

Chapter - 5

Home Products

CHAPTER - 5

HOME PRODUCTS

Home Products centres on Binod and Rabinder, cousins based in Bihar, trying to overcome the gaps in the social ladder in modern India and dreaming of making films for Bollywood. The novel bristles with the social complexities of Bihar's small towns, with residents having to invent their own version of modernity in trying to better their lot.

Kumar ostensibly works with a simple plow with few surprises. But each character's story is like a journal about the middle class in Bihar routing its journey to a better world through Delhi, and later through Mumbai. Each of Kumar's characters will at some time have to break his or her shackles. In the very first scene of the novel when an elderly woman opens the front door to the protagonist, she covers her head with a cotton sari on her head. Kumar instantly conveys so many messages about the relative position of two characters: that the woman is conservative and middle class, that the young man is a stranger to her and that she is uneasy but not afraid by his presence at her door. The story

shifts back and forth between small town -Bihar and the big city -specially Bombay-Delhi. This book is not merely about cousin rivalry, sizzling romance, dazzling success or terrifying despair. It is also about the mob crazy of today's India.

Binod wanted to be a writer -he likes reading Orwell, Chekhov, Manto and Bhalchandra Nemade -but he now works in Mumbai as a film journalist. His cousin suggested him to write a story taking his bua as role model. Bua, after losing the support of her husband early in her married life, educated, took up welfare work and is now a minister in cabinet. Kumar tells the details very minutely. Early in the novel, when Binod visits Patna, Bua comes to see him, accompanied by another minister, Parshuram. Bua has never remarried, but midway through the conversation, "Parshuram reached over to where Bua sat, took the corner of her sari in his right hand and began to rub it on the lens of his spectacles".(HP 65) This is enough to suggest the nature of relationship between them.

In the description of middle class homes, village houses, train compartments, street scenes and small towns Kumar is very particular. The characters are not swathed in rich silk stuffs and draped in gowns of gold but evocative, such as this passage, in which Binod walks through the bedroom of his future wife for the first time, in order to use the bathroom:

He had never seen that part of the house before. It was a plain room, a thin mattress lying on a wooden bed that took much of the space, two metal wardrobes with new paint on them set against the wall. On the wall was a poster nailed to the wall, showing a still Pather Panchali, of the little boy Apu. The poster was for the film screening of Ray's films organized by the Patna Cine Society.

Inside the bathroom, the plastic buckets and mugs were stacked in bright new colours(HP 55).

In *Home Products* there is the prominent use of news stories, which are interwoven with the narrative as reporting assignments undertaken by Binod, or items in the newspaper, or discussion between family members. Most Hindi authors in the forties, fifties and sixties had been employed at one time or another by newspapers or All India Radio. Their intimate knowledge of the workings of daily papers is reflected deeply in the literature of that period.

The news stories incorporated into *Home Products* don't just set the stage, they are part of the novel's larger preoccupation with the truth, and how it is portrayed in writing and in film. The distinction between realism and fantasy is underscored in a fascinating scene in which Binod, his cousin Rabinder and their childhood friend Neeraj Dubey, who is now a successful Bombay star, sit and watch the classic 1979 Yash Chopra film *Kaala Palathar* together. It is based on the 1975 Chasnala mining disaster in Bihar and the three men sit down to watch it for the umpteenth time on the anniversary of the event, coincidentally the same day as the 2004 Tsunami disaster.

The novel is remarkable in the manner in which it deals with its women characters. Binod sets out to tell the story of Mala Srivastava through a film he intends to script. Mala, a small-time poetess, is murdered after a controversial affair with a prominent politician- no doubt inspired by the Amarmani Tripathi case in Uttar Pradesh. Her story is seen to be symbolic of small-time ambition breaking through small-town tedium. Another powerful character is "Bua", Binod's aunt, who pretty much beats the system by breaking

the rules herself and doing so boldly - after her infirm husband dies and she is plunged into the murky politics of Bihar - guilt-free and liberated, ruthless and crafty, Bua becomes almost iconic. “ In Bihar, Bua became a symbol of a form of independence that was still new in independent India. Bua had nothing. She got an education and then entered public life at a time when there were no women around her to give company. ”(HP 111)

Home products is a narrative of new India, new north India, to be precise. It gets straight into the north Indian realities of today, with "internet brothels," powerful people parked in jails with mobile phones being used to orchestrate all kinds of activities and even the tragedy of Satyendra Dubey. But the book draws strength from the author's refusal to limit it simply to a judgmental journal detailing rising crime rates, rifle -carrying men on motorcycles or Bihari stereotype of the times. It also sketches the opportunities, sometimes brutal opportunities, and options available in India today. And the diverse ways in which the people have reacted to these options.

