

OF PROMISCUOUS READERS AND PERSISTENT WRITERS

Siddharth Dhanvant Shanghvi

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WHEN I WAS GROWING UP MY MOTHER HAD ASKED ME TO TURN OUR GARAGE INTO A PIZZA PARLOR. SHE WAS CONVINCED, WITHOUT LEGITIMATE PROOF, THAT I WOULD OWN A HUGELY SUCCESSFUL PIZZA BUSINESS. 'IT WILL BECOME A FAMOUS CHAIN BEFORE YOU KNOW IT. THERE WILL BE A LINE FROM HERE,' SHE SAID EXTENDING OUT ONE ARM, 'UNTIL THERE,' THE OTHER ARM WAS IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION, SIGNIFYING SOMETHING VAGUELY IMMEASURABLE — IT MIGHT BE THE END OF OUR BLOCK IN JUHU, OR THE MOON. I WANT TO BE A WRITER, I MUMBLED, AND SHE SAID, 'YOU CAN WRITE ON THE SIDE.' THE PROSPECT OF RUNNING A PIZZERIA BY DAY AND WRITING BY NIGHT WAS SO RENEGADE, AND SO LOATHSOME, THAT WHEN I FINALLY SOLD MY FIRST NOVEL A FEW DAYS AFTER MY 24TH BIRTHDAY, I WAS RELIEVED THE ADVANCE ALONE MIGHT CONVINCING MY MOTHER I DID NOT HAVE TO START A PIZZA PARLOR TO MAKE A LIVING.

AS A YOUNG AUTHOR, IN THE EARLY OUGHTS, I COULD LOOK BACK ON THE SUCCESS OF TWO GENERATIONS OF WRITERS BEHIND ME. THEY HAD ACHIEVED GLOBAL RECOGNITION, SALES BY THE TRUCKLOAD, AND TOP TICKET PRIZES NORMALLY RESERVED FOR CLUBBY OCCIDENTALS. THE LAST SONG OF DUSK GOT TRANSLATED INTO A DOZEN LANGUAGES. I, A 26-YEAR-OLD, WAS INVITED TO LITERARY FESTIVALS SO FAR AWAY I ARRIVED WITH THE RED EYES OF A WORLD-CLASS ALCOHOLIC. I MADE A MAGAZINE COVER IN FRANCE. WON A PRIZE IN ITALY. WRITING HAD POWER, BOTH IN THE DEEP SENSE OF THE SUBLIMINAL, TRANSFORMATIVE STRENGTH OF LANGUAGE; AND THE MORE SUPERFICIAL PRIVILEGES SUCCESSFUL WRITING BESTOWED (YOU COULD BE SHALLOW OR PROFOUND; I CHOSE SHALLOW: THE MORE HONEST OPTION).

THEN, ALMOST OVERNIGHT, EVERYTHING CHANGED. PUBLISHERS REALIZED READERS WERE NO LONGER READING AS THEY ONCE DID. THEY BLAMED THE INTERNET, CHANGING READING HABITS, AND THE FAILURE OF THE ENGAGED IMAGINATION. NO MATTER THE REASON, THE SOLUTION BRIEFLY WAS BELIEVED TO LIE IN TECHNOLOGY — PEOPLE WOULD QUIT PAPER, THEY SAID, BUT SWITCH TO READING ON THEIR IPHONES AND KINDLES.

SURE, PEOPLE MADE THE SWITCH, BUT THAT WASN'T ENOUGH. IN FACT, IT WAS DOWNRIGHT INADEQUATE. PEOPLE . WERE. NOT. READING.

PUBLISHERS AND AUTHORS HAD FAILED TO SEE THAT THE NATURE OF CONCENTRATION HAD CHANGED — WHIPPED BY THE BROWSER IT HAD BECOME A PHILANDERER, A WAYWARD, WANDERING THING. THE DELIBERATED SENTENCE — ONE CHARACTERISTIC OF LITERATURE — ABDICATED TO THE YOUNGER RAKISH SON, ABBREVIATED GIBBERISH. SUSTAINED, EVEN DIFFICULT READING THAT CONSOLIDATED SOLITUDE QUICKLY MADE WAY FOR THE SCATTERED, PROMISCUOUS SCAN OF SO MANY STORIES THAT, ULTIMATELY, NOT A SINGLE COULD PREVAIL. BECAUSE NO ONE STORY WAS MEMORABLE, ALL STORIES COULD BE FORGOTTEN.

