

## **Marriage or Live Together: The Issues in O. P. Arora's 'The River Flows Eternally'**

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*A versatile poet, author and critic.*

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### **The Abstract**

*The River Flows Eternally* is a book of short stories by Dr O. P. Arora, which contains seventeen short stories, none too long. This is his sixth book of fiction; all his books of this genre taken together, in English and Hindi. In these stories Arora has plunged into the most debated and controversial area of man-woman relationship in the present context; in a changed scenario when Western culture has been enormously influencing Indian society. The moot point is to find out the best way of conjugal relationship; marriage or live-together. The book has some more stories too which point out the pitfalls of Indian society, its hollowness and weakness. They contain writer's point of view and remedial suggestions too in each such situation.

**Keywords:** Marriage, sex, relationship, goon, honesty.

## **Introducing the Author and the Book**

Dr O. P. Arora is a veteran professor living in Delhi for long. He is a cherished bilingual poet, fiction writer and critic. He has authored 12 creative books. *The River Flows Eternally* contains seventeen short stories, none too long. I have read all the stories and have discussed most of them at length to bring out the essence of this collection of stories. About the title of the book this may be said that the author refers to man-woman relationship as a river; it flows but through different curves; usual and unusual. Arora has plunged into the most debated and controversial area of man-woman relationship in the present context; in a changed scenario when Western culture has been enormously influencing Indian society. In accord with it, a call of the day; living together of two adults of any sex has been legally sanctioned. But Indian Marriage system is acclaimed as an acclaimed institution. In spite of some pitfalls it has served its purpose, has more success in its record than failure. The main theme of the book is a debate: If marriage is preferable over the live-together idea. And the author seems to be in favour of the first.

## **The Stories**

First two stories, "Bridge over the Banks" and "When you Blow the Conch", are brief confirmation of the idea of marriage as the solid base of relationship between a couple (the bride and the bridegroom) in the usual shape of love and understanding.

During the study of MA staying in a hostel room, the storyteller, protagonist of the story, "Rashmi" fell seriously ill suffering from typhoid. Avoided by most he suffered loneliness besides illness. He was a puritan. His old acquaintance, young Rashmi, carrying scandalous rumour about her, took leave and nursed him, including towel bath changing clothes, for about two months braving notice and gossips of all the young men in the hostel house. The first person of the story was extremely embarrassed and protested but enjoyed her presence; foods and services.

Sometime after the cure when he was in a very obliging mood, wishing to help her, she proposed him to be the father of her child as she intensely wished to be a mother. The idea was considered repugnant, impossible and ill designed to the proposed "I" of the story but she insisted without any intention of getting married to him. When she was asked why she did not become pregnant by her husband before she divorced him she said that she never loved him; he was a perfect devil to give birth to a healthy and loving baby whereas she loves the person proposed. When she was told that he never had loved her he was told that it was not a fact. He loved her without his realising it and that his love for Pragati, his would be wife, was not as genuine as he felt and that she was not a girl to give satisfaction to a man. However, she was not granted her wishes. She left in a huff with utter humiliation.

Long after settling in life he came back once to his loved place, Chandigarh, and met his friends who said that Rashmi's condition was not desirable. Though he verbally abused her to his friends, he took the opportunity to meet her and found that she was suffering from privacy and illness. Grateful as he was, he came to her help the way he was once helped by her. He called a doctor who cured his patient. He found Rashmi having no grudge against him, found her always admitting his honesty and broadness of heart.

"While tidying up the room a little, I was suddenly struck: a faded photograph in an attractive frame on the stool near the chair lying close to the window-it was mine clipped from the college magazine." (Rashmi The River 31) The protagonist bowed his head realising her genuine love for him, admitting to himself his rashness in comprehending her feeling towards him in the past; openly he admitted to her that she had been prophetic in her assumption about Pragati. He was divorced from her. While coming back she bid him goodbye without an iota of remorse.

