

Modern Indian Writing in Translation
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Week 3 Lecture 1: Gold from the Grave (Part - 1)
Length: 35:32

Student: Hello everyone, I will just be giving a small introduction to the author of the short story Gold from the Grave, Tukaram Bhaurao Sathe, popularly known as Annabhau Sathe. He was born on 1st August 1920, and died on 18 July 1969. He is primarily associated with Dalit literature, his 35 novels 10 Folk dramas, 24 short stories, 10 powadas, 1 play and a travelogue, have been published in Marathi by the Maharashtra government in 1998. His protagonists in the award-winning novel Fakira, not only reclaim their identity, but also teach humanity and the value of forgiveness.

Fakira won a Maharashtra State Government award in 1961, in a Ballad Mumbai cha Girni Kamgar, mill worker of Mumbai, written in 1949, Sathe traces the miseries of factory workers and captures the disparities between the rich and poor in Mumbai. A small excerpt from this ballad, 'there are divine looking high-rise buildings on Malabar hills, Indrapuri, there is a colony of Coober, rich people enjoy all material comforts. On the contrary, people living in Parel work hard day night eating whatever they get and sweat it out'. Aarti Wani describes two of his songs, Mumbai chi Lavani, Song of Bombay, and Mumbai cha Girni Kamgar, Bombay's Mill Hand, as depicting a city that is rapacious, exploitive, exploitative, unequal and unjust.

Professor: Hello, everyone. Welcome to this discussion on Gold from the Grave. It is a story by Annabhau Sathe and it is a translation from Marathi by Vernon Gonsalves. That's the translation that we are working with for today's purpose, and the story is a bizarre story. This story is comparable in some respects, with the Premchand the shroud, we do have an eerie, Gothic atmosphere which can be interpreted in myriad ways.

So, what we are going to do today is concentrate on the first section of the story and my students here are going to take turns to join the discussion to unpack the bizarre elements of this story, which deals with poverty stricken, poverty stricken landscape of Mumbai. So I will first request my student Karnalius to pick out a passage from the story, which is really striking to him as a reader.

Karnalius: So the story is basically very interesting, and it is very realistic in sense, because you get to know the lifestyle between the rich and the poor within the story, because you see that the protagonist who is Bhima is actually looking hard to find job in order to survive, in order to feed his wife and in order for him to find some money, so that they can survive.

Professor: Yeah.

Karna;ius: So, the best thing, the best part that I liked in the story from the first section is the paragraph which which says, “clothes under his arm Bhima turned back from the quarry, on the way he stopped at a stream, he back there and prepared to make his way home, devastated beyond itself it was then that his eyes fell on on a mount of ashes, there were the ashes of a dead body.

As he looked at the charred human bones, Bhima grew even more despondent., Must be some jobless wretch, poor chap must have given up on life, I will also die like this, starvation will start in a couple of days, then Narmada will sit crying, my wife will fall into a deep depression and there will be nothing I can do about it.” And the next paragraph as well, “suddenly he saw something sparkling in the heap of ashes, when he looked closely he discovered a sparkle came from a gold ring about a tola.

Professor: Overjoyed he grabbed hold of the ring, one tola of gold and to from a corpse ashes.

Karnalius: “...from found in the ashes of a corpse. He had found a new means by which to live.”

Professor: Okay, so yeah, these are very very important moments in the first section of the story. So, so, far we understand that he is a quarry worker and he is a migrant too, he has migrated from a village to Mumbai to find work, and he tries to make a living by breaking stones of a hill and until one fine day he loses the job because the quarry shuts down, so, that is the setup so far.

And on his way from that closed down quarry, he comes across a mound of ashes and suddenly, he notices a burnt body. And look at the set of ideas that from his mouth, in fact, that passage is what I would call free indirect discourse, we can have the stream, we have the stream of consciousness of this particular protagonist here, right? ‘Must be some jobless wretch, poor chap must have given up on life, I will also die like this,’ this is not the narrator, this is Bhima’s words, Bhima’s voice coming through the narrator’s pen, right?