PERHAPS IT'S A DEPRESSING TIME TO BE A WRITER. OFFENDED BY THE LITTLEST THING, CENSORS AND CRETINS ELBOW PUBLISHERS INTO PULPING BOOKS. READERS PATRONIZE NOVELS WRITTEN BY FORMER ACCOUNTANTS THAT RETAIL WITH BRIGHT GOLD STICKERS BRAGGING RS 80 ONLY! PUBLICISTS SCOLD YOU IF YOU DON'T TWEET LIKE SHASHI THAROOR — PROVOCATIVELY, UNRELENTINGLY, USELESSLY . EDITORS SAY, 'HAVE YOU CONSIDERED AN INDIAN SIXTY SHADES OF GREY?' (YES, IT'S MY MEMOIR). BIG BOOK PRIZES BEG AROUND TO STAY FUNDED, AMENDING OLD NAMES TO THE LATEST SPONSOR. CRITICS KNOW THEY'VE BECOME AS CULTURALLY IRRELEVANT AS THE BOOKS THEY REVIEW IN PUBLICATIONS WITH AN ANNUAL READERSHIP OF FIVE. IF THERE WAS NEVER ANY MONEY TO BE MADE IN PUBLISHING BOOKS THERE IS NOW MONEY TO BE LOST IN WRITING THEM. BAH.

AND YET, WE WRITE. I WRITE. IT'S AN INSULTING TIME TO BE A WRITER — AND IN A STRANGE WAY, THE MOST IMPORTANT THING TO DO RIGHT NOW. I DON'T MEAN TO WRITE NOVELS TO WIN READERS (GOOD LUCK, BABE) OR TO WRITE LONG, HECTORING ESSAYS THAT APPOINT AUTHORS AS AMBASSADORS OF CAUSES (YOU CAN BE A BIG FRAUD OR A SMALL FRAUD, EITHER WAYS THE CAPITAL INVESTMENT IS THE SAME). I MEAN WRITING IN THE OLD FASHIONED SENSE OF AN ACTIVE ENDORSEMENT OF SOLITUDE, WRITING TO FASHION AND ORGANIZE A LIFE, WRITING AS A MEANS TO THINK ALOUD. AND TO BE A WRITER WHO IS NOT A CULTURAL CELEBRITY, AS HE WAS UNTIL RECENTLY, BUT SOMEONE WHO PUT UP IN RELATIVE ISOLATION, OBSCURE AND SLOSHED, RAGING AGAINST THE WORLD AND CELEBRATING BEAUTY AT EVERY POSSIBLE OCCASION, AS HE ALWAYS HAD. BOOKS BECAME AGAIN WHAT THEY WERE: LOVE LETTERS TO PEOPLE YOU ARE YET TO MEET. WITH ALL PERKS UNDER CHECK, AND NO EXPENSE ACCOUNT TO SPEAK OF, YOU'D HAVE TO BE NUTTY TO WANT TO BE A WRITER. IF YOU ARE ONE THEN I SALUTE YOU. FEW THINGS MAKE ME AS INSANELY JOYOUS AS BEING FACED BY A BLANK, COMMANDEERING PAGE, AND TO EXPERIENCE THIS JOY WITHOUT ANY OF ITS ACCOMPANYING CONSOLATIONS OF PUBLIC SUCCESS IS TO MEET, FINALLY, SOMETHING LIKE ACCOMPLISHMENT. THIS FEELING IS PERSONAL, AND ENDURING.

sds - <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/stoi/all-that-matters/Of-promiscuous-readers-and-persistent-writers/articleshow/36993197.cms>