totally ignoring me, as I stood silent and stupefied. As he talked, he constantly and loudly broke wind. After quite a while he realised my presence and pointed his finger at me, saying something aloud. At that the workers pounced upon me, shaking my hand and in some cases hugging me. Kumar said aloud,

‘Never be torturing your mind if he is a Pakistani; he not like those arrogant Keralites and North Indians. That is why he has choosing house in our area and make us his friend!’ Then he spoke in Tamil; perhaps translating what he had just said.

A man brought a drink in a disposable glass and gave it to Kumar; he took a sip and said something. Within seconds another disposable glass was brought. He took a sip from it, nodded in approval and returned the glass to a man standing nearby saying loudly: ‘This one is more better’. He gestured to the man and he handed me the glass. Said Kumar, ‘Good soft drink; no alcohol mix so that it is *halal*. I just verified it myself.’

Everyone stared at me without saying a thing while I drank. Kumar also stared at me constantly while whispering to a worker who constantly nodded while staring at me. After I had finished, Kumar came up to me and said,

‘All the workers in this area and many other areas in Lumut are coming from our village in Tamil Nadu in India. I am meaning that Arti and I am belonging from the same village, so that is why I am saying *our village*. To tell you the truth, Arti is my first cousin.’ After his statement Kumar inserted his right-hand index finger into his nostril and left it there as if blocking the passage. He became static for a while. He then violently stirred the finger for good thirty or so seconds, withdrew it with a jerk and took a good look at and shook his head slowly in disbelief. Then he produced a handkerchief from his pocket and wrapped it around the finger tightly. Meanwhile everyone remained static and mute but indifferent as if nothing was going on. Kumar cleared his throat so that everyone became attentive and he continued addressing me: ‘My village’s population is fifty thousands. In our village not many educational and electric facilities except one primary school and two world class cinemas, but we are hardworking people, so we like to survive. Like our fathers and mothers before, we walk two hours to get water from the river. But now, with my own money, I build a tube well that is operating by pure diesel. Now people coming to my tube well to get the free water. But still water problem is existing. We have no draining system; next year I building a drain as big as the Ganges and many public toilets. But we are good people. Our one villager when going abroad, he is pulling and sponsoring many

3

fellow villagers and help and shelter them,' Kumar gestured towards the workers as he spoke. Then he translated his speech into Tamil, and everyone nodded and sloganeered,

'Professor Kumar good!'

'He fit!'

'Sir Kumar money!'

'He water!'

'Sir give toilet!'

'He many many loaning!'

Kumar beamed with joy: 'You see they are no educated but still managing to be speaking in appropriate English!'

I wanted to go home, Kumar asked me to make a donation for the Tamil workers of Lumut.

'This thing is very important. We are sure this time Rajni Kant will fight elections and we are wanting him to become our chief minister of Tamil Nadu so ...'

'Ooooo!!!!' all exclaimed in unison, 'Rajniiii Kaaaant!!!!' and 'My love Rajniiii!!!!' and 'My life Rajniiii!!!!'

'We are,' Kumar continued unruffled by the excitement that the very name Rajni Kant had evoked, 'asking donations so that at the time of election we all go to Tamil Nadu together and giving vote for him. These poor workers are not earn like us teachers and mechanics and cannot hire aeroplanes and aircrafts, but for Rajni Kant's election we will all hire a ship to go.'

'Who is Rajni Kant?' I asked.

Kumar was shocked. Shocked! His body language infected all the workers around too. It took him a while to recover: 'He is the greatest hero of the world and mankind! He is our movie national hero! He in more than two hundred movies! He always kill the criminal people and corrupt people! All people of Tamil Nadu want him to become our chief minister. Why not? Many actors have become chief ministers of Tamil Nadu who were not great like our Rajni Kant. One day he will be our India prime minister. We want him win Nobel Prize for braveness! He is like us. He also come from backward village like us. We have same background. Our national and state elections will be holding anytime from now and Rajni Kant will announce his political party anytime now, but we also know from radio and newspapers and magazines that the present state government is afraid of his popularity, so they will try to harm or kill him. I swear upon three thousand Hindu gods that if something like that happening, we all bringing Iranian revolution in Tamil Nadu and like Ayatollah Khomeini kill million bad character persons. We can all die and kill for Rajni Kant!'

That was the first and last time that Kumar spoke with such a passion. Then he and the workers talked for a long time, in which Rajni Kant's name was mentioned many times, which brought proud smiles and a lot of excitement amongst them. In the meantime, I was ignored completely.

I did not have my wallet, so I said I would make a donation later. Kumar nodded.

'**Why was your** wife running after Dilip?' I asked as we were returning to my house.

