

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Lime and Water

Geetha Waters

My father and I were sitting at our dining table waiting for my eldest cousin, Karun, to join us after greeting my mother in her sick room. Every morning he would do his rounds of the several properties she had purchased for him from his earnings while he was working overseas. He would check if anyone had dumped rubbish on his blocks or stolen coconuts from his palms overnight. En route he always dropped in to see how we were going. He was the head of my generation on my mother's side, and an active generous mentor to numerous cousins within our extended family. As he entered the room, I reached for a jug of lime and water and poured him a glass. Karun glanced at the bangles tinkling on my wrist and looked to see if my father's glass was full before sitting down opposite me. It was hot and sunny outside and I could see beads of perspiration on the lines of his forehead. Slowly we began to sip our drinks. After I'd heard about a drunken incident from a distant relative early in the morning, I had dared to bring up the topic of Karun's addiction to alcohol as he walked in the front door.

'The forces of conditioning ... mmm,' he said reaching for his glass. 'The forces of conditioning – that is the real problem. You can't do anything about it – habit, just habit, and years of just having another drink.' My father and I looked pointedly at the jug of lime and water and nodded our heads deliberately, giving him time to pause and expand on the nature of his addiction.

'This slice of lime is bitter,' he added, smacking his lips with a look of intense displeasure, no doubt trying to divert our attention to less challenging topics of conversation such as the quality of fruits and vegetables in season in the local area.

'But the lime is fresh,' said my father as he sat back in his chair at the head of the table, and 'straight from my neighbor's garden. He brought it over early this morning.'

We all fell silent for a while. My father and I followed my cousin's eyes as he studied the rim of his glass. I glanced away briefly, to hide my concern, looking towards my mother's door. If only she were able to speak coherently, she would have told him in no uncertain terms that he was treading on dangerous ground in relation to his health. He really had to get his act together now if he wished to age gracefully. If he didn't stop drinking soon, he would be in serious trouble. No one would respect him in his old age and, furthermore, his children would suffer. He had a daughter and a son still to be married, and no one wanted an alliance with a family where alcohol was a problem. Although alcohol was becoming more acceptable these days, it was still regarded as a great weakness of character to get drunk and walk around gesticulating wildly in the evenings. He liked to have a few drinks, he said. After years of working in tin sheds, lying sweltering under cars in the heat of Dubai, he argued, he deserved to have a good time during his retirement.

'What kind of a "good time" is that, if you are destroying your liver?' I asked him.

He looked away, reaching for the jug I had placed in the middle of the table. My father sat alert and watchful, sipping his drink, and listening to us with interest. Rocking back and forth, he shot me a glance as if daring me to continue. There was an

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awkward pause while I wrestled with the consequences of taking the conversation further.

Luckily, my mother called out from her room, asking if anyone was around. She had been a high school teacher all her life but her once authoritative tone of voice sounded plaintive now, seeking reassurance. ‘Mmm!’ we intoned in unison, smiling at the sound of our own voices. The tension dissipated as the three of us watched her young carer, Ambika, walking hastily from the kitchen towards the sick room. My mother had been bed-ridden for two years from Parkinson’s disease and her condition was gradually deteriorating. She would live another year, maybe two, we did not know. Since my sister and I lived far away, my cousin had been overseeing her care, ensuring that in our absence, our parents would want for nothing.

Catching the look of concern in Karun’s eyes, I smiled at him, honoring him for his generous help and support over the years. When I began high school, he had decided to go overseas just as Dubai was turning into a major growth centre in the Middle East. He had been in his twenties then. I remembered how he used to prance about, showing off his bulging muscles just like Mohammed Ali – well almost! Thirty years later, here we were, trying to sort out the fallout from those years of his estrangement, anguish, and feelings of disenfranchisement on returning to a country which had changed beyond recognition during his absence.

Thousands of young men had left Kerala to live in Dubai, to help build that gleaming glass edifice of the twenty-first century. They had worked in the desert in deplorable conditions, being exploited by numerous conniving middle men, both Indian and Arabian, all after a fast buck. Unlike many of his friends, Karun had been lucky enough to find a decent sheikh who had been his sole employer for the rest of his working life. The work had been tough and arduous, but he had fared far better there than if he had remained in India, where he would have been paid next to nothing to do the same job in a local workshop. What is more, the blocks of land he had purchased in our neighborhood had steadily appreciated in value over the years. He was now a landowner, he liked to remind me, when I dared to goad him about his lack of self-restraint in relation to alcohol.