And then he says that 'Narmada will sit crying', his young daughter, 'and my wife will fall into deep depression' and his family will basically self-destruct, it will collapse. So, that is what he thinks until he comes across a tola of gold, a measure of gold and that is it, his life makes a U-turn, he starts to make a business by trying to steal, by successfully stealing from dead bodies. So, Catherine, I was wondering if you have any thoughts about this section or this passage from the story.

Catherine: I would like to comment a little more on the setting of the story, because right in the beginning, the author establishes a kind of intrigue, the very first line and the second line, where he says, 'hearing that a powerful moneylender had died in a nearby village, Bhima sprang to his feet. He was exhilarated.' So, that itself makes the reader curious as to why this person, this protagonist is happy, so happy about the death of someone.

Professor: Yeah.

Catherine: So, he establishes that in the very first line that this is going to be a very unusual sort of a narrative, a very bizarre kind of narrative. And then the third paragraph where there is a description of their living quarters, I found that very interesting, because you have 50 or so huts in the suburb, in the jungle, which creak in the breeze. And then he further describes the huts as being made of old tin sheets, mats, planks and sacks and those houses contained people. So, he is almost he almost finds it strange that people live in such abysmal circumstances.

Professor: Yeah.

Catherine: And the following line, I think sort of sums up the the condition of the people living there when he says, 'cast-off things sheltering a cast-off people.'

Professor: Yeah, absolutely. I will just make a point about that and then we will go back to that opening set of ideas, cast-off things sheltering a cast-off people, we have the narrator commenting in the story. So, we do not have an objective narrator who is just detailing things out for the reader, we have a narrator who is commenting on the status of this protagonist and his placement in the society. So, it is not a very objective, neutral kind of description, which is going on in the story.

So, that is something that we need to remember, the repetition cast-off things cast-off people, associating people with cast-off objects is also very very interesting. The people themselves

have been turned into objects which are worthless, so that idea is also very clearly highlighted there. And Catherine, you are quite right, it is a very interesting opening, if you think about that, and you you rightly point out that there is a kind of an intrigue or a curiosity that is provoked in the reader. It could almost be like a detective story in some respects, as to when you are trying to answer the question, why is he happy about the death of a village, you know, money lender, powerful money lender? And I was also on jotting down notes while I was reading and and I was just pointing to myself that there is an extreme of emotions.

If you read the passage very closely, 'hearing that a powerful moneylender had died in a nearby village, Bhima sprang to his feet, he was exhilarated' and the next line, 'his joy would not subside, he is not able to suppress his happiness. Looking in the direction of the village he suddenly turned to glare at the sun in the sky.' So, he is glaring angrily at the sun in the sky. One moment he is full of ecstasy, joy, exhilaration, the other moment he is so angry, he is glaring, he is giving looks to the sky.

And further down, if you look at the way the setting is described, the way the landscape is described, you can also see the emotions of this particular character, kind of projected on to this particular aspects of the landscape. Let me just quickly read the second paragraph there. 'The sun was setting, rain clouds crowded the sky they had the rough battered look of freshly-ploughed land.' When you look at freshly ploughed land, there is, there is this quiet sense of joy and satisfaction, peace, you kind of somehow sense the rhythm, the natural rhythm of you know civilization.

So, but here, look at the way the freshly-ploughed land is described, it is rough, it is battered as if somebody had beaten the land, so we can clearly realize that these are the emotions of this particular protagonist. And look at the next line, 'the retreating light filtering through those nasty looking clouds'. Nasty looking clouds. Again, that emotion which we associate with human beings, and the aggressive attitudes is kind of offered for the cloud. So, there is a transferred epithet there in in the description of natural scenery, and these stream down over Mumbai, the key setting.

So, Mumbai already has been shown to us in a very kind of negative, pessimistic, harsh light,. And we also need to remember that this particular writer has written a lot on the city of Mumbai and if you kind of think about the brief introduction that Gurudarshana kind of read for us, you will realize that the city Mumbai becomes a dystopian place for Annabhau Sathe and he describes the misery of that place, the misery that place inflicts on its inhabitants, its

wretched inhabitants, who are unfortunate enough to fall on the the oppressed side or the exploited side of that great divide between the rich and the poor.