There are two unmarried couples or boy-girl friends as are their nomenclatures today, who live in the same campus for four years. While Vishal and Neha have decided to marry, Avinash and Ria aren't in favour of it. "This is 21<sup>st</sup> century. Concrete. No abstractios. All these foolish romantic notions of love died long back." (When the Sun Rises The River 39) Avinash says. To Ria marriage is

carrying a humdrum life of having kids, getting them grow up with studies and in old age playing with their children. While the marriage supporters say, "Love doesn't mean only sex. Love means identifying yourself with someone, fulfilment through each other, depth in emotional bonding." (When the Sun Rises The River 39) In the course of time Avinash too prefers marriage but Ria obstinately rejects the idea to the extent that she would leave him then.

In a few days, Ria finds herself pregnant. Consulting doctor warns her that abortion would render her opportunity to be a mother blocked forever. Though she never wants to marry she doesn't wish to block her chance of becoming mother in future. Avinash accepts the responsibility and helps her all the way through to get the baby born and goes further to place the baby to a childless couple willing to adopt the child so that Ria gets freedom to continue as before. But at the last moment she becomes very weak mentally, unwilling to part with the child and implores Avinash to marry her as she is overwhelmed with his selfless services given to her. She says it is possible by one who loves the soul, not the person only. To justify her recent ideas contrary to what she had been cherishing so long she delivers a mini lecture to Avinash, telling among other things, "Relationship between man and woman goes far beyond sex, passion or intensity. It transcends the narrow bounds of physical, it reaches the spiritual. These months you always spoke the language of the soul. I realised what

relationship really means." (When the Sun Rises The River 46)

And here is another love story, "Shazia". In Delhi they came from Ajman, near Dubai, and settled in a house bought by them, opposite the house of the protagonist of the story. They were Muslims who usually had little contacts with Hindus. They were immediately considered rich with petro-dollars as they came from Dubai. While the wife of the storyteller was reluctant to contact them out of prejudice and bitter experiences between communities during the partition days, the Muslim couple, Shazia and her husband Abdul Sattar, visited them with sweets on the Diwali Day, greeting them with 'Diwali mubarak'. They behaved very politely and cautiously befitting a vegetarian Hindu household. Shazia said that she was Muslim because she was born in such a family, she could be similarly a Hindu had she took birth in one such family. Once when her husband had gone out of station Shazia suffered sickness alone. As it was known by chance, the Hindu householder took pity and brought a doctor and arranged for medicines and served the helpless lady by all means. Eventually she was cured. Similarly when once wife of the man suffered due to an accident Shazia served them devotedly and whole heartedly. When on the birthday of their son Shazia and her husband were invited, they came and presented a golden guinea to the boy, unexpected to them.

Shazia was simply open and expressed herself frankly. She said that she did not know of her husband's love but knew of sex. When she brought tea for the man he was a bit embarrassed but Shazia said, "I have observed that you like me. I thought you would certainly like it more if I bring you tea myself." (Shazia The River 59) Then came the time after a year when the family shifted to Bombay where their daughter came to settle from abroad. It was not liked by Shazia. They continued their relationship over the phone. And after months Abdul Sattar died suddenly. The family from Delhi flew to Bombay to attend the burial. After a few years when they planned to visit Goa during the holiday of their son, Shazia invited them to stay for few days with her in their house before going to Goa.

They were so treated there, with such hospitality during their stay for three days, that the storyteller tells us, "Those three days were the best days of my life. I have never enjoyed life that much. To my fill, physically, mentally, spiritually. As if I had opened up." (Shazia The River 60) He considered it as the blissful moments of his life. And the lady, while they were taking leave said, "With you I have experienced love." In response to guest's smile involuntarily she embraced him. Suffice it to say that here love is in its pure essence as experienced by humans without rubbing and exploiting it physically; love in a subtle form as in the Bengali lyric of the famous Vaishnavite poet Chandidas, "Washer woman's love is like purified gold, free from the smell of lust."