‘Land won’t do you any good, if you are lying under it,’ my father said, matter of factly. I looked at him gratefully. I needed help to force my cousin to admit openly that he had a problem. He was my Elder and it was impolite for me to refer to his weakness. No one else in our family bothered to mention such things any more for fear of causing offence. They had simply given up after repeated attempts at stating the obvious. But I had only recently returned from overseas, so I took advantage of my new status. It was up to me to create a stir; my relatives depended on me to do so. Since we belonged to the same extended family unit we all felt a responsibility to help out during periods of crisis, such as, births, deaths and marriages. We also functioned as a counselling unit to make sure that things worked out between us.

‘I know that I am not setting a fine example for the next generation,’ my cousin said reluctantly, rubbing his chin on his fist while kneading his thumb along the angle of his jaw line.

We allowed the pause to extend meaningfully, taking care not to say a word.

‘It is just a few drinks after all,’ he added, looking to us for assurance.

We looked away without interrupting, our expressions impassive. My father and I stared out the window, past my cousin, looking into the distance through the

gaps in the palm trees which stood in long rows along the full length of our backyard. He had all those years overseas to thank for his drinking problem. It had been the only salvation which saw him through the soulless years of work, the heat and returning to a dreary room each night. I hung my head in shame, drawing a deep breath, unable to find the courage to pursue the conversation and cause him greater discomfort.

Kerala had a long history of trade in spices, rubber, tea and calico with the rest of the world, including with China, Malaysia, Africa, Europe and the Philippines. Over the centuries it had become an established custom for families to send men overseas when there was no work at home. Thanks to this tradition, Kerala had become one of the most prosperous states in India. Few of the women in the state would have realised what their men were going through in the Gulf countries – in Dubai, or the other United Arab Emirates, in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain. For men, working overseas ensured that their families were fed and could lead a comfortable life back home. Most women remained behind by choice to raise the next generation in the absence of their fathers.

‘Alcohol is a serious addiction!’ my cousin admitted looking to us for agreement.

We nodded non-committally to encourage further admissions.

He paused as the statement sank into a pool of silence.

‘Even thinking that,’ I interposed, ‘...every time you think that, possibly reinforces the addiction, doesn’t it?’

‘If you continue to think that way, nothing will change,’ my father intervened. ‘If Krishnaji was still alive, he would say that you have to take responsibility for every thought you have, to discover how each influences your life and guides your daily decisions. This is your life, we are talking about. All those years of working, working, working, reduced to this, to pay the bills of some shoddy bottle shop owner with big plans for his own family at the expense of yours.’

Jiddu Krishnamurti’s words had more weight than ours because he was a great twentieth-century philosopher and the founder of a school where my father had worked for twenty-five years. My father and I exchanged a quick glance before proceeding with the conversation. We rarely mentioned Krishnaji’s words to members of our extended family. They were mostly content with traditional ways of thinking and praying to a multitude of gods of their own choosing. But my cousin was different. When he had been barred from the wealthiest temple in our area during his youth, for daring to question where all the money was going, he had started his own temple near the paddy fields for the poor folk who were treated with such disdain by the local priestly class. From humble beginnings the temple in the paddy fields had now grown into a thriving place of worship. He had also gone out of his way to visit us at Krishnamurti’s school in the neighboring state of Andhra Pradesh, during one of his annual holidays from Dubai. He had been very impressed by Krishnamurti’s vision for education, exemplified by the layout of the school, which was nestled in a green valley amidst the sparsely covered hills of the Deccan Plateau. Walking about, he had called it ‘a heaven on earth’, unlike the glass and concrete jungle he had briefly left behind in Dubai.

‘That megacity with all its modern technology is not sustainable. It will not withstand the desert sands, the winds and the sunlight blazing mercilessly down on it day after day. It’s just a short-term paradise for big investors and desperate young

men like me, working to make all our dreams come true in the space of our life time.'

'Krishnaji was a great man,' Karun admitted uncomfortably. Thinking back on his brief interlude at the school, he pushed his glass away to the side as if he had had enough. 'But he did not have a family and devilish deadlines to pay for dozens of siblings – their education, their school fees, their weddings, and the incessant demands of my aunts and uncles!'