Keeping to a fertile space between fact and fiction- his fictional characters living in very real times-Kumar eschews the kind of bold celebration of the emerging India and the euphoria that usually accompanies such accounts. For example, while talking about the sudden and rapid displacement of lives that change in India has meant and that too what it has meant to several of those left behind, there is a moving sequence where Binod goes to talk about his divorce to his wife's old uncle and aunt in their crumbling home in Deogarh evoking the “ the undeniable sense that they occupied an abandoned time.....these fragments form a little visited place in the past. ”(HP 56) It is this incongruity, which he senses there -contrasted with his life lived partly in Delhi and Bombay - that the novel

succeeds in portraying very well. Seema Chisti states "each of Kumar's characters will at sometime have to break his or her social shackles."(1).

Home Products reads like the powerful Hindi novels that through the 1970s, 80s and even now capture the angst, misery and fullness of north Indian lives as they struggle to cope and then "modernise" themselves and cope with the "opportunities" springing up. It is also an excellent read. *Home Products* marks the much welcome return of Home as home, not as space but place not as metaphor, not in quotes, but as a real place with a doormat outside the door, a place where history works silently, like sunshine or moss, to produce what it alone can-stories, with whom it incestuously fathers children, their home products.

Home is ghar, without italics, for whom Sehwag, the Indian cricketer, speaks in Hindi. Home does not begin in Capital letters, when it let s out a warning for attention, it is always the lower case, Binod's Motihari, Om Puri's Ambala home is laboratory where the first experiments with the world take place, where Harvard become s "Harvard" and "lawyer" "liar", where Sartre's play, in the "India n version", creates melodrama instead of shame, and where Macbeth becomes Maqbool.

Home Products tells the tales of small town India slugging it out in the urban landscape. Kumar is equally at home writing about a village in Bihar or a jazz club in Brooklyn. It is a complex tale of two cousins whose fate is intertwined as their lives unfold in the urban sprawl. The very first scene of the novel exemplifies the novel. An elderly woman opens her front door to the protagonist, a journalist called Binod. As she did so, she "began to cover her head with her cotton sari when Binod introduced himself". It is a gesture so slight and so familiar that it might easily go noticed. By this simple gesture,

Kumar conveys so many messages that the woman is conservative and middle-class, that the young man is a stranger to her and that she is uneasy but not afraid by his presence at her door. It is a fragment of visual poetry which, like the best documentary films, allows us to forget the camera, lights and sound recordist, so that we enter the situation unaware of the craft that has brought us there. As Amitava Kumar puts:

The narrative shifts back and forth between small town Bihar and the big city -specially Bombay - Delhi. Binod is the main actor in this drama, but three members of his family share the stage with him: his father Baba, and Bua's son, the colourful jailbird Rabinder. The cousin spends much of the novel's pages behind bars, yet dominates the story with his larger-than-life presence. He is more passionate, more vital and ultimately more successful than Binod. But this book is not about cousin rivalry, sizzling romance, dazzling success or terrifying despair. It is about the adrenaline rush of humdrum survival eked out within the casually chaotic, blood-drenched mobocracy of today's India.(HP 89)

Laloo Prasad Yadav and Ajay Devgan, Bill Clinton and 9/11 - they are all there and many others besides-but this book is about the supporting cast, not the stars. Binod yearns to write a workable screenplay for Bollywood director Vikas Dhar, But he can't make himself learnt tricks for the industry. His own love of classic cinema, for elegance and honesty over cheap melodrama makes it painful. His father was once a documentary

filmmaker, who used to make the flickering black and-white films in which footage of smiling peasants winnowing wheat were once the absolute image of eternal India.

Binod's vision is at once lyrical and dispassionate. He sees the filth and corruption that define the lives of so many millions of citizens, including members of his own family, but he neither winces nor retreats into fantasy. He holds the camera of his heart steady as he teaches to see the truth with our moral compass intact, and yet not hate what we see. *Home Products* marks the much welcome return of Home as home, not as space but place, not as metaphor, not in quotes, but as a real place with a doormat outside the door, a place where history works silently, like sunshine or moss, to produce what only it can - stories, with the whom it incestuously fathers, children, their home products. Eklavya Gupta puts, "his novel might be thought of as exploring the question of how art, which is a representation of life, also impacts life." (12).