Catherine: This pattern of description I think we find it throughout the story. The things which are seemingly normal, mundane, quotidian are juxtaposed with things that are absolutely abysmal, wretched and almost like a mockery of humanity. Absolutely, the two things coexist. So, you have the kitchen fires burning, you have the children playing, you have everyone going about their day to day business, but their lives are completely submerged in poverty.

Professor: Absolutely, absolutely, which reminds me of this particular detail on page 107. 'His beloved daughter Narmada was playing close by.' As you pointed that the real mundane day to day existence of child's play, 'and his wife was in the house patting bhakars into shape, preparing food.' So all these quotidian or regular routine is ongoing and Bhima even looks awe-inspiring.

If you look at that description of Bhima he's awe-inspiring, 'his satara outfit comprised a long red turban, a yellow dhoti, a shirt of thick coarse cloth. He looked a proper wrestler, his massive forehead, thick neck, dark eyebrows, flamboyant moustache and broad yet fairly features had struck fear into many a ruffian', so he is a fear for, you know physical presence in the story.

We have the softness of the child and the wife, gently playing, doing their work, which contrasted it once again with this really powerful, you know, specimen of masculinity, fearful specimen of masculinity as well. So you are quite right in pointing out the the really stark contrast. And this story is is also about a contrast between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots. And usually the story is associated with, you know, kind of illustrating the life of Dalit, but I would not kind of kind of put this into that compartment and say 'yes, this is kind of exemplary of that kind of lifestyle.' I would just say that this could apply to every human being who is kind of is in the margins, and who is trying to strike out a living by hard work.

And I want to point out once again to the setting of this story, which is in the suburb. Not in the town, not in the city. If you go back to the other stories that we have read, particularly The Blue Light, if you remember setting up that house Bhargavi Nilayam, it is again near the borders, it is near the municipality border, it is not in the hustle and bustle of town. Once

again, you know, what we have here is kind of marginalization of certain people and certain settings, and which in itself has a lot of ideological implications that we can probe.

So setting is interesting, it's in the suburbs and it's, it's just a kind of, you know, hovel, that lots of people huddling close together like that crowd of clouds in the sky. People living cheek-by-jowl and and and crowded settings and setups are there, very clearly to indicate that there is overcrowding and therefore, that could also be one of the economic reasons for such a deprived lifestyle.

My question here is to Catherine, I was just wondering about this phrase, if you go back to page 107, '...as his many dreams of getting a job becoming a worker bringing home a pay packet, making his wife a coin necklace was shattered, Bhima had lost hope and had moved to the suburb in the jungle.' So he is a villager and then he could not make ends meet there. So what he does is he migrates to Mumbai and he has moved to the suburb in the jungle. Why this word jungle? You know, when you first read it, you really wonder if this is a real jungle, if there is a real wilderness? What are your thoughts on this? Maybe you can make a comment on it.

Catherine: I think the setting that's been described so far is a typical slum or basti in Mumbai. And as you had already pointed out, there are people from different castes, different religions and different communities, who are like jostling together and then they are struggling to make ends meet. So it has become a jungle in the sense that it is each man or woman for himself, and herself and it is a struggle to find work and there is a lot of competition.

And he creates this scenario where human human beings might not necessarily be human. I think this is a prelude to what happens later on in the story when a certain animalistic kind of instinct takes over for survival, so I think the word jungle is very significant in that you have this fight for survival and also diminishing humanity.

Professor: Yes, yes, absolutely, absolutely. So the jungle is a metaphoric way to represent this suburb of Bombay or Mumbai where you know civilized values and civilized way of life takes a backseat and animalistic tendencies come to the fore. So, once again, the city and the suburbs are portrayed in a really, really harsh and, you know, wild manner, the wildness becomes real as the story progresses and there is a foreshadowing of things to come. Okay, thank you, Catherine, thank you, Karnalius.

Aparna would you like to read the passages that you find striking in the story?

Aparna: Yes sure. So the most interesting paragraphs I found from the story is just after where Karnalius stopped reading, I will read it out once again. “Suddenly he saw something sparkling in the heap of ashes. When he looked closely, he discovered that the sparkle came from a gold ring of about a tola. Overjoyed, he grabbed hold of the ring, one tola of gold and that too from a corpse ashes. He was delighted by his discovery, there was gold to be found in the ashes of a corpse. He had found a new means by which to live.

