Street Art & Urban Creativity | Vol. 9, No. 2, 2023 | ISSN 2183-9956
Street Art & Urban Creativity. Scientific Journal

Epistolary Reparation and Gendered Silence in Amitabha Bagchi's Half the Night Is Gone

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RECEIVED: 10/10/2023 ; **ACCEPTANCE:** 15/11/2023; **PUBLISHED:** 30/12/2023

Abstract

In Amitabha Bagchi's Half the Night Is Gone (2018), the bereaved novelist Vishwanath writes four letters to people whose lives have touched his own. In the historical novel he is writing, Omvati goes to the post office to tell her husband that his father has been touching her. Asked what to put in the letter, she takes her money back. Later, her brother-in-law writes asking her husband to collect her, leaving out the very thing she wanted to tell him. Reading these acts of address through feminist narratology and narrative ethics, this article asks what a letter of apology can repair when the person who suffered an injury has less freedom than its writer to speak of it. Bagchi lets the reader follow Omvati's judgement closely, even as the prologue turns to the disappointments of the man who harmed her. This uneven attention complicates the promise of Vishwanath's letters. The more fully he can explain himself, the more it matters whether the people he addresses can give an account he has yet to imagine.

Keywords: feminist narratology, epistolary fiction, narrative ethics, gendered silence, reparation.

1. The letter Parsadi receives

Parsadi, who works in Delhi, receives a letter advising him to come home for his bride. A reader who knew only his brother's account might take the matter for a family oversight. The young couple have been apart too long and Parsadi needs someone to keep house. Readers of Amitabha Bagchi's Half the Night Is Gone know more. Omvati has already tried to write to Parsadi about his father, Mange Ram, whose demands on her as a daughter-in-law have become increasingly sexual. What reaches Delhi instead is a request that she should go there to look after her husband (Bagchi, Half the Night 19–23).

Years separate this household from Vishwanath, the Hindi novelist who has imagined it. In his seventies, grieving the loss of his only son in a car accident, he sends his publisher pages of an unfinished manuscript. In it the fortunes of Lala Motichand's family and of the servants on whom it depends unfold across three generations. Between instalments of this history we read Vishwanath's own letters, which turn from matters of authorship to his conduct as a brother, a father and a husband (Nair; Quadri; Zaidi). His reputation rests partly on his talent for satire. To examine his own dealings with people whose failings he once felt qualified to judge is a considerable departure for him.

That departure has divided the novel's readers. The tenderness with which Vishwanath comes to regard an erring father or brother has moved several critics. Others have asked what that tenderness costs the women who live with these men (Bhattarai; George; Abidi). Omvati makes the disagreement particularly difficult to resolve. We know what she cannot bear to say in front of the man at the post office because Vishwanath gives us access to her thoughts. The same novelist who affords her such privacy chooses how soon we leave her and whose troubles we attend to next. The case for reading his writing as a form of reparation turns partly on that choice.

By narrative reparation I mean the work a story or letter can do when someone acknowledges harm to a person who has a claim on them. The injured person may take a

different view of the past, or have little wish to revisit it. I read Omvati's attempt to disclose the harassment in the prologue alongside the account of a widow, Kamala, whose letter reaches its destination. Passages quoted from two of Vishwanath's letters allow us to hear how he addresses his publisher and his brother. The novel's reviewers supply accounts of the other correspondents and of Omvati's later pursuit of an education. Their disagreement over what the women can hope for belongs to the argument too.

2. Reading the novel's divided reception

Harish Trivedi, who chaired the jury that awarded Half the Night Is Gone the 2019 DSC Prize for South Asian Literature, praised its intricate storytelling and the way Bagchi brings Hindi, Urdu and Sanskrit literary sensibilities into English. The jury's citation set the ties between fathers and sons alongside those between men and women, masters and servants, and the individual and the nation (Scroll Staff). On this reading, a household's history can illuminate a society's. Reviewers differ over how far the novel's sympathy extends across divisions of gender and class.