In "Dreams and Dreams" a young damsel dreams of a marriage fulfilling her life's dreams while waiting in a bus stand. Finding a young married woman with 'choora' still on her wrists coming, she become bitterly jealous and when she arrives, asks her if she waits her husband to pick her up in his car. The new comer sighs to say that they still travel by bus and that too no more together which happened a few days after their marriage. She further says that maybe a car would appear in their life after few more years. As they talk, a third and married lady, senior by about ten years to them, appears and waits in the bus stand. After hearing the two, she comes to a full understanding of their discussions and joins them. During the course of relating her experiences of a married life she says, "You won't be together then most of the nights. You will be together only for the biological need . . . . Nothing glamorous. It is all dull and drab." (Dreams and Dreams The River 63)

"When will you Grow Up" is a story about a war of decisions between marriage and no-marriage. Dr. Swati was a brilliant student and now a promising young doctor fully engaged in her profession, unmindful of other things of life. Her colleague, Dr. Manjula disturbs her with warning against not settling in life. She is disturbed at home and outside with pressure to settle with a suitable bridegroom but she doesn't care. As she chance meets one of her seniors, he too raises the question of her marriage and while in conversation says, "After you get a job, marriage and babies are two boxes you must fit in. If

you don't you are a bohemian, a worthless person." (When will you Grow Up The River 66) At this, Dr. Swati feels obstruction in her free movement and tells his senior that she is sorry to have disturbed him.

But the senior now changes his standpoint and tells her that he whole heartedly supports her mission. "Devote yourself fully, single-mindedly to your mission. Forget about the petty people barking on the roadside. They will never win." (When will you Grow Up The River 66) At this, Dr. Swati gets new strength and mental vigour to go forward in her life according to her choice.

Stories like "Bouncing through the Dark Lanes" depicts deceptive love life that ridicules a true lover. A girl tells Vimal, her genuine ex-lover, when he meets her after long, "You wanted to marry me. Stupid! Love has nothing to do with marriage. Love is a fancy. It is for fun. Masti.

"You were a fool. You took me seriously. Never take girls seriously. They are very practical. Or selfish." (Bouncing through the Dark Lanes The River 73-74)

While she ridicules her ex-lover she cheats her present husband feigning as a cancer patient, taking a doctor as her support on payment. She would move to foreign countries with monetary help from her husband with a pitiful consideration that she would not live for more than a year, as the doctor suggests. Though there is vagueness in such happenings, as if the husband would not know the reality of his wife's condition before supporting her travel without him, the idea is to trifle the institution of marriage.

"Straws in the wind" as the name suggests, points to a woman who charms an honest man, a poet, by coaxing him in a very alluring way, praising him and his poems when acquainted for the first time in a literary meet. At first, the married man refuses to go with her but later he is convinced by the lady, Sugandha, "That marriage steals away romance, makes life monotonous and a humdrum routine. Even your sex-life is nothing but a ritual. There is no fun and enjoyment even in bed." (Straws in the wind The River 96) With these thoughts, he goes to her door but comes back, not to home but to a lounge of the hotel and looks far into the horizon. Blushing, he goes back to her who was still waiting with a see-through dress on her body. At last, the triumphant woman said, "I knew, if I am a woman you would certainly come back," (Straws in the wind The River 97) she said putting her arms over his shoulder. The body triumphs over his life's cherished ethics and culture.

"Not so Easy" is a tale of 'Live togetherness', hackneyed. Sudip and Ria lives together for long but Ria suddenly leaves to try living with a foreigner, allured by his resources. Eventually she comes back soon but Sudip has undergone introspection in the meantime. And this is the wisdom he gains in the absence of his partner: "Out generation, this 'here and now' generation, I have realized, is just drifting . . . . so sad but true. We are obsessed with sex and money, and we seek momentary gratification. Live only for the moment. Of course we have coined certain slogans, high sounding and laudatory . . .

Self-deception and self-justification, nothing else. In fact our obsession with freedom is just humbug, all hallucination." (Not so Easy The River 111)

"Sudip said bye to Ria and walked out." (Not so Easy The River 111)

Apart from this group of stories there are few stories speaking about the present condition of the country in different spheres of running the administration and managing the other affairs, irrespective of the party line and polity of the country. "The Spark" is one of them. Atul is fresh from the Academy of Administration, a young man with newest zeal for work with honesty to keep the administration free from stains. He gains accolade at the beginning but as the wheel of administration rolls, he comes to a position where his boss advises him,

"Mr. Atul, in this case you should relent a little. Be a little pragmatic if you want to rise in life. The Minister is hell-bent to see the plan through. He would not like us to say 'no' to him."