Home Products which is Amitava Kumar's first novel is a story of two stories told together, the story that the words on a page tell us and the other, often more interesting one, the story about the story. The purpose which is made visible by the writer who almost in a late modernist gesture takes us to that great workshop, the writer's mind, his table and on it an open exhibition of his wares. That is the sense with which the book begins and ends, an image similar to one of Picasso's famous series of drawings on the theme of the artist and his model, painting brush in one hand and the canvas suggesting the in-betweenness of the story. Home tells no real story, it lives on the lured zone between life and art, between Kumar's story and Binod's. The story is certainly not that simplistic. Chanderhas puts "Binod felt the tragedy they had witnessed on stage had also made their own small sufferings pleasant and lyrical." (3)

Binod, a journalist by profession, is asked by a filmmaker to convert his editorial in a story, a story about the life in small towns and a woman's lonely ambition. This story about "a woman's lonely ambition" is actually many stories. In real life, though Kumar never talks about this anywhere, this is the story of Madhumita Shukla, a small time poetess from the state of Uttar Pradesh who was murdered, allegedly, by the man, a minister in the state government, whose child she was carrying when she died.

It is significant that Kumar retains the initials of Madhumita Shukla's name, the M.S. changing to Mala Srivastava in his manuscript. So, this then becomes the story of Mala Srivastava, and of Binod's aunt, Bua, once a poetess, and now minister in the government, who like Madhumita and Mala, has made the "terrifying trip to the heart of power". There are others in the story too, who like Mala Srivastava, live lives outside the margins of the story, the Hindi film actor Manoj Bajpai who is Neeraj Dubey in the novel, a white girl called Alice, writing a book on Bollywood, is perhaps Jessica Heines, Vikas Dhar, a filmmaker who remarks Hollywood films, bears resemblance to the Hindi film director Mahesh Bhatt. Anindita Sengupta analysed "it is a complex tale of two cousins whose fate is intertwined as their lives unfold in the urban sprawl."

These two intertwined narratives negotiate through imitation ("why don't you rewrite a story you have liked in the past?" Binod's friend asks him, and Binod considers the option by revising Chekhov's story, "The Lady with the Dog", changing the European seaside to Hardwar and the "Dog" in the story to "a small, four year -old boy"); challenge through foreplay (Binod changes the setting of his story from Hanuman temple with a group of policeman to a "a young, well -dressed man at a tea stall in a tiny town" in the space of two days); surrender through mock -betrayal ("I have changed the story a bit. I

have made it more romantic", Binod tells Dhar), claim through borrowing ("Binod had borrowed from Chekhov's story and now it seemed that Rabinder was borrowing from his editorial"), so that the borders between them, the "shadow", as it were, between the green room and the stage, are erased. Kumar, therefore, like many others before him, the modernists, and then Borgers and Cortazar, among others, reveals, like the silkworm, both the yet -to-be-finished product and the raw material and .Daisy Rockwell States that , "this novel combines together personal ambition, crime, p olitics and bollywood.'"(4).

This, also, is the story of Rabinder, Binod's cousin, who, at the beginning of the novel, is in jail for running an "internet brothel", from where he thinks of stories that could be turned into films. This, again, is th e story of Bua's husband who asks her the name of the capital of Mongolia on the first night of their marriage and Binod's father, a collector of irrelevant stories. For this a book that is not just about writing a story, it is also a story of other stories, of Mahatma Gandhi and a goat, about a father telling his journalist -son that "journalist should write why people resort to spreading stories", about Saddam Hussein " writing a novel in which he had cast himself as the hero, " about the cricketer McGrath , about madmen, Manto, Premchand, Tennessee Williams and Chekhov. What hold s the novel together is its love of literature "Binod's childhood and to some extent therefore his life, was shaped by the stories that his mother told him. "(HP 111).

Binod wants to know, " how Mala had discovered literature"; " Baba would have much preferred that Binod was a writer," a police inspector asks Rabinder, " Gandhi and Nehru.... wrote a lot of books while they were in jail. What are you going to do?" Baba recites a poem b y Sumitranandan Pant while Lalji Chants Wordsworth's Daffodils, Bua's

poems in a diary; the mother's story from Hans; Bhalchandra Nemade's story about Mani; The death of a Salesman and *The Glass Menagerie*; the stories of everydayness from everywhere. In this story about cinema, the narrator becomes a clap boy, merely ushering in beginnings with no control over ends. "The Making of a Movie" is an analogy which seems to suit the novel perfectly, for just as film clippings about the making of a film have begun to annotate the pleasures of film-viewing, the story about the making of a story.