Richa Bhattarai reads the novel's return to the past through Vishwanath's wish that the world he knew need not disappear. She finds particular feeling in the bond between brothers, yet asks how much of a life Bagchi gives the women whose marriages expose them to violence. Her reading leaves room to distinguish the harm a character does from the judgement the novel invites.

Rajni George admires Bagchi's wit and ambition, yet misses the widow Kamala, who slips from the narrative after falling in love with Diwanchand. Suvarnalata and Sahdeyi have scope to exert power, while Vishwanath's wife Vimla is largely confined to the duties she performs. Supriya Nair locates a related difficulty in the novel's politics. She admires the tenderness and historical reach of Bagchi's writing about devotion, yet asks what the revival of Ram-bhakti prescribed for women. The silence of so many women in the novel troubles her on precisely these grounds. Both reviews ask how much readers can learn of these women when the story lingers over the anguish of men.

Sakina Abidi follows Omvati beyond Mange Ram's harassment to her husband's violence. When Omvati recoils from her husband, Abidi observes, the account of his frustration leaves little room for her distress. Violent men retain a complexity seldom granted to the women they hurt. Abidi wonders whether this portrayal is meant to expose women's predicament or whether it betrays Vishwanath's shortcomings as a novelist. Either way, she judges it a fault in Bagchi's book. Vishwanath's authorship of the manuscript complicates any attempt to assign its prejudices to Bagchi. It still leaves readers to judge what the novel asks them to accept.

Prakruti Maniar sees a prospect of change in Omvati's resistance to her father-in-law and in her determination, against her husband's wishes, to secure an education for herself and her son. She reads Vishwanath's apologies in a similar spirit, as though one generation could acknowledge to the next where it had gone wrong. Yet Vishwanath can alter his view of the past simply by coming to see a responsibility he once disowned. For Omvati, much depends on whether her family will let her act on what she already knows.

The disagreement among these reviewers is sharpest where two judgements remain possible at once. Readers can feel for a man who has belatedly understood the harm he did. The time spent in his company need not give them any better idea of what it was like for the woman who lived with him. Omvati's encounter with Mange Ram provides an unusually exact way of assessing where that time goes.

3. Who can give an account?

In Giving an Account of Oneself, Judith Butler considers what a person can know of a life already shaped by other people and by norms that precede it. However sincere the speaker, some part of that formation escapes the telling. That account also belongs to a scene of address. Someone is being asked to hear it. When Vishwanath writes about his failures, the past acquires a different weight with each addressee, each injury he recalls and each response his words might meet.

Some of those differences arise from the practice of letter writing itself. Vishwanath can choose whom to approach first. He can revise a judgement before the person it concerns has seen it. Such latitude may allow a careful apology to take shape, but it also allows him to settle the terms on which an old injury will be discussed. A recipient with a different recollection has

had no part in that choice.

In Fictions of Authority, Susan Sniader Lanser traces the historical relation between narrative voice and social power through novels by women. In the households Bagchi depicts, what standing does a woman have when she speaks? A daughter-in-law who depends on the household for her livelihood has reason to weigh what will follow if she speaks. At the post office the risk changes, although the grievance is the same. A woman may state a grievance plainly and still lack the means to call anyone to account. Readers may even know her thoughts in some detail while the narrator retains the authority to decide how her protest bears on the story.

James Phelan distinguishes the ethics of the told from the ethics of the telling. One concerns how characters act. The other concerns the choices involved in recounting their actions and the judgements those choices invite (203–16). After Mange Ram sexually harasses Omvati, the historical narrative lingers over his frustrated ambitions. Vishwanath can draw readers into sympathy with Mange Ram. The arrangement of the two narratives gives readers another possibility. They can feel for Mange Ram and still ask why Vishwanath gives him so much of their time. That question concerns the design of Bagchi's novel as well as the sensibility of his fictional author.

