



High Impact Factor 8.1458 ISSN J-Gate



Double-blind  
peer reviewed

Vol. 8, No. 3  
CLRI Aug 2021



Referred Journal



GENERAL IMPACT FACTOR & More

Page 104-115

## Brihannala's Canvas

### Debasish Banerjee

#### 1 The Pronoun 'She' was Voluntarily Accepted

'Be off from here, you *hijra*,' hollered the grumpy daily-passenger, eyes popped out at the intruder standing in front of him in a bright, light green sari, shiny glass bangles and lips dipped in resplendent scarlet.

Nimki knew that she was a hijra (transgender). Even the pronoun 'she' was voluntarily accepted by Nimki long before anyone in the brothel where she grew up made her realise the difference between a 'he' or a 'she'. Nimki liked to be in her usual-self. There was something that Nimki looked upon as 'safe' and 'neutral'. That 'something' was her being a transgender, an abusive and uncared

'hijra', a trem unscrupulously used by those cautious city folks proud to be called 'men' and 'women' some of whom would often be found frequenting the brothel. Nimki had often seen how her Namita masi haggled with customers displaying her reddened lips soaked in betel-juice and slammed her chamber-door to be closed for at least an hour every day to carry out some secret task. Haggling and chortling went on day in and day out. They loved each other. They revelled with Rafi, Kishore, Lata and Asha. They throned each other. They took oath to be each other's Romeo and Juliet or Heer or Ranjha. And eventually, they abused each other before departing when a glass full of wine reached to its dreg. They all did it routinely. They all liked it—a customary brothel-life.

Nimki hated all those. Very often she harrowed through the hurly-burly brothel life armed with a square-sized pitch board, brushes and a packet of Camel's water colour—her dearest paraphernalia. Namita masi brought her all these to let her at least live in a world of fantasy.

Why Nimki could not paint a luminous sky, a tree—be it a guava or coconut or a bird sitting on a branch did never touch herself or anyone in the brothel. But, she would paint...paint to her long suppressed grief—the closed door of the brothel, layer of paint peeling off in many parts; chortling and tittering whores sitting on veranda steps for customers and of course, Namita masi sitting beside her brass spittoon.

Her fingers knew the magic to bring the figures she drew to life. How truly and cruelly they reflected the miserable brothel life surprised many a viewer of her paintings. Thus, Mimki, a hijra would give birth to her ideas and thoughts through her creations what sometimes, who were biologically perfect took to be a hard nut to crack to give birth. An art teacher was but luxury for Gouri. But, she got a one. She got a guide for her passion. Nimki had restored the memory of the day that belonged to her very few good-old-days.

## 2 She Felt a Hand on Her Shoulder

Like the other days little Nimkii was busy scratching some clumsy lines with her pastels. In her childish whim the little one was drawing some odd figures when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She looked up to her horror—a middle aged man smelling alcohol, eyes bloodshot, hair unkempt was gazing at the child's scribblings. He broke out in a boisterous laugh seeing the odd figures of men and women drawn by her. He used to frequent the brothel—a man discarded by his society. Bhuban was his name and he was a painter. In a long run to paint a masterpiece he had wasted all his bank balance, lost his wife who invented suicide to be the only way out to get herself out of the misery. Bhuban gave way to a reckless life—alcohol and whores.

Then, someday to his fascination lost long ago he came across little Nimki in the brothel and decided to train the child in fine arts. Sketches after sketches of every detail of human body were taught to Nimki. In a span of seven long years she had had her control over pencil sketch, pastel and water colour. To her mentor's surprise every stroke of brush could have the power to enliven the character she drew. Bhuban never bothered of his student being a hijra. That she was a student and an admirer of art was his concern only. Bhuban always said to Nimki, 'Unless an artist consigns his soul into the image he paints, a masterpiece can never be created.'