From the next day onwards Bhima began visiting crematoriums and cemeteries on the banks of the rivers and streams. He would sift through the ashes of bodies and pick up a fragment of gold here and ornament there, earrings, nose rings, a gold chain, bracelet or anklet, he would find something of value every day.

Bhima’s new venture began to flourish. He discovered that gold ornaments which were left on the bodies that were being cremated, would melt, and melt with the heat of the fire and enter the bones. So he would crush burnt bones and remove the gold. He would break skulls. He would crush wrists, but he would get the gold. In the evening, he would go to Kurla, sell the gold and collect cash. On the way home, he would get dates for Narmada. Business was steady.”

Professor: Okay, thank you, thank you. Now I would invite Mrudula to offer some comments on the passage that Aparna has read for us.

Mrudula: Is a very interesting passage. And what strikes strikes the most is that somebody’s death becomes a means of living for another person. And how the, how he describes about when he discovered this spark came from a gold ring of about tola. It is like a precious jewel that is going to help him to lead a life, so gold becomes very important here. And that too, it is kind of bizarre that somebody collects gold from some corpse’s ashes. And like, we do not we actually it does not come to us that you can make a living out of it, so, first time I am coming across something of this sort.

And another thing that I have noticed is that is the stark difference of the different sides of Bhima that is mentioned here. Towards the towards the last of this passage, you can see, the writer talks about how his new venture began, is flourishing, and then he is a he he describes the brutality that he has done to the corpse, he is like he would crush the burnt bones and remove the gold, he would break the skulls, he would crush wrist. It’s very gory and it is it is

very brutal in one sense, but and the very next line itself he is he is describing the gentleness of Bhima like in the evening you would go to Kurla, sell the gold and collect the cash and the way home he would get dates for Narmada, business was steady.

You can see a fatherly instinct, fatherly love in him and a murderous, a murderer you cannot call him a murderer, but still the brutality is evident.

Professor: Yeah. Absolutely. I am glad you pointed this very instinctive response to this passage. When you see the scenario, it feels surreal, it does not feel real at all right? He comes across a bit of gold on a corpse and then suddenly he makes it into business. The next sentence is that he had found a new means by which to live, and he starts visiting crematoriums.

And sometimes the narrator says that the gold ornaments which were left in bodies used to enter the bone, so he has to crush the bones to get at the gold, so what we have here is a very stark, gory, Gothic picture of Bhima, a powerful figure, he is burly, he is very powerful here, he is just crushing the bones of these dead bodies to get at the gold. So it feels so brutal.

And the narrator himself or herself makes a comment here saying that the brutal reality of unemployment had made him brutal. So he has been turned into this animal by the way things are in this society, it is unemployment, it is just a small concept that we can easily understand, unemployment everybody can understand, you do not get work, if you do not get work, you will be hungry and then the narrator says that that kind of behavior will make you brutal, will turn into an animal.

And he scavenges, he scavenges for gold. He is like an animal here, hyena-like, you know that kind of idea is kind of placed here on our minds, very subtly at the very beginning of the story. So what he does is he does all these crushing of the wrist, breaking up the skulls. Yes, these are dead bodies, but we still understand the horror of it. And it also tells you the inhumanity that is kind of trained on him, so he is been trained to behave in such inhuman ways.

And we also need to see this as a concept, a concept of brutality, a symbol as well, his actions become a symbol too, just as the way the rich and the powerful the moneylenders, the landlords, behave brutally, they may not literally break wrist, they may not literally smash skulls, they may not literally crush your bones, but they are doing it in a symbolic way in

order to exploit you and kind of cushion their lifestyle, that symbolic brutality is here, eerily turned into a real brutality which Bhima inflicts on dead corpses.