Kelly Oliver's Witnessing: Beyond Recognition asks what it takes to receive another person's account. Oliver argues that the possibility of addressing someone and receiving a response sustains a person's sense of self. The pursuit of recognition can leave intact the division between the one who knows and the one who is known. At the post office, the reader understands what Omvati needs to say. For Omvati to make a claim on her husband, however, someone must first hear her under conditions in which she can bear to speak .

4. Vishwanath's correspondents

By the time Vishwanath begins to write, it is too late to speak to the son he has lost. The four letters interrupting the history of the Motichand household go first to his publisher, then to his younger brother in America, to his son's American girlfriend and finally to his wife, Vimla (Nair; Zaidi). Each knew a different part of his life. His brother can remember their childhood from the younger boy's side. His son's girlfriend knew the young man in circumstances his father did not share. The letters bring Vishwanath closer to people who might question what he remembers. Writing to them gives him a chance to acknowledge what he owes them. What any one of them might make of his account is a separate question.

Consider the 2008 letter to Sarvesh Kumar, his publisher. Vishwanath writes, "The writing doesn't ring true. The praise doesn't ring true. Nothing rings true" (qtd. in Quadri). The same phrase that calls a work of fiction into question comes to include its reception. By the third sentence even a reader who disagreed would be hard put to find a place from which to reassure him. Yet the sentences have a practised cadence, and the person to whom Vishwanath entrusts his doubt knows his work. Grief has shaken his confidence in his judgement. It has left him with both a craft and a reader.

Vishwanath's father cooked for a wealthy employer. When Vishwanath writes about Mange Ram and his son Parsadi serving the Motichand family, he returns to a relationship his own family knew. The brothers Dinanath and Diwanchand likewise bring his treatment of his younger brother Jagannath into view. George observes that Diwanchand, like Jagannath, grows up unfairly blamed for his mother's death. That may be one way for the older brother to reconsider what he once dismissed in the younger. Zaidi is more cautious about reading the historical family as a version of Vishwanath's own (George; Quadri; Zaidi). A simple identification of the two families would make it difficult to see what Diwanchand might mean to a reader who knew nothing of Jagannath.

Addressing Jagannath, Vishwanath acknowledges having wanted to "hold you personally responsible" for the collapse of a vision of India in which people of different religions could live together (qtd. in Bhattarai). The charge he once levelled at the younger man was out of all proportion to the decision that provoked it, Jagannath's departure for America. Much of the force of the admission lies in that word personally. An account of national disappointment had allowed a brother to speak as his brother's accuser. In the letter he can own the accusation and address the person against whom he made it. For Jagannath, the years of being blamed may matter more than the political ideal invoked to explain them.

Bagchi recalls feeling uncertain of his authority, as a writer in English, to enter the Hindi literary world from which the novel draws. Giving the manuscript to Vishwanath helped him

write about a milieu that his fictional novelist could claim as his own. He told Srishti Gupta that he owed the device to Amritlal Nagar's Amrit aur Vish. Nagar's device gave Bagchi a way into the novel, and his fictional author a literary inheritance on which to draw in grief. It also places two writers between Omvati and the reader. The judgement that matters in her village is one that neither man can make for her.

5. Omvati at the post office

Ten days after his wedding, Parsadi is due to leave his village for Delhi, where he will take his father's place in Lala Motichand's service. His young bride, Omvati, stays behind. Her elder sister-in-law Radharani assigns her the care of Mange Ram, now largely confined to bed. Although distressed by Parsadi's departure, Omvati takes to caring for the old man. She brings Mange Ram his meals and medicines and helps him to the bathroom. The care expected of a daughter-in-law gives him repeated opportunities to touch her (Bagchi, Half the Night 19–20).

As she leans over him to settle his bedclothes, Omvati feels something on her breast. Only when she tries to brush it off does she recognise Mange Ram's hand. He pleads accident. When the touches recur, she begins to understand Radharani's hints about him. She suspects that he has touched Radharani too, and the suspicion draws her closer to the older woman even as she resents being sent to care for him without a warning. The reader follows Omvati as she reconsiders what she knows about them both (Bagchi, Half the Night 20).

