





Close Encounters - A Beggars' Opera (or, Bandra to Grant Road by the suburban line - an opera in 8 acts)

NEENA NEHRU

Overture: up the grime-grey stairs,
avoiding exploding crimson pyrotechnic starbursts
of paan-stained spittle,
pools of mildewed gunk,
globes of indeterminate yuck,
onto the overbridge.

Introducing

the notional cast of characters:

a blind lottery seller extolling blinkered luck;
an exhausted family curled up for the night,
wrung out, strung out along the drier edge
like shrunken, wrinkled brown rudraksha beads
threaded onto dirt frayed gunny sacks,
interspersed with mangy, scratchy dogs -
a living rosary, count the beads
in exculpation for your own good luck;
fruit sellers behind piles of chikoos, mangoes, bananas,
next to a toothless crone, skin gnarled, sari extended
taut and empty as her belly, eyes and heart,
no clink of coins, no chink of light;
a parade of lepers excommunicated from Life,
disease exacerbated by hunger and vice
versa, displaying the emptiness

where their extremities should be,
exposing the hollows of their hearts – and yours;
a star cast of distortions from a Grimm rhyme -
mute, mutant, mutilated, lame,
hunchback, poorman, beggarman, thief –
exhibits from the freaks gallery at the fair,
exploiting their handicaps, displaying their wares,
obscene neon advertisements
exhorting your charity, extorting your pity,
extracting your coin.

Act 1 – Bandra

Set: claw my way into the Ladies' compartment,
past exasperated women clawing to get out;
no chance of a seat, or of falling,
wedged firmly upright by the pressure
of soft, steaming hot rolls
baking in assorted shapes and sizes -
extrovert college kids in imitation
imported jeans flaunting exclusive designer labels
faked in Bhendi bazaar;
fishwives with expanding waists in the full nine yards,
exemplary burqa clad matrons
elevating their shrouds of shame to flags of pride;
crushed stenographers dripping in non-crush nylon
and drooping gajras - all
held tight and high on an olfactory cocktail
of damp, strap-hanging underarms, fresh fish,
stale flowers, bad breath, furtive farts,
perfumed hair-oil, Mahim creek, Bombay-duck.

Enter: a blind singer
squeezing through the swaying sweaty mass,
wheezing high-pitched filmy bhajans,
collecting more indifference than coins;
I wonder, does he get turned on
by all that yielding, invisible
female flesh?

Chorus: outside, a
blue kite limps
bravely, struggling
through a hostile
damp sky.

Act 2 – Mahim

Set: over oily-black-thick-reeking Mahim creek,
Creaking past barrack-blocks, once cheap
young things painted gaudy shades
of plastic pink, firozi blue, pista green,
promising to satisfy your dreams,
now seedy madams matured into middle-age,
exacting exorbitant rates, fading
peeling powder struggling to hide
spreading seepage stains, stretch-marks,
scar tissue, blotchy patches of exfoliating eczema,
bravely bedecked with necklaces
of chameleon laundry on sagging lines.

Enter: a hijra, exile from both sexes,
flowers in the hair, shadow on the jaw,
swinging dangling ear-rings and narrow hips,

flexing muscled arms, exuding menace,
spreading alarm, clapping hollow palms,
promising blessings, threatening curses,
cajoling, intimidating with sandpaper chin,
sandpaper voice extracting alms
because it's tuesday, thursday, holiday, anyday,
today - sharpened sixth-sense selecting vulnerability,
sniffing superstitious fear-heat like a randy dog.
I play a game
guessing who will be the next victim.

Chorus: outside a
red kite waves
fiercely, challenging a
bull wind in a
dangerous sky.

Act 3 - Matunga.

Set: a row of . . . well . . .
dwellings, for want of a better word,
by any other name would smell as foul;
defined by usage, not by form,
defying mind, boggling words,
turning extravagant exaggeration
into restrained, mild understatement,
execrable excrescences excreted by the bowels
of a sick, diarrhoeous city.