So in a way he could be taking his vengeance on this dead moneylender when he wants to get at the corpse. So it is a very reasonable interpretation to make and once again, we can see him bringing back dates for Narmada, Narmada and 'business was steady', things are normal, things are good for him. And we do not see him conscience-stricken that is completely elided, there is no repugnance, there is no revulsion, so he has been hardened by the realities around him to completely go scavenge, to go find his business among the dead bodies in the cemeteries. So he is not at all kind of made repugnant, but what he is doing, yeah, so that is interesting to me.

Kurla is a neighborhood of east Mumbai, that's the reference. And Varna River, it's a tributary of Krishna River, the reference to Varna early on page 107.

Okay, so then I would like to thank the both of you for joining me and let me invite two other students to unpack the story further.

Student: "The sun had set, darkness covered the land. As his wife served his meal Bhima ate in grim silence. When she realized that he was preparing to go out, she said softly, 'You are going somewhere, aren't you? I don't think what you are doing is right. You should find some other way to make a living. Corpse, corpses ashes, gold this existence it is all wrong. People brand—'

Bhima was upset by what his wife was saying. 'Be quiet,' he said irritably. 'How does it matter what I do? If my home fires go cold, who is going to come and light them up?'

'It is not like that.' she said quietly, noticing her husband's angry face. 'It is not good to roam around like ghoul or ghost. I am saying whatever I am saying I am saying whatever it is I am saying because I am afraid.'

'Who told you that there are ghosts in graveyards? Listen, this Mumbai is a ghosts bazar, the real ghosts stay in houses and the dead ones rot those graveyards. Ghosts take birth in the village not in the wild,' raved Bhima. In the face of his anger, she kept her mouth shut as she made preparations to leave. He growled, 'I did not get work even after going to Mumbai, but sifting through corpses ashes, I have got gold. For I broke hills, they gave me 2 rupees, but

now that ash easily gives me even 10 rupees.’ Saying this, he left the house. It was quite late by then it was quiet and peaceful outside.”

Professor: Okay, thank you. A remarkable set of ideas here once again, the contrast is very very clearly brought about by Bhima. What are your thoughts?

Student: I mean, starting from the end it says it was quiet and peaceful outside.

Professor: Yes yes.

Student: Which is not at all indicative of things to come.

Professor: Absolutely, which kind of takes us back to the point that Catherine was earlier making about the the contrast between the soft, you know, the softness of the world outside that the harsh realities of the world that Bhima knows, so that that contrast is there. What else is there?

Student: I mean, It is, it’s not just Bhima, his wife seems to know it as well, and she, she’s quite aware of what he’s doing. And she tries to dissuade him very, very softly but she I would like to posit that she also sees sense in what he’s saying that if they have no money, what is going to happen to them?

Professor: Absolutely, absolutely.

Student: And this is another way to live. Although she’s not in full agreement with it, it does bring home the bacon, so to speak.

Professor: Yeah, yeah. So if you go back to the idea first. ‘I don’t think what you are doing is right.’ So she somehow seems to be like the conscience of the family, she is somehow seems to be the conscience of Bhima, which he suppresses very harshly, he says, you do not know, if the lights go out, the kitchen fires go out, who is going to come and light them up? So, but we can also see her voice is the voice of reason too, the voice of reasons, the voice of the conscience, the voice of the traditional attitudes to society, you should not disturb the dead that is what we are told to believe.

So that kind of attitude is also brought to the fore by his wife and she says, what I am saying, I am saying because I am afraid, I am frightened, because she is worried that things will turn on the family, you know you know, there might be some kind of repercussions for, to what he

is doing. And look at his response, 'who told you that there are ghosts in the graveyard? The ghosts are not in the graveyard, but in the villages, in the towns.'

And he says that this Mumbai is a ghost's bazaar. Bazaar, you know where there is a lot of crowd, once again people living very closely to one another, there is a lot of activity, there is a lot of economic activity, but he says that they are all drawn by ghosts, not real people, not civilized people, not people who are alive, alive both to the needs of the others.

So, the real ghosts stay in houses and the dead ones rot in the graveyards. So all people, he just tarnishes everybody with the brush, saying that everybody is a ghost, ghosts take birth in the village not in the wild. So, he says that the real ghosts are in the village and, but this idea will be kind of turned upside down as we read the story further.