Then, one day old Bhuban told Nimki the story of Brihannala. It was true that the listener was surprised on hearing such a name. But, the old painter further supplied that the mighty archer Arjuna, one of the Pandavas disguised as a eunuch Brihnnala during the incognito of the Pandavas. How Brihannala as a music and dance teacher in the court of the king Virata, of the Matsya kingdom excelled in qualities, was narrated by Bhuban to let his listener make out the importance of a eunuch's character that later shaped the concluding part of the epic.

The brothel had found old Bhuban to be in his own, typical temperament. Infact he had had something more delicious to taste than those bevy of the squabbling hores' flesh—a student to devour

the gem of fine art. One day Bhuban took out something from his plastic bag that redoubled his pupil's enthusiasm—a couple of *Old Artists* series. Nimki's eyes got stuck on the famous works of the old masters. She wondered at Van Gough's *The Potato Eaters*, *The Starry Night* ; Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*, *Return of the Prodigal Son* ; Monet's *Woman with a Parasol*. All those Bhuban had collected from Minerva, the only book stall in so many mushrooming in the city that could take pride in a rare, good collection of art materials and journals. Thus, Nimki took a great inspiration and burnt the midnight oil.

Then, one day old Bhuban died of liver ailment leaving his dream of painting a masterpiece unfinished. His untimely demise left Nimki shell-shocked. She still felt a tug as if the spirit of his mentor was hovering round her and was all eyes to see his disciple painting a masterpiece someday.

### **3 A Fitting Reply to Such Simple a Question**

Hence, she never discarded her paraphernalia. She, too was haunting... a masterpiece to let the soul of his mentor be appeased.

Unlike painting, schooling was unimaginable for Nimki. In her early childhood she kept on staring wistfully at the blue-painted iron gate of Saraswati Girls' High School. The gate on every morning and afternoon gave her an immense source of joy and besides, a suppressed grief of being a school-less-fellow delved deep into her heart. Commotion of boys and girls fascinated her. She wanted the school uniform and thus, had made a bold request to her Namita masi in her infancy:

'Masi, can't I be one of them? Can't you send me to Saraswati Girls' High School?'

How Namita had sighed before replying on to the innocent face of a child was still a nightmare for Nimki, 'They won't let you in there.' Her lips were quavering. However, she had told her, 'School isn't meant for you. You're not supposed to go there.'

'Why? Why won't they let me in there?' the infant carped.

Cudgled Namita had had her stock-reply,' Because dear, you're neither a girl nor a boy.'

The innocent and ignorant Nimki winked her eyes and after a brief spell of silence replied,' Then who am I?'

Baffled absolutely Namita shook her head. She was helpless to give a fitting reply to such simple a question. Since then Nimki had been searching for the reply of who she was. Then, a time came when she came by her real identity huddled into some corner of the brothel. A very undisturbed life started disturbing her when Nimki saw the uselessness of the sanitary-pads what the other women in the brothel used regularly in every month. Nimki also realised now that the act of shutting chamber-door was not meant for her. She was growing there as a tuft of weeds.

Times rolled on.

Nimki, now, in the prime of youth, a five-feet-seven-inches-fellow decked in bright chrome yellow salwar suit, lips resplendent crimson, wrists ornamented with green glass bangles and eyes remorseful with broken dreams was often found at the Super Market road, busy city thoroughfares and the buses plying across the city clapping, drumming, singing and haggling with passengers. But, now Nimki was not alone with her shattered dreams and awkward gender. She got Bela, Raju, Subhadra and Hema, who, too were in their twenties like Nimki and had already learnt their trade to keep their body and soul together. A queer art for some queer fellows. Life must go on. They were all brought up either in slums or brothels and clad in such an obnoxious identity those hijras were begging to survive. Nimki, too was one of those rare species of this so-called civic society.