To this Atul, the spirited officer, tells him, "You know, sir, that it cannot be done according to our rules"

"Yes, I know that. But rules can be twisted any way, at least for the sake of the Minister, and for your own career."

"I am sorry sir, I cannot do that, I cannot kill my conscience." (The Spark The River 50)

Consequently, he was transferred to different difficult areas in the east and north-east of the country without any prospect for progress. Eventually in five years he grew lean and thin, greying and looked haggard. Yet he did not relent to pressures; but the glow of his eyes was lost. Though it seems that some other similar young enthusiast took up the cudgel to continue, he left soon drowning the spirit in vagueness.

“A Flash in the Dark” is the story of exemplary honesty, courage and patriotism, so rare in this Dark Age that it seems like a rare flash lighting the dark area of the society. The happening is common. Suddenly outside the Metro Station in a big city, someone or a gang of goons snatches valuables from a person and runs. Even if caught they injure the catchers and try to escape; the onlookers witness the crime without venturing into the affair, thus remaining on the safe side.

Such an incident happened, let us assume in the crowded Delhi. A poor man is carrying money taking it as loan with high interest, to pay the last installment of his housing loan. And his belonging is snatched away. He runs taking all risks, and catches one of the two criminals and requests him for return of his money explaining how he obtained it and how he would lose all chance of having his house if he failed to pay the installment. He receives a big punch on his face as a reward but he caught and overpowers the snatcher when his accomplice comes running with a dagger and stabs him. The storyteller

comes to help when all others in the crowd were on lookers only. He too was stabbed and hospitalized. One of the criminals was caught. A case was filed by the police as usual.

Worried wife and daughter of the man came to the hospital to help and console. After some time came his friend to see and advise him as well-wisher. He said, "Anything could have happened. It is a country of the goons, by the goons, for the goons. How can you fight them alone? You should learn to be." (A Flash in the Dark The River 70)

Replacing the word 'Goon' by 'People' one gets the definition of democracy, which has been brought to this position by replacement. However, the patient in the bed wished to know from his friend if he meant that he should have been selfish but the friend says, no but he should be practical. The patient maintained that it means to be selfish and continued to speak relevantly: For the selfishness of Aambhi Puru won against Sikandar, for the selfishness of Jaichand, Mughals ruled India for long years and for the selfishness of Mir Jafar the English occupied India. But he would not follow the great men cited. Finding his friend obstinate the well wisher disclosed the reason of his appearing after long to his friend. He said, "We are friends. There was a time, when you came to Delhi, you needed me. Today I need you. One of the two boys is my boss's son. Yes. And he has specially asked me to prevent you from identifying the two persons. My job is

at stake. And if you help me . . ." (A Flash in the Dark The River 71)

But the patriot was confirmed in his conviction that "For our small personal benefits we have always pawned this nation . . . . During the last seventy years of independence we have done only that . . . handed over this nation to the goons . . . social goons or political goons." (A Flash in the Dark The River 70)

He did not agree to oblige his friend even at the cost of his life.

"Goodbye to Angels" is a story about the frailty of human memory and gratefulness. They forgot to remember the great doctor who had helped all patients and suffering people serving them selflessly; a rare action by a member of such profession at present. When he died, his funeral procession was one mile long but within a year no one gave the promised donation to establish a charitable hospital in his house. It is a great irony of life that when a really grateful man came to enquire and help in establishing such a hospital on the anniversary date of the late doctor's death, he found that none kept his promise and the doctor's wife even forgot the date, she had rent out the dispensary for good rental income and at the top of her accomplishment, she was going out for a programme of merriment. She had little time to tarry like her impatient children, who clad in fine dresses, were ready to accompany their mother.