And once again, the point here that I want to draw attention to is the fact that Mumbai is figured as a place of ghosts. So, that that representation of the city in such a light is very very harsh and intriguing and this made, you know, made sense of by Bhima, he makes sense of this ghost's bazaar.

What else is interesting here? Once again the irritation versus the softness idea is there, the irritability that he kind of offers in the, in the face of softness of the wife. And I am also reminded of Charles Dickens's 'Our Mutual Friend', isn't that where we have a father figure trying to fish up dead bodies in the river and he makes a living out of selling those corpses to scientists, to doctors. And the daughter says, please do not do it this is not right, so same kind of idea is kind of brought to the fore here too, isn't it? Yeah.

Suma, would you like to offer your thoughts on any of the sections?

Student: So after, like Bhima is digging up the corpses for like, gold, we see that again it is like you know you should not disturb the dead, so you have this bizzare happenings around the place. And you notice that the corpse of the young daughter-in-law of a moneylender has been moving around mysteriously in the burial ground. And so this is one thing that we should, you know, have, you should keep it in mind.

And then you can see that, so Bhima again goes back, I mean, he knows all this, and he is going back to the burial ground for, you know, gold. And so he is he, 'It was pitch dark, but he felt no fear. A sari, one petticoat and a blouse, dates in the morning was all he had on his mind, he was in a wild mood today.' So it seemed as if, you know, he was very logically

thinking that, you know, when a female is allowed to move into the public space, so it is something like he is like, no, I won't see, it is like a, it is only something that has to be seen in the day, and I think it is something.

Professor: Yeah, let me, let me just comment on that. It is an interesting passage that you have picked out for discussion. 'It was pitch dark, but he had no fear'. He in fact likes darkness, he invites darkness, which is why he kind of glares at the sky hoping that it will be dark soon. And he is, he is happy when there is darkness, so that he can get his business done. But the point here is that, a Sari, one petticoat and a blouse, dates in the morning, so these are the things that he wants to arrange for his family in the morning after he has successfully robbed the corpse of the moneylender and sold it and, you know, so these are the plans that he has, for his wife and the daughter.

So, what he is trying to do here is that even though his profession is bizarre, it's really cruel and brutal, he is trying to recreate the domestic happiness for himself and his family. So once again, we have two really, you know, two very different worlds that Bhima is kind of crossing from one to the other. One world is the world of graveyard and the other world is the world of his family where he wants to provide for his wife.

Look at the reference to that coin necklace. He wants to provide not only the basic necessities, he wants to make the wife happy, he wants to give her jewellery, he wants to bring dates, because dates is perhaps a delicacy that you don't usually get. So, it is a special thing that he wants to give to the daughter, because she likes it.

So, the domestic charm that we kind of see a glimpse of, the charm that he has in his mind for the family is really kind of, gives us the humane, you know, side to Bhima there. He is brutal, but he is not brutal towards his family. That that thing is something that we cannot forget. And I wanted to point, do you have something else? Yes, yes.

Student: So, I think there is a clear-cut blurring of boundaries between life and death.

Professor: Yeah.

Student: Because the instance where the gold is suffused into the bone.

Professor: Yes, yes, very good that is a very symbolic moment.

Student: Something which doesn't show death and life as two separate things, the material and something

Professor: The organic and the inorganic kind of coming together, blending together, but I would interpret them in a different way, in a more cynical way and say that, you know the greed has gone into the bones of the human beings you know. You have become so inhuman when you become so greedy. And you have to kind of hack at the bones, hack at the flesh and the bones to get to what you want.

And once again, I am reminded of that a fairy tale The Goose that Lays the Golden Eggs, they are not satisfied with one egg per day, they just want to kill the goose. And two peasants killing the goose to get at all the golden eggs, somehow very horrifying, you know, so I am also reminded of that, that narrative of greed.

So, you point to a very interesting point about the blending of the organic and the inorganic and I think about the dehumanizing, how gold eats the bones and the minds of the people. So, that aspect is also there, right? We need to remember several trajectories when we analyze texts in this fashion. Anything that we want to add?

Student: No.

Professor: Okay, thank you very much Shweta and thank you Suma.