Years ago she had left the brothel. It was soon after her foster-mother Namita masi expired. Those were painful days for Gouri to have looked after her ailing masi confined to bed with HIV positive. Everyone in the brothel had shunned her. But for Nimki she was a mother and how she could. She was everything in her life—a saviour, a care-taker, a companion and above all a loving mother. The day she died Nimki lost her home. She was driven away from

the brothel. Then, on a rainy night when Nimki was lying almost half-dead on the pavement a party of hijras rescued her. Nimki had been starving for days for she was yet to know her trade. They piggybacked her to the farthest corner of the city, behind the burning ghat where old banyan tree created a hypothetical border between the gender and the transgender. They had their colony—all made up of mud walls, bamboo poles and polythenes.

#### **4 Clapping, Singing and Drumming**

People despised those hijras. So, they never bothered to set their foot within the precinct of their colony. Those hijras were believed to be hypnotizers and kidnappers. Last month, when two school boys were found missing, they were hauled by the police and were eventually released in absence strong evidence. Bela, Raju, Subhadra, Hema and others like them now no more accused their odd gender but those men and women who were so superstitiously stereotyped.

Now clapping, singing and drumming became an inseparable part of Nomki's life. She was as if going through a dark, narrow passage full of thorns groping for a streak of light to get relief. But, the reality that was hiding somewhere in ambush beyond the brothel was much more gruesome that pounced upon his prey the moment it emerged from its haven. A hand and eyes that were so well cared and nurtured to craft and adorn the beauty of art were now so unwelcomed and despised by the ugliness of humanity. Nimki got to realise that she was dealing with dirt and filth but somewhere in the corner of her heart she had a deep rooted faith that she was not born for it.

Though meagre fifty or hundred rupees was not fairly enough for her to live in drudgery, Nimki still possessed her treasure—the pitch-board, colors and brushes. Infact, she had her soul stuck on them. She still spent a bit after her ambition. She still had obstacles. One day on a sunny afternoon when Hema and Subhadra were sitting on the courtyard Nimki sketched their figures on her drawing copy. The innumerable grey lines scratched in the criss-cross of

verticals and horizontals brought forth the exact shape, dimensions and ultimately they resembled Hema and Subhadra. This success was celebrated. Both Hema and Subhadra started dancing and drumming. Nimki laughed away as if she got her reward. Later Bela, Raju too, begged to have their individual sketches drawn and ultimately had them someday to their surprise.

## **5 Pledged to Ignite the Fire of Hope**

Those hijras despised and humiliated always in public, possessed so tender a heart and so flamboyant a soul for they stuck the sketches and paintings on the walls of their hutments and adorned them at every single glance they happen to pass away.

Hema was a great patron of art and she used to cast a very serious and critical look at Nimki's every creation. Hema ignited Nimki's never say die spirit. Very often Hema found a long lost contentment serving as her financier. In her hard times Hema would tuck up a fifty or hundred rupee note into her palm and on being objected Hema refrained, 'Let not this fire in you be doused for once for it's very close to ignite a corner of the world.'

Nimki drew on besides drumming, singing, clapping and haggling. She had now become quite aware of the corner of the world she and those like her were thrust into. A corner, so blurred and murky that the light of humanity could hardly intrude. But Nimki pledged to ignite the fire of hope and prosperity in this murky corner of the world with her gradual epiphany.

The other day Nimki sketched Bela. Hundreds of pencil criss-cross across the art paper brought forth exactly what was before her eyes—a swarthy, middle aged in bright lipsticks and vermilion coloured sari, hair dyed in burgundy sitting cross legged with bidi between fingers, smoke spiralling across a bulbous nose. Bela could hardly contain the joy invented by the artist.