'I am hoping that you are understanding that he is slightly overweight. My wife is wanting him to drive the cycle but he don't want, so she have to take some emergency actions.'

‘Your little boy was wearing a fake moustache; and the cigarette stuck in the back of his ear ...’

‘Guru idealizing Rajni Kant! He has seen all his movies. He want to destroy crimes when he become young man, so from now he is copying him. I will be happy if little Guru destroy criminals of our society. His cigarette style is like Rajni Kant. Rajni Kant is doing many tricks with cigarettes in the movies and destroying bad characters of society with his tricks by making them idiotic fools.’ Kumar then bent his head over my shoulder and whispered, ‘The cigarette on little Guru’s ear is actually not real; it is a pen and the butt end is its cap. My Guru will never be cigaretted in his whole life! When he grow up he will do something very smartful: he will join Tamil Nadu police and do many goodnesses secretly! One more thing: all the gold things that my family and me are have is not genuine, so do not be saying that we spend on gold unneedfully.’

It was night time when we returned. Before entering my gate, I saw a life-size poster of a mustachioed man stuck on the outer wall of Kumar’s living-room wall, around which tiny fancy bulbs were twinkling in a circle. The man was posing with a gun, and bullet belts were striped all over his naked torso: ‘Rajni Kant!’ Kumar snickered.

At home the scene was a bit unusual. The little Guru had broken some of the toys. (Later Atiya told me that he had brought his own toys which ‘killed’ ours.) Dilip was sitting beside what used to be the dollhouse; he was blushing. Some mechanical tools and a scotch dispenser tape were lying around. Nearby on the carpet, the dinner was laid out. From its smell, it was South Indian food. Kumar’s wife said something to me. Kumar addressed me:

‘We want Dilip to become a civil engineer. We always asking him to engineerize things at home and he make and fix many useful things. Arti ask him to strongify your dollhouse. But sometime he commit mistakes. But do not worry, Arti will beat him later for destroying it and we will try to buy you a second-hand used dollhouse. Cheapest and best!’

At that, Arti said something, and ‘Let us finish off dinner cooked by Arti which is waiting for us for one hour plus!’ Kumar announced. Dilip and Guru also joined us. ‘Wait! Let me first go to the washroom so that I can give a proper bath to my dirty finger and eat easily,’ said Kumar. In two minutes’ time we began to eat. As we were eating, there was a disturbance just outside my door. I opened the door and discovered an army of Tamil workers. ‘They are wanting the donation!’ Kumar shouted from the carpet.

‘How much?’ I asked Kumar, frightened. I had only five hundred dollars with me.

‘Eight dollars will be sufficient amount.’

I had a ten-dollar bill, which I gave to one of the workers. The mob left after showering innumerable thank-yous on me.

We went to bed immediately after the Kumars left. As expatriates, we knew that educated Tamils spoke perfect English. But Kumar’s English was very poor, and his wife’s was even worse. Obviously neither of them was very educated. Arti had managed to tell Atiya that she was a beautician. Both Atiya and I agreed that the Kumars were a family without as much as a trace of pretentiousness. But we also

agreed that Atiya should never visit Arti for a hairdo or make-up. As we were talking, I heard Kumar call out my name. I went to the balcony. He and Arti were standing in their balcony. Underneath them, the house and the lawns were alive with people. Arti said something, and Kumar said that everyone was grateful to me for the donation, and that he would lead me to the college next morning. I said my thanks and returned to bed. Before we slept we heard Kumar, his wife and male voices. We also heard cars honk as they passed by, the honking followed by Arti's shouts. We were too tired to walk over to the balcony and find out what was going on.

Next morning as I came out to leave for the college, I saw Kumar and his kids sitting in a very old car. A number of workers – I had seen them the previous day – were trying to push-start it. After a while, he and his kids got into my car and the workers pushed the car elsewhere. I talked to Dilip; his English was excellent. He was very polite, but Kumar would scold him off and on for some reason. Dilip told me that he wanted to be an accountant, but his father wanted him to build bridges in Tamil Nadu. He also said that he would ultimately have his way once he had finished school. The little Guru also spoke excellent English. During their journey to school in my car, Guru struck Dilip time and again. Dilip seemed to accept it patiently; Kumar just smiled.

I spent a busy day: telephone office, electricity department, water management authority, and a new account with a bank, among others. I returned home late in the afternoon. Atiya had also been busy decorating the house. In the evening, she drove to a gynecologist and I came out to inspect Queen's Street. At one end there were shops and stalls that I had visited the previous day; at the other end was a big playground. There were forty houses, twenty on each side, each house facing the other. My house was almost in the middle. The road was rather narrow. There were two narrow rainwater drains passing in front of the houses on both sides. Next to the gate of every house was a lamppost. As the sun went down, all the lights went on and made the street well-lit, but the lampposts of my and Kumar's houses did not light up. Yet our fronts were not totally dark; the light coming from other lampposts was kind of OK, but not good enough. Upon close examination, I discovered that the bulbs and the glass casings on the two lampposts had been broken. Kumar came out to ask why I was there. I asked him about our lampposts.