Home Products is also a sign of return of the diary, the confession mode, the personal blog, the "About" stories that sell products, books and writers, and the "makeover" programmes which work on the arithmetical difference between raw material and finished product. Kumar's novel reflects, without dipper lights, that subculture of arrogant intrusionism, where the palette of colour is often considered to be a work of art as important as its surrogate child, the canvas; in doing so, he obliquely also criticizes this novel desire of citizens of new capitalist states to be "made" into a story. This "story" as Kumar shows, embodied in the material form of film reels, for "consumption", is as much a "product" of the human factory as page there, Paris Hilton, Parliament and proxy wars in deserts.

The novel is shot through with cinematic moments. "I have many favourities but one sharp-etched in memory is the journey in a hired jeep through the streets of a small hamlet during a power cut." (HP 76) In the vivid darkness of the night, their presence was an intrusion. Lives had been carefully organized around a routine of darkness.....Again and again, they surprised people who were eating or resting. Women turned their faces away and men shaded their eyes.

Home Products is a study of distance (Part I - "The car with the Red light," a journey "to the heart of power"), of the ignorance of what travelling these distances entails (Part II - "Ulan Bator at Night" a journey to the heart of an impending madness), of the blind lanes in the map of that travel (Part III - "Bandini, or The Prisoner of Love," a journey to the heart of immobility), of borrowed wanderlust (Part IV - "Kiss of the Spider Woman", a journey to the heart of darkness), and eventually, of the impossibility of transformation that the journey had promised (Part VII - "The Glass Menagerie"), is a history of the failure of the expedition of the self, and its inability to remain or become either "Home" or "Product."

This also perhaps refers to the predicament of the author Amitava Kumar who like Binod does not travel in his writing too far from his home. In an interview after the release of the book Amitava Kumar said,

I am convinced now that the only story I have to tell is the story of how to find the words to put down on the page, or how to tell your own story - the story of how you came to be. My idea is that at the end of *Home Products*, the reader should find that the book Binod was trying to write is this very one, the one the reader is holding (HP 76).

And the book that we hold is primarily about hopes and dreams of people from Amitava's home town - Binod, Rabinder, Bua, Neeraj Dubey and Binod's father.

Amitava Kumar in response to what it feels to be writing about India from outside, asks if his writing would be considered more authentic if he lived here in India, inhaled

smog and stood in queues for several hours. The author has proved that he could still write an authentic novel drawing from his provincial roots without being caught up in the inconveniences of smog and labyrinthine queues. Amitava Kumar mentioned that during a certain stage during the process he would read a few pages of Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* before sitting down to write for a few hours. " I wanted to be reminded again and again of the comedy that informs Naipaul's writing about failure."

But *Home Products* does not resemble *A House for Mr. Biswas* in theme and tone. Ralph Singh, the protagonist of the *Mimic Men* quotes a Greek philosopher as stating that birth in a great city is a precondition for a happy life. This statement resonates with Ralph Singh as he feels stifled by the land of his birth, the Caribbean Island Isbaello. Echoing Ralph Singh's Greek philosopher, Binod, the chief character of *Home Products*, writes "If you happen to be from nowhere it is not simply that you don't know anyone else -the truth is that you don't even know yourself"(HP 13) These words appear in an editorial Binod writes about the murder of an ambitious young woman with literary and political learnings who, like Binod, comes from the backwater of Bihar. In precise, unsentimental but often moving prose, in an episodic novel that frequently meanders into the pasts of his characters and reflections on contemporary Indian culture, Amitava Kumar claims a place for Bihar on the literary map. Though Bihar is maligned for its backwardness and criminality, he appears to be saying, there is energy and ambition and movement there.

WORKS CITED

Chaudhary, Chandrahas. "Review of Home Products". *The wall street Journal* 24 March 2007. Print.

Chisti, Seema. "Review of Home Products". *Indian Express* 25 March 2007. Print.

Gupta, Eklavya. "Note on Home Products". *Time Outline* 10 July 2007. Print.

Kumar, Amitava. *Home Products* London : Picador Publication, 2007. Print.

- - - , "How to write a novel". *Hindu* 4 March 2007. Print.

Rockwell, Daisy, "Review on Home Products". *Indian Express* 26 July 2008. Print.

Sengupta, Anindita. "Small Town Desires". *Hindu* 2 December 2010. Print.