The exertion of day's labour and mental trauma were high but not as high as to vanquish the spirit of her creation. One day Nimki painted the burning ghat and the smoke spiralling up, the lying corpses in

shroud and the banyan tree which often served as the resting place for the mourners. The artist showed it to everyone in the hutment. A volley of praise was bombarded except Raju. A mere mention of burning ghat always scared the fellow. How Nimki's parents were ostracized for a heinous crime—giving birth a transgender that led to their suicide, was too toxic a memory for him to ruminate. It was the burning ghat where Raju lost everything to gain a life in orphanage. To fight against the common outlook was beyond Raju's dream. Then, someday the little one fled to join a group of hijras to respite himself from the torture he was subjected to in the orphanage. Raju had found it no more than a pigsty. Now, at least he got more than a piece of stale chapatis, a glass of tea and a plate of boiled rice besides being jeered as a hijra. Now, Raju could dream of a plate of chicken curry and tandoori roti from the road side dhaba and cunning-free smiles from his fellows.

Nimki was still sticking to her dream. The grey spiralling smoke of the burning ghat was still the theme of her painting for she found a close affinity to those hot steam soaring high into the heaven that she believed would reward her some day with a rain of hope and success.

Then, one day Bela flicked across her fb page and told Nimki of *The Impressionists*, a national-level painting competition from Delhi organized by The Academy of Visual Arts with a sum of fifty thousand rupees prize-money, a reward for the first position holder and a golden opportunity to have a permanent membership in the National Artists' Forum that would certainly be a gate-way for the prestigious art galleries across the world. First three position holders of *The Impressionists* would access to a weeklong exhibition of their paintings in the art galleries in Delhi. Moreover, the feat would pave a way for themselves to make a name and earn a worldwide fame.

Nimki was greatly elated having been known of such a grand event but a speck of doubt now harboured within her soul. To crack such a competition was likely to be an unimaginable task to her. Never before did she confront such a great challenge that was to be faced, fought and won.



Victory for Nimki had a great essence. She knew it quite certainly that the age-old common shroud of obstinacy of the so-called civic society that was too opaque to let one have a glance at the real definition of humanity and the light of knowledge could only be stripped off by dint of her victory. She was to prove that a third gender was not always born only to have a third-class-seat but very often a first-class-seat and sometime more special.

She worked out some sketches of Bela and Hema on some rough sheets before representing them on 3"×5" canvas. The sketch of Bela sitting on the courtyard with a bidi between her fingers amused everyone. For her swarthy complexion Nimki used burnt sienna with partial scarlet mixed with a reasonable amount of ivory black. She shone the folds of her sari with a mixture of chrome yellow and cadmium green upon the sari's emerald green background. For Hema's burgundy dyed hair she meticulously applied the burnt umber and slight portion of yellow ocher to give an impression of the highlighted portions. But, in all this, her brushes did never falter to bring out the pathos and the limitless affliction that were suppressed within their look imaged through many a layer of paints. She painted the two hijras whom the main stream of society had discarded unlike her dear canvas—it not only housed them but also gave vent to its feelings on behalf of those two trivial models. Thus, in a few weeks Nimki got her two canvas filled with the two lively images. Bela and Hema were shown sitting together uncared and mournful under a tamarind tree with grey smokes of the burning ghat spiralling up in the backdrop. She titled them *The Replica*. She had something to tell; reveal, for the society discarded her types. She harboured the thought that *The Replica* would certainly be a flag bearer for their kind.

Eventually, *The Replica* was packed off and sent to the Delhi office.

Mr. Gopal, who was the Chairman of this national-level competition *The Impressionists*, had his office by now filled with the painting-boards and canvases from all across the country. Now, the most decisive step was to take place— selection of the winner and the runner-up. Two judges, all from the National Academy of Visual

Arts Dr. Shiv Kumar and Mr. Thomas D Souza, experts on both the Indian as well as the western art spied every work meticulously. After all, only the best one deserved the victory—fifty thousand rupees and with it a delicious slice of the world wide honour.

The Academy had only two days now before the announcement of the result of the competition. They shortlisted four candidates. Eventually, the two paintings reached the top final— one was Nimki's *The Replica* and the other was *The Garden* by a certain Rumi Joshi, a student of the Academy of the Visual Arts.