'Some people in this street are no good and misbehave like Mr James Bond.'

As I was speaking to Kumar, the lawn of his house began to come alive with the workers. Kumar left. I went home. After half an hour I went to the balcony: Kumar's house had become a different place: A cassette player was playing Tamil songs. Arti was coming in and out, and the people there seemed to be at her beck and call. The little Guru was running around hiding behind trees and plants, firing at imaginary enemies and constantly falling down as if shot dead. Dilip was holding a rope and would start jumping when Arti came out and would stop when she went in. Some people began watering the plants, some cutting the grass, some playing cards, some standing in a corner and talking; some were reading magazines. Many people started appearing from the house sporting only loincloths on their bodies and wiping themselves with towels, some brushing their teeth with small tree branches. In one corner someone was massaging Kumar; a few of them began cooking in the front of the lawn on the traditional Indian clay stoves. Everyone seemed busy doing something. Soon a number of them lined up, and one by one they started using a

cordless phone. At that moment Atiya returned, and I went down to the kitchen. But in a minute or two, the doorbell rang. It was Kumar with a number of workers. Beyond Kumar's shoulder I saw two workers washing my car as at least ten workers watched them. Beyond all of them was standing Arti, close to her gate, wearing the same black-and-red tunic and watching us all intently.

'As you are fully knowing these people are not as rich as we, so they are requesting you to give your mangoes, which they will sell. They will give you some. I also give them my mangoes. If you give them mangoes, I tell you a good secret,' said Kumar, as the crowd around him nodded in appreciation and expectation.

I was puzzled; I was too new there to refuse. I said yes and Kumar nodded at them, and they flew to the mango tree like lightning and within minutes no mango was left. They left my house and Kumar told me the secret: 'You know our houses are too big and we need not many rooms; so I have given some rooms to 33 people and they give me 20 dollars each. In this way I help them because they cannot find cheapest and best accommodation; they pay me and I earn something every month. And the workers get cheapest and best accommodation near their shops. You can also have many tenants. You know they are reliable; I know them; they are from my village.'

I said I was too tired and would think about that later. I did not tell that to Atiya, but decided to refuse the offer politely one of these days. I went to bed. Atiya was sleeping. I did some reading; soon there was a repeat of the previous night's noise: Arti, Kumar, and some males speaking aloud in Tamil, cars passing by, honking, and Arti shouting.

'**Why were people** lining up last night?' I asked Kumar, as I took him to the college next morning. His car did not start on that day either.

'I allow them to phone their people in India. When my bill is coming, they pay with some very, very little interest ... just under two percent.'

There was nothing much to do that day, so I returned home and relaxed all afternoon. In the evening we went out for dinner. As we left the house, the crowd in Kumar's house was repeating the previous night's activities. They all waved and whistled at us in good spirit.

Next day was Sunday. Early in the morning I was woken up some noise. It was Kumar and his worker friends who were standing at my gate. I was not happy having been woken up so early in the morning. I found Kumar and others agitated. He was holding a three-day old copy of *Tilong Times*. He told me that Tamil newspapers and magazines would arrive the following day and for the past few days they had not been able to find the right frequency on the radio, and it was just by chance that a customer had pointed a news item to one of the workers in a general provisions store. (Those were pre-Internet days and planes would fly into the tiny state of Tilong only once a month.) In an inner page of the paper was briefly mentioned that two suicide bombers, Tamil Tigers from Jaffna in Sri Lanka, had been nabbed in Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu; they were planning to kill a high profile personality whose identity the police were not revealing for 'security reasons'. Kumar wanted me to read between the lines about the identity of high profile personality. He feared that the suicide bombers' target was no other than Rajni Kant. I told him that the target must be some politician, and not Rajni Kant. Kumar smiled, thanked, and returned with his friends.

In the evening, Atiya and I decided to pay a courtesy visit to the Kumars. We passed the gate and no one seemed to be around. But as we moved forward, we heard some noise. The doors of the living room were open; it was packed with bare-chested workers; only Arti's body was hidden under the same tunic. All of them seemed to be crying, even Guru was sobbing in Arti's lap. As we proceeded we found that they were watching a Tamil movie in which Rajni Kant (I could recognize him!) had been shot and was uttering a high-pitch monologue in the lap of a hysterically crying beautiful woman. Dilip was sitting in a corner, dozing off. No one paid us attention. Rajni Kant died amidst a song and the movie ended. Kumar and Arti greeted us.