While the women clean rice together, Omvati tells Radharani that Mange Ram's hands wander. Radharani asks what she does about it. On hearing that Omvati removes his hand and tells him to stop, she approves. It is Omvati's judgement of his conduct that draws a rebuke. Radharani reminds her how the family obtained its land, before telling her how much of this she may say aloud. "What you are doing wrong is talking about it now" (Bagchi, Half the Night 21). Omvati has found someone who understands the complaint. What the family owes to Mange Ram's years of service helps explain why Radharani's support goes no further.

Radharani's account of the land makes that dependence more exact. Mange Ram spent years persuading his employer to give it to him. Radharani's husband tills it, while Omvati's husband has taken his father's place in Delhi. When Omvati begins to mention Parsadi, Radharani cuts her short, as though the younger woman were laying claim to authority in the house. A rivalry Mange Ram himself sought to encourage now enters the exchange. His years as another man's servant become Radharani's grounds for defending his authority over a woman who serves him (Bagchi, Half the Night 20–21).

The next day Omvati takes a coin from her box and goes to the post office. Her intended reader is Parsadi. The man who writes letters asks her what she wants to say. It is an ordinary question in the course of his work. For Omvati, answering it means explaining to a man outside the family how her father-in-law has touched her. She takes back her money and goes home (Bagchi, Half the Night 21).

A letter might have taken Omvati's account beyond the household in which Radharani has told her to keep quiet. To reach her husband by this route, though, she must give another man access to precisely what she wishes to tell Parsadi in private. Vishwanath can choose an addressee and write directly to that person. Omvati can choose Parsadi, but she cannot choose him as the first person to hear her words. The letter she leaves unwritten gives the four letters Vishwanath completes a different significance.

Bagchi tells us little here about Omvati's schooling. She has found the words to describe the touching while cleaning rice. She has been able to pay for a letter. What stops her is the prospect of saying those words in front of this man. The coin, taken out of its box at home and taken back at the post office, marks how far she has got by her own resourcefulness. Parsadi's possible answer lies beyond anything the reader can know from this scene (Bagchi, Half the Night 21).

6. After Omvati takes up the knife

The touching becomes part of Omvati's daily work. When Mange Ram makes her massage his legs, he urges her hands further up his thighs and blesses her as an elder might bless a daughter-in-law. She hears the lust in his voice and recoils from it. One evening, when he touches her breast, she feels a sudden arousal and is briefly still (Bagchi, Half the Night 21–22). Abidi questions the way the scene represents that sensation. Its sequence matters. Mange Ram seizes her other breast, Omvati pulls away, and only then does she go to the kitchen for a knife (Bagchi, Half the Night 22).

The reader learns what Omvati has felt before Mange Ram makes anything of it. He takes her stillness for encouragement and anticipates a victory. The narration moves so quickly from her arousal into his certainty that his confidence threatens to determine how the reader interprets her brief stillness. Omvati's next actions expose his mistake. She cuts his stomach, covers his mouth when he cries out and calls the wound an accident, returning the excuse he has used each time she objected to his touch (Bagchi, Half the Night 20–22).

By the time Radharani and her husband arrive, Omvati has stopped the bleeding and is bandaging the cut. She has defended herself and is once more tending to the man who touched her. To celebrate the knife as evidence of empowerment would be to overlook what preceded it. Moving his hand and telling him to stop had failed to protect her. Her sister-in-law would hear no further complaint, and the letter she meant to send her husband was never written. In the months that follow, she barely speaks to Mange Ram. The family leaves his conduct unexamined (Bagchi, Half the Night 21–23).

A letter does leave the household the day after Omvati wounds Mange Ram. Parsadi's brother asks him to collect his wife, explaining that a bride should not have been left alone so long. He says nothing about the wound or what provoked it. Parsadi eventually takes Omvati to Delhi. The narrative returns to Mange Ram's thwarted hopes as a wrestler, the power he once enjoyed as a servant and his fear that his failure was somehow of his own making. When his old teacher Yusuf Mohammad visits, the reader follows his painful effort to stand (Bagchi, Half the Night 22–25).

