

Whom Can I Tell? How Can I Explain?

Selected Stories by Saroj Pathak

Translated from the Gujarati and with an introduction by Shirin Kudchedkar

Foreword by Susie Tharu

However, the stray Saroj Pathak story, nested and framed by collections that clearly had little feel for its genius, had in no way prepared me for what I came across as we reconsidered the body of her work in context of new questions posed by *Women Writing in India*. There was something so suggestive about cameos of mental distress and troubled sexuality that comprised her fiction that we found ourselves returning to the stories in several rounds to ponder their implications. It was time, we decided, for a full collection of her stories to be made available to non- Gujarati readers.

Over the years since then it has become increasingly clear to me that Saroj Pathak is one of the most significant writers of the 1950s and 1960s, and what is more, that there are very interesting reasons why her work was largely overlooked by her contemporaries. In her personal life Saroj Pathak typifies the best among the (Nehruvian) avant-garde of the 1950s and 1960s: charged with the vision of a new India, conscious of responsibility to the less fortunate, and bravely, passionately, committed to the New. She was born in Kutch and brought up and educated in Mumbai. When she finishes school, she studies literature, and gets involved in an avant-garde circle of artists. She chooses as her life-partner: a man much older than herself. He is also a writer, but not from her caste.

If we think of the characters that populate Saroj Pathak's fiction as figures from this underbelly of the Nehruvian era, the stories can be read as belonging to an altogether new genre, one that treads the borderlines of psychology and cultural history. In fact these texts persistently pull away from the normative forms of both these disciplinary and hermeneutic frames to locate themselves in a region that is not quite psychology and not quite history and yet is both psychology and history the same time. It seems to me that Saroj Pathak's fiction is best described as a sensitive and thought- provoking document of the psychohistory of a critical period of our national life. We are dealing with mental disturbance here, but in a mode that resists pathologizing the question. And what is more, these stories are written by one whose distress (as against sympathy for, or responsibility towards, those less fortunate than her) leads her to the question and indeed gives her that special feel for it. It is a critical distinction this and one that I only learnt to make after the women's movement taught me its importance. It is a distinction that foregrounds experience and marks also the distance between progressive administrator and organic intellectual.

Pathak's stories focus on one or two figures and the narrative is designed both as record of their predicament and as initial moves in its analysis. There are couples of all ages, as well as single figures.

Extract

'Whom Can I Tell? How Can I Explain?' pp 20

All men tell dirty stories, swill liquor, beat their women, throw them out. Manuda had called Ballu the son of a concubine; his father, the swine, must have deceived his mother... perhaps he had married her, but then again, perhaps he didn't! Thinking of his father he felt a murderous rage. But he softened when thinking of his mother. At the thought of Tinni he felt pity.

If he ever met that accursed father of his, he'd boot him in the face. But where would he meet him?

Here he is, that accursed father! There must be something to do with him in the letter... But suppose he had to do with his mother? Then everyone would make Ballu the butt of their mockery. What if Dadu got to know? Just as he himself joined in when they talked about other people's wives, mothers, sisters, these people might do the same thing on this occasion. He couldn't read the letter himself.

The pencil he carried to school every day was employed with effect on the posts, cinema hoardings, station benches, toilet wall in public parks. He tried his artistry on the pictures of the film stars on ads. If an illustrated magazine fell into his hands, he would draw a great paw or a cigarette puffing smoke, or a pair of moustaches on the bosom of the women in the face powder or furniture ads.

His mother's face was different.

Tinni's hands were fair and smooth.

'Dazed, Tormented, Terrified' pp13

'How can the teacher become our mother?'

Everyday Bansi struggled to answer Guddo's questions by pointing to the woman who had become 'Mummy.' In this new unfamiliar school in Delhi nobody knew, as they did in Ambala, that Bansi's mother had been deserted by her husband, that she had committed suicide. Nobody whispered and pointed a finger at Bansi as a girl whose mother had killed herself.

It's not that a stepmother is always wicked. She remembered how her ninth standard classmates at Ambala used to talk. Now she didn't have a mother, but a

mummy. Mummy dressed nicely. When she visited their school and sat and laughed as she talked to the Principal and the Maths teacher, she would inquire about the 'progress' Bansi and Guddo were making and would smother them with kisses. Bansi would watch as the Principal passed his hand over Guddo's whole body, rubbed her palms; and she would find some excuse to slip across quickly, say 'Namaste' and, leaving Mummy alone, grip Guddo's hand in her own with a guardian's care.

Mummy was very beautiful. Bansi would often gaze at her. Mummy used to have lots of work outside the house. The office provided Daddy with a jeep. When the jeep didn't work Daddy would even fetch a car. Mummy was very intelligent; she started to learn driving. Malik Uncle would come everyday. Mummy would go to Mathura Road or to Kutub Road to practice driving. When Daddy returned from his office, Mummy would shoot a piercing look at Bansi and tell him, 'Today I took Bansi with me for my driving lesson.' Sometimes she took Guddo alone, sometimes both sisters. Like the thermos, napkins or snacks. But sometimes when Mummy went for her driving lesson Daddy would take Bansi aside and ask her, 'Did you accompany Mummy today?'