This reminds me of a humorous story, an irony of life; "Zadig", by Voltaire. The story is about a lady from Babylon who approached the tomb of her recently died husband to cut his nose though she earnestly loved him in his life.

The incident was, after the sudden death of her husband Zadig, his wife Azora lamented and wept bitterly shedding copious tears but soon she met a close friend of Zadig, Cador, who said that Zadig had bestowed most of his properties to him before his death. Both young Cador and Azora became friends and had a delicious dinner but they took more time chatting and finishing supper. Then they slept together. At midnight, Cador complained of severe pleuritic fit and pain. Worried, Azora went out in search of remedies but coming back lamented that the famous physician Hermes had left Babylon. Then Cador mentioned a strange remedy; if the nose of a dead man is applied to his affected part he would be cured. At this, though she intensely loved her husband, took a razor and went to the tomb of Zadig. As he lay extended, breathless, she watered his nose with her tears and approached to cut his still fresh nose. But suddenly rose up Zadig and holding his nose in one hand held the razor by another hand. "Madam", said he, "never exclaim against the Widow *Cosrou*. The Scheme for cutting my Nose off was much closer laid than hers of throwing the River into a new Channel."<sup>1</sup>

Seeing his wife lamenting and cursing a widow for her efforts to change the course of a stream so that she might avoid atoning the death of her recently expired husband, Zadig planned to test his wife's fidelity.

Most of the stories pose the question: whether a married life or living a passionate and whimsical life, drifting from shore to shore, living together with anyone or living forlorn, is more welcome. It seems that marriage, the age old practice in India, is more welcome as it is the saner way of life. The present import of ideas about man-woman relationship from foreign sources and ways of free living contains many pitfalls as are already experienced. They contain perversions apart from artificiality. Indian married life is altogether different. We find in Jhumpa Lahiri's celebrated debut novel, *The Namesake*, an example of age-old Indian married life. Though refers to Bengalis, it is more or less applicable to pan Indian life, and in comparison to Western culture and practice.

"She is surprised to hear certain things about his life: that all his parent's friends are Bengali, that they had had an arranged marriage, that his mother cooks Indian food every day, that she wears a sari and bindi. 'Really?' she says, not fully believing him. 'But you're so different. I would never have thought that.' He doesn't feel insulted, but he is aware that a line has been drawn all the same. . . . Seeing the two of them curled up on the sofa in the evenings, Gerald's head resting on Lydia's shoulder, Gogol is reminded that all his life he has never witnessed a

single moment of physical affection between his parents. Whatever love exists between them is an utterly private, uncelebrated thing.”<sup>2</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In the process of showing conjugal lives of man and woman in various relationships, Arora has created some good and genuine love stories like “Rashmi”, “Shazia” and “When the Sun Rises”.

Besides the stories covered by the main theme of the book, man-woman relationship, there are some other stories which give a good hint towards honesty, uprightness and gratefulness of character. Lack of such qualities in most of the so called successful and also unsuccessful, frustrated Indians, coupled with cowardice, are dragging down the national life and progress in spite of propaganda and political gimmicks playing their usual illusive and deceptive roles around us. Stories like “The Spark”, “A Flash in the Dark” and “Goodbye to Angels” points towards the preference and choice of the writer towards boldness and uprightness. Not only thought provoking, they point towards the social responsibility and honesty of the writer who are usually above the other artists and players in the field of art and culture.

## Notes and References

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## *About the Author*

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**Aju Mukhopadhyay** is a versatile poet, author and critic. He contributes to different genres of literature: poetry, fiction, criticism, research paper, essay and environment. He has written biography, on film, journalism, wildlife and other subjects. Going into Japanese short verses, he has contributed to journals and websites worldwide; haiku, haibun, tanka, senryu and of a mixed genre, Ekfrastic. Of the ten books of poems two, *Short Verse Vast Universe* and *Short Verse Delight* are of Japanese short verses and essays on them. His works have been widely anthologised and translated. Besides awards and honours in poetry, he was awarded Albert Camus Centenary Writing award.

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