Omvati's withdrawal makes her refusal clear. Phelan's distinction shifts the question to the pace of the telling once she leaves. The prologue gives Mange Ram time to wonder where his life went wrong and allows his teacher to comfort him. The reader may judge his conduct towards Omvati harshly and still feel for him as he struggles to rise. What calls for scrutiny is how much more occasion the narrative gives us to exercise that sympathy on his behalf.

Abidi's objection has particular force when she turns to the later encounters with Parsadi. In her account his attempts to touch Omvati make her vomit repeatedly, yet it is his frustration that the novel pursues. The prologue gives a different kind of access. We know what Omvati begins to suspect about Radharani's experience, what disgusts her and why she leaves the post office. Even here, however, the reader is present for Mange Ram's last meeting with his teacher. The sentence after his death records the birth of Omvati's son ten months later (Bagchi, Half the Night 24–25). The difference lies in how long the telling stays with each of them.

7. Sahdeyi, Kamala and Vimla

Sahdeyi comes to Lala Motichand's house to nurse his elder son. When Ashadevi falls ill, Sahdeyi takes charge of the women's quarters. The servants talk about her sexual relationship with Motichand. The narrator confirms the rumours and lets us see why she allows them to spread. They strengthen her position. Her husband left soon after their wedding to join a nautanki theatre troupe. Other servants cannot readily claim authority over her as a wife, a widow or an unmarried woman. She teaches Mange Ram how to use a word in the master's ear to discredit a rival and how to win a newcomer's allegiance before anyone else does (Bagchi, Half the Night 14–15). The narrator follows her reasoning closely enough for us to see why her rivals find her so hard to dislodge.

Sahdeyi understands something about service that a life of dutiful attendance might obscure. A wealthy employer comes to depend on the people who run his house and bring up his children. After Ashadevi's death, Motichand leaves his children in Sahdeyi's care, glad to be spared the trouble of marrying again. She can turn that dependence to her advantage so long as he trusts her to act in his interests (Bagchi, Half the Night 15–16). The limits of this arrangement become clearest when another servant's daughter comes to need protection. The same confidence that allows Sahdeyi to act with remarkable independence makes it difficult for anyone to call her or her ally to account.

Sahdeyi begins to win over Ganeshi's daughter with a bowl of kheer when the girl is twelve. Four years later, when her parents start to discuss marriage, the trust Sahdeyi has cultivated becomes her means of helping Mange Ram take revenge on the girl's father. The narration passes over what happened to the girl at the hands of Mange Ram. It records the pregnancy, the abortion and the marriage Ganeshi pays to arrange. Only after the girl leaves Delhi does Mange Ram claim responsibility for the pregnancy to her father's face (Bagchi, Half the Night 15–17). A brief glimpse of her hard life and the taunts she endures gives some sense of what the scheme

has cost her. Considerably more space goes to her father's reasons for keeping quiet. The authority Sahdeyi gains among the servants has much to do with what this girl can be made to bear.

Kamala gets as far as writing the letter that Omvati can only contemplate. The morning after Diwanchand's katha, a gathering at which he expounds a sacred story, the young widow leaves Delhi for Vrindavan. From there she writes to her childhood friend Suvarnalata. She intends to stay away and asks that nobody be sent after her. The narration reports the substance of her letter, then follows the woman who receives it. Suvarnalata asks the widows to keep Kamala's attachment to Diwanchand quiet and tells his wife Shakuntala that a sick uncle in Calcutta needs Kamala's care (Bagchi, "In This Contemporary Novel"). Kamala has chosen where to go and whom to tell. Once the letter reaches Delhi, it is Suvarnalata's explanation of her absence that Shakuntala hears.