Enter: a queue of jostling, haggling vendors -
a withered wraith offering shriveled chikoos,
another past her prime, overripe sitaphal,

a blind man waving multi-coloured handkerchiefs,
unkempt urchins expertly balancing trays
of tawdry trifles examined to while away boredom -
shiny baubles, plastic bangles and beads,
hair-clips, combs, silky ribbons, safety pins, dish scrubbers,
stick-on bindis in an extravaganza of colours, shapes and sizes -
a gaggle of college girls sift through them,
so difficult to decide, offer half the asking price –
they will scream and curse,
in the end will let you buy.

Chorus: outside a
green kite totters
drunkenly, stumbles on the
rough pavement on an
uneven sky.

Act 4 - Dadar.

Set: for action – sensing an imminent exodus,
I scan the rows for telltale signs -
a shifting bottom, book closed, gathered shopping bags -
experienced native tracker selecting my quarry,
expectantly tensing for the kill; ah - Now!
quick as a flash I deftly slide under her still rising seat
onto the still warm seat,
under the very nose of a rival in a blue nylon sari -
let her glower; ah! sweet scent of success,
exhilarated flush of victory, exultant blaze of pride,
the seat is Mine!
Those crisply starched cotton-candy ladies
in their chauffeur-driven, air-conditioned tombs,

minds buried in 'Stardust', they don't know what they miss -
this,
yes, this,
is 'Life'.

Enter: something under my clothes –
soon extinguishes my smug glow
with a sharp tight stinging bite
on the right outer thigh, then moves inward;
furtively I glance at my neighbour,
absently scratching her arm, then her matted hair,
hurriedly relinquish my prize to the triumphant blue nylon sari,
look around for another try.

Chorus: outside, a
white kite bobs
defiantly, riding the
unruly waves of a
swirling sky.

Act 5 - Lower Parel.

Set: the carriage empties,
exposing a floor littered
with piles of peanut shells, crumpled paper bags,
orange peels, pips, sweet wrappers, chikoo seeds,
some fag ends, an exterminated cockroach;
above, ads for Pearl Abortion Centre,
family planning clinics, 'Fair and Lovely',
washing powder Nirma, Peter Pan bras, Carefree
components binding together a woman's life.
In a corner, a clutch of chattering women

in tea-cozy garments designed
to keep the stimulating brew warm
exclusively for intended eyes;
a baby whimpers, one of them pours in some milk;
a child shrieks, she adds two lumps of sugar sweets,
now is that alright?

Enter: a troupe of exuberant urchins
swaggering with exaggerated Bachchan bravado,
executing exhibitionist cartwheels, off-duty now,
the day's selling-begging done, shrieking,
chattering, swinging from strap to strap
with graceful simian loops, high spirited,
high swinging hooligan hoolock gibbons hoo-hooing,
whooping with delight, not yet cowed
by the whiplash tail of life
that has excoriated their elders,
strip by excruciating strip, exorcising their spirit,
which they replenish from a bottle.

Chorus: outside, a
pink kite swings,
stomach churning on the
roller-coaster of a
moody sky.

Act 6 - Elphinston Road.

Set: ladies' compartment
halts next to the gents' urinal
decorated with bloody paan-stained expectorations,
abstract paintings of a consumptive society.

Flies zip around drunkenly,
heady on the overpowering vapours,
men enter and exit, unzipping-zipping their flies,
ejaculating unexpurgated expletives,
spewing vile invective,
spitting out the gagging stench that
invades their minds.

Enter: a tender young flower girl,
slender stemmed, budding body,
exquisite blossom face, sad petal eyes,
cheeks prematurely robbed of their bloom,
tangled corolla of stringy hair,
selling fragrant white strings
to tie around your shining tresses.
The scent of jasmine wraps itself
around the stench of urine –
fragile flowers tied around an oily jooda;
jasmine intertwined with urine,
delicate floral strands woven
through greasy, straggly unwashed braids;
incompatible extremes coiled together
in an uneasy embrace.