'Who told you to support all of them?' asked my father, who had also fallen into the same trap in his youth.

'My father spent years raising his siblings and getting them married before he settled down,' I said hastily to defray any likely confrontation between the two men.

'Where are they now, when you need help?' continued my father. 'I suggest you put aside your pride and think for yourself. Take some real action. No one else will come to your aid in this. It is entirely up to you. You have the money to spend and plenty of people who will join you for a top up each evening. But this is your problem and no one else can offer you a way out.'

My cousin sat back bracing his hands on the side of the table and stretching his legs across the floor. He took a deep breath. We had been through a lot in our lives and shared many memorable moments together. There was an understanding between us that we were speaking out of genuine concern for each other.

I looked at him appealingly, thinking back to those few days we had spent at the school. Like me, he had been at first dismissive when he heard Krishnaji admonish us for being inattentive to such flimsy things as thoughts. It seemed such an obvious thing to say and, by comparison, the problems the world faced had seemed so complex and incomprehensible to us then.

Over the years, however, as I observed my own life and considered the lives of others, it became increasingly clear that the essence, the quality we yearned for, was very much within our grasp, if only we appreciated the simple things which enhanced our lives each day. Sloppy thinking about addictions, about habits, only wasted time which ensured that our problems continued into the future. Would he see this, I wondered anxiously, staring into my cousin's eyes?

The jug in the middle of the table was finally empty. Clear yellow slices of lime lay at the bottom. I looked at them for a long time as I realised we had come full circle. It was so simple to see now that the problem of desire, discontent and the need for fulfillment was always the same. It was always one of the circularity of thought. How we think, how we speak, how we walk, how we look at things, all influence behaviour and have an impact on the quality of our lives. Few people realise that the carriage of thought is imbued with an insistence that life conform to our ideas of it. Would my cousin see the futility of his search for a good time, I wondered? Otherwise we would all have to stand back and watch him ruin his life.

Pushing back his chair abruptly Karun stood up to take his leave. My father nodded in his direction several times acknowledging his presence. He looked agitated. I could sense that like me, he was loath to offend my cousin under our own roof, but the opportunity was too good to let go lightly.

'As I have heard Krishnaji say on many occasions, "To go very far, you must begin very near!" and that is all it takes Karun.' My father spoke resolutely as if he was appealing to my cousin's better judgment.

'You have a lot to live for. Do not throw it all away for a few drinks, no matter

how good it makes you feel at the end of the day.'

We both rose to follow my cousin to the front door commenting on the heat of the day. He paused at the door to bid farewell to my mother. Then he headed home towards his distant fields that were now lying fallow. The road outside my parents' home ran from 'Pineapple Springs' all the way to the 'Black Hole' where the silt pans once covered by paddy fields stretched far into the distance. Karun had built his house to the west some distance from the stream which fed the fields. It flooded each year during the monsoon nourishing the clay fields with dark topsoil before it emptied into the Arabian Sea. We watched him as he sauntered along the middle of the road, remembering how he used to run along the streets as a boy, racing from place to place, doing errands for his numerous relatives and inadvertently becoming entangled in everyone's lives. He was tolerated for his enthusiasm and admired for his determination to let nothing stand in his way. Looking at his receding figure, I wondered out loud to my father, if we would ever see the once buoyant spirit rising up inside him again.

Months later, after I'd returned to Sydney in Australia, my father phoned me with the news that Karun had finally come to his senses and given up alcohol.

'We did it! We did it!' my father yelled into the phone. 'We are all so overjoyed!'

He sounded so excited that for a moment I imagined that he was talking about cricket. Then as the story unfolded I heard of the intense battle Karun had in winning his health back and getting his addiction under control.

'Do you think, our conversation at the dining table had anything to do with it, Cha?' I asked sensing a desire to play a meaningful role in this success story. I listened intently as I learned that after a terrifying stint in hospital where he had had to face the irrefutable fact of his deteriorating liver, he had resolved to abstain from drinking altogether.

'It is hard to say what went through his mind during those hellish months in care,' my father explained.

'Who knows? The doctor gave him no option either. He is the best in the state and he refused to admit him into his care if he ever returned with the same problem again. He had no other option then. Perhaps together we did play a part, to build his resolve to live a life worth living in the end.'