'Every Sunday we see Tamil movie by our Rajni Kant. In this movie saving his people from bad characters dies Rajni Kant. He defused the bomb in the vegetable pick-up, but the enemy killed him; but Rajni Kant killed all before he dead. Those bad characters are Tamil Tigers but the movie is not saying that,' said Kumar, sad but reassured. He invited us to join them every Sunday 'free and full of comfort'.

After returning from the Kumars, we had supper. I decided to stay downstairs in my study and have tea there. Atiya joined me. After the tea, Atiya and I pulled books from the shelf and we got lost in reading till we were disturbed by some noise outside. I heard Arti's voice followed by many other voices; there were a few honks too. Atiya went up to change clothes before making tea for us. I lit a cigarette and relaxed.

I realized that Atiya had been upstairs longer than she usually took. A car honked. I heard Arti shout. Atiya returned, rushing. Too upset to speak. Had she seen an evil spirit in the house? Or something else?

'I cannot stay in this house a minute! The first thing you do in the morning is go back to Haji Khatri and get a new house or I am going back to the hotel!'

Why?

'Go to the balcony!'

I went to the balcony upstairs. Kumar, Arti, Guru, Dilip, and at least a dozen workers were lining up, sitting on their haunches over the rainwater drain. Their lower dresses were missing as they were all defecating. Guru was not wearing anything at all; he was holding his gun with one hand and nibbling at a long, thin carrot in the other. Dilip was carefully studying a harmonica in his defecating posture. A worker was sitting on Arti's left and they were talking non-stop; he was holding up a paper cone from which both of them were eating popcorn. On Arti's right sat Kumar; he had a tiny branch with which he was brushing his teeth and also using it to draw something on the ground, discussing the drawing with a worker sitting on his left; he was the man Kumar was whispering to as I drank the soft drink on my first day in Queen's Street. At a little distance from Kumar and his interlocutor three workers were talking as if in secrecy; further left were sitting three more workers: one of them was trying to find a wavelength on his portable radio as two workers on his left and right attentively observed the radio. At the farthest end were a few more; some of them were quiet, some talking. In front of every one of them was placed an earthen water bucket. Arti looked up at me but did not pay attention. Guru loaded his gun and pulled the trigger at me. Kumar, his interlocutor and the rest of them also looked up and some of them waved at me good-naturedly as they must have done to Atiya moments before. A car passed by and honked; Arti shouted something angrily at it. At that Kumar looked up and addressed me,

‘Now you know why I don’t want bulbs on this street with so many James Bonds driving before us?’

I promised Atiya that I would convince Kumar to stop defecating publicly or else we would change the house. I did not want to leave such a great house.

The following day I went to speak to Kumar in the workshop of the mechanical department; but he was glued to the phone and seemed extremely distracted. He did not pay attention to me at all, though I waited long. He spoke loudly; obviously he was making overseas calls one after the other. I decided to see him in the evening; but in the evening his house was totally dark and empty of people. Even the Rajni Kant poster was not there.

Next morning I learnt that Kumar was on leave for two weeks. From that point on, everything changed. Although Kumar, Arti, their kids and the entire army of the workers were all there, they seemed cut off from the world around them. They would not even acknowledge my presence or gestures; even so in the stores. I could only feel tension and anger building up in my neighborhood; nothing but tension and anger. In the evening they would remain shut in; no lights; no honks, no Arti interjections. Atiya told me that during the day a number of trucks and vans had come and gone from Kumar’s house; she also said that Dilip and Guru had stopped going to school. Suddenly all the stores put up signs of ‘Mega Sale!’ and ‘Bumper Sale!’ and ‘Cheapest and best!’ Things were sold immediately.

As I was trying to make some sense out of that, I did not realize that I was in for another shock: in a few days’ time everyone – Kumar, his family and all the workers – disappeared. Their very disappearance catapulted them into a very palpable presence, and everyone seemed to be directly or indirectly affected by the traces of what used to be Kumar and his lost tribe: soon the owners of the stores and Kumar’s house broke the locks to discover nothing in them; the two Lumut-based banks, the American Express and electricity, water, and telephone departments were looking for them. Their disappearance was the topic of every Lumut gathering. The rumor was that an official investigating team from Tilong City was on its way. The team never came. The local media did not pay attention to the matter because it was preoccupied with the fast approaching haze from Indonesian forest fires. Only a brief report appeared in a newspaper which said that a group of people riding donkeys was spotted crossing the Hanching river and moving into the neighboring East Malaysian littoral state of Sarawak. But no one knew their identity as their movement took place in the middle of the night.