Chorus: outside, a
yellow kite weaves and
lurches, pukes,
falls flat on a
heaving sky.

Act 7 - Mahalaxmi.

Set: across the road, the racecourse;
high-strung, high-prancing, high-investment,
high-stakes, highly-trained horses
in clean dry stables, expertly brushed, expensively groomed;
they look across a foetid canal, look down their fine noses
at snot-nosed, knot-haired, pot-bellied,
rot-toothed, not-schooled children
trailing outsize, discarded clothes of indeterminate colour,
running rowdy races by their tarpaulin-
rags-cardboard- plastic-sheet homes;
no one will bet on their chances.

Enter: a lame beggar,
stumping on one weedy leg and a stout stick;
cynically I wonder if he has tied one ankle to the thigh
in mock mutilation, bent joint hidden
under a flapping trouser leg,
then look again and see -
there is no knee
beneath his shorts; a fumbled rupee coin
to exonerate my guilty confusion;
am I breaking another leg
in order to mend my conscience?

Chorus: outside, a
purple kite tangos,
swoops and stoops with the
sensuous wind in a
sultry sky.

Act 8 - Bombay Central.

Set: mainline terminus; we stare enviously
at faces on the Rajdhani heading north
in air-conditioned comfort to exciting events . . .
an executive conference in Kathmandu,
a cousin's extravagant wedding in Delhi,
expense account holiday in Kashmir . . .
leaving behind yesterday's rejection slips
for tomorrow's bright interview.
Last month I was among them, cool air, warm glow,
looking out with condescension at those poor sods
hanging on and out of the doors,
intestines spilling out of the split belly
of a bloated society
no longer able to live with the shame of
itself.

Enter: a dancing duo
prematurely expelled from childhood,
innocence expropriated by the exigencies of Life;
'ek, do, teen', belting out the lyrics
he should've but didn't learn at school,
the five-year-old accompanies himself with spoon castanets,
his eight-year-old sister gyrates skinny hips,
swivels bony shoulders, rolls suggestive eyes in . . .
is it child-like play-acting,
or the serious adult business of
survival?

Chorus: outside, an
orange kite ebbs and

flows, flotsam
drifting forlorn on a
grubby sky.

Finale - Grant Road.

Up the down staircase in the gathering gloom -
soon it will be over, this parade
of hopelessly aspiring expendable extras
expectantly performing their tricks; maybe . . .
one day . . . a star will fall and give him his wish -
break his leg, give him a break;
a producer will spot him - it has happened before,
or so they say.
And then there appears . . .
(rolls of thunder, rattle of raindrops on tin roof,
blaring horns, screaming police sirens) . . .
the last performer,
exhumed from a living grave,
laid out for a final encore
beneath a huge yellow hoarding
exclaiming 'Hadenza for piles';
oblivious of the bouquets of footsteps falling around him,
he takes the final curtain,
extinct eyes staring at the pigeon smeared rafters above,
flat on his back, legs twisted at the hip sockets
at angles never devised by nature,
each leg laid diagonally across the torso,
left foot on right shoulder, right on left,
carrying his unholy cross,
not on his back but on his chest,
indifferently waiting

for the Great Executioner
to resurrect him with extreme unction.
I drop thirty pieces of silver
into the battered mug by his face,
but he doesn't even flick his eyes
to see who has betrayed him.

Chorus; outside - no kites to fly,
only neon signs trembling in my glittering eyes -
but then I sadly realize, the tears are for me, not them;
what possible good can it do
for me to be crucified on these sights?
Will it extirpate their pain, expiate their sins, expunge their crimes?

I am no Christ.

Epilogue. So what did I get
in exchange for all that?
Some free entertainment, a long poem,
a couple of flea bites, a bad conscience,
a dose of self pity to cure it. On the way home
I stop at the Video Shoppe;
Gautama saw an old man, a sick man, a corpse,
and sought Nirvana
under a Bodhi tree;
I saw
a Beggars' Opera, and seek oblivion
in 'Close Encounters of the . . .
remote
controlled kind'.