The two works of painting had a tug-of-war, neck and neck fighting on their way to clinch the trophy. Dr. Shiv Kumar argued that *The Replica* was relevant in every aspect: theme, colour combination and perfection. On the other hand, *The Garden* was also appealing to Thomas. He believed that the painting symbolized rejuvenation in nature and could be a great source of aesthetic beauty where the artist meticulously worked on flowers and vegetation—all with vibrant, rainbow of colors, each stroke of brush drawn with an expert hand measured perfectly; a finely calculated work.

It was full moon. Through the window rails Nimki was gazing at the silhouetted branches of the guava tree behind. Her brows were a bit corrugated and lips shadowed. She was thinking of the result that was to be announced the next day. Suddenly, Nimki felt for a hitch that might come in her way, even to be enrolled in the competition. In her short bio-data she had mention that she was transgender and now she was a bit apprehensive whether there would be any place for a third gender—'who knows whether the painting's already been rejected!' such thought intoxicated the kind of stagnant notion that long ago she had harboured for her types. Literally, Nimki trusted in her types. She had woven a new world where the transgender would not be classified with number. And, *The Replica* meant it.

## **6 A True Impressionist was Born**

The panel of judges unanimously decided on *The Replica*. The painting surpassed *The Garden*. Eventually, both Thomas and Shiv Kumar were impressed upon by the relevance of *The Replica* that

was much more appealing than *The Garden* that, to them only hinted at the outer essence decked with beauty and glory rather than inner essence that dealt with the root of the social structure. They were deeply moved by the way the artist crafted the painting—a silent depiction of the untold misery of those being abused as 'hijras' that was ever brought to light by any book or by any piece of art before.

*The Replica* was acclaimed. Nimki got her wings—a true impressionist was born.

Smiles played about in every corner of the hutments. Bela, Raju, Hema and Subhadra clapped and drummed in ecstasy soon after the news of Nimki's success was conveyed.

Grey smokes were still spiralling up from the busy burning ghat. The afternoon sun was still peeping through the branches of the tamarind tree.

But, what did he see there?

The afternoon sun peeped through to discover the tears glistening on somewhat cloudy countenance of the artist. And, the artist was looking down at her own oblong shadow where plopped two big tear drops; tribute for the two— one was Namita Masi, who like a mother bird always protected her birdling and other was that old Bhuban who someday appeared to let her brush the world of fantasy.

The tear drops disappeared before long but the artist hardly took her eyes off.

## **Debasish Banerjee**

---

Debasish Banerjee was born and brought up in Durgapur, West Bengal. He finished his Master degree in English from the Burdwan University and is presently a teacher of English language and literature in an English medium school in Mathura, U.P. Some of his short stories have appeared in a local tri-monthly English magazine BORDER VIEW publishing from West Bengal.

---

An advertisement for Amazon Prime. It features a light blue background. At the top left, a white starburst shape contains the text "PRIME AT ₹ 999 PER YEAR\*". In the center, the "amazonprime" logo is displayed on a dark blue rectangular background. Below the logo, three white boxes with blue borders contain the text "Original Shows", "1-day delivery\*", and "Ad-free Music". At the bottom center, a yellow button with a black border says "Join now". In the bottom right corner, the text "\*T&C Apply" is visible.

PRIME AT  
₹ 999  
PER YEAR\*

amazonprime

Original Shows 1-day delivery\* Ad-free Music

Join now

\*T&C Apply

## [Get Your Book Reviewed](#)

If you have got any book published and are looking for a book review, contact us. We provide book review writing service for a fee. We (1) write book review (2) publish review in CLRI (3) conduct an interview with the author (4) publish interview in CLRI. [Know more here](#).

## [Authors & Books](#)

We publish book releases, Press Release about books and authors, book reviews, blurbs, author interviews, and any news related to authors and books for free. We welcomes authors, publishers, and literary agents to send their press releases. Visit our website <https://page.co/Vw17Q>.