At the katha itself, Kamala briefly commands the attention of the gathering on her own terms. An older woman asks how Krishna could dance with other men's wives when Ram takes his love for Sita as proof that she cannot belong to another man. Diwanchand admits he has no answer. Kamala suggests that the women who loved Krishna asked only to play with him and that he honoured their love in meeting them. Diwanchand thanks her and resumes his exposition. Shakuntala, watching Kamala's face, recognises her love for her husband (Bagchi, "In This Contemporary Novel"). Kamala can give public expression to an idea of love which Diwanchand welcomes as a reading of the sacred story. Once it touches their own lives, discretion prevails. George misses Kamala when the novel's attention moves elsewhere. The loss is felt all the more because we have heard what she could contribute when she was free to speak.

The question of who gets to answer comes back to Vimla, the woman to whom Vishwanath writes last. Bhattarai reads the letter as a reminder of the kindness owed to those closest to us. George finds little in the portrait of Vimla to suggest a life beyond the duties of a wife. The two judgements can stand together. To recognise the extent of his neglect may cost Vishwanath something, but his sense of loss tells us little about how Vimla understands the years they have shared. She might recognise herself in his account, take issue with its terms or have something else to say about their marriage. The fact that he finally addresses her gives him no authority to decide among those responses.

8. What a confession can repair

Vishwanath himself wonders about the nature of "the literature that can bring change" (qtd. in Zaidi). The letters give the question a narrower and more demanding application than it had for him as a public satirist. A brother whom he once treated as answerable for the failures of a nation can now read what Vishwanath thinks of that judgement. He can put before his wife an account of years that his professional success once allowed him to overlook. Whether either would give the same account of the injury is something even the most accomplished letter could hardly determine. Butler helps us see why a confession needs an addressee. Oliver's work makes a further demand on the writer. To write a confession is already to have a say in what an injury meant. To hear the injured person's account may require the writer to reconsider the very thing he thought he had come to confess.

The manuscript enclosed with the letters offers a revealing instance of such a difficulty. Vishwanath follows Mange Ram from a wrestler's training ground to a merchant's service and eventually to a bed from which he can scarcely raise himself. By the time his old teacher returns, the effort it takes the dying man to stand has a history the reader knows in some detail. His teacher can remember a strong body and accommodate a failing one in the same embrace (Bagchi, Half the Night 24–25). Omvati has had to support that body too. What for one person recalls an intimacy freely given was for the other a daily duty upon which Mange Ram learned to trade. When Yusuf supports Mange Ram in his arms, the earlier scene of caregiving changes what a reader can see in the gesture.

Who, then, can change the conditions under which the next generation enters service? Nair observes that Parsadi hopes his son Ramdas will become the personal attendant of Kesho, Lala Motichand's grandson. An appointment of this kind might secure a livelihood for the boy. In Maniar's account, Omvati wants an education for Ramdas and for herself, against her husband's wishes. The inclusion of the mother matters. Omvati might have ambitions for her son and still spend her own life needing someone to write for her. At the post office even the price of a letter was within her means. What she could not buy with her coin was the privacy most writers take

for granted.

9. The household's account

Perhaps the severest test of Vishwanath's achievement is the least assuming letter in the book. Parsadi's brother writes out of practical concern. To bring Omvati to Delhi would remove her from the man who has been harassing her without compelling her to disclose the abuse to a stranger. Yet the brother's explanation also settles what the family can say about the move. Radharani can tend to the old man, he points out, and Parsadi needs a woman to run his household (Bagchi, Half the Night 22–23). The proposed remedy answers a question about who will care for the men. Omvati had a different reason for wanting to write.

Vishwanath's distinction as a novelist is that he lets the reader know the difference. His difficulty, as a husband addressing Vimla, is that the corresponding difference in his own household may be knowable only to her. He can tell her what he now sees in the years they shared. The measure of repair would be whether she could tell him something about those years that his account had left out. In the prologue a letter crosses the distance between a village and Delhi and eventually brings a husband home. The one thing it never brings him is his wife's reason for needing him there.

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