

“Subculture without dipper lights”  
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*Home Products* by Amitava Kumar

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*Home Products*, Amitava Kumar's first novel, is a story of two stories told together, the story that the words on a page tell us and the other, often more interesting one, the story about the story; that is the way it reaches its readers, the traces of its scaffolding visible, made visible on purpose by the writer who almost in a late modernist gesture, takes us to that great workshop, the writer's mind, his table and on it, an open exhibition of his wares. That is the sense with which the book begins and ends, an image similar to one of Picasso's famous series of drawings on the theme of the artist and his model, painting brush in one hand, the other hand on a model's exposed thigh and the canvas inside the canvas suggesting the in-betweenness of the story.

Like the Great Stories (“The Great Stories are the ones you have heard and want to hear again,” *The God of Small Things*), *Home Products* tells no real story; it lives on the blurred zone between life and art, between Kumar's story and Binod's. This story is certainly not the simplistic *How to write a novel*, the title of Kumar's piece, in *The Hindu*, about writing this novel. Binod, a journalist by profession, is asked by a filmmaker to convert his editorial into a story, “a story about the life in small towns and a woman's lonely ambition”. This story about “a woman's lonely ambition,” is actually many stories. In real life, though Kumar never talks about this anywhere, this is the story of Madhumita Shukla, a small time poetess from the state of Uttar Pradesh who was murdered, allegedly, by the man, a minister in the state government, whose child she was carrying when she died. It is significant that Kumar retains the initials of Madhumita Shukla's name, the M.S. changing to Mala Srivastava in his *Manu-Script*. So, this then

becomes the story of Mala Srivastava; and of Binod's aunt, Bua, once a poetess, and now minister in the government, who like Madhumita and Mala, has made the "terrifying trip to the heart of power". There are others in the story too, who like Mala Srivastava, live lives outside the margins of the story, the Hindi film actor Manoj Bajpai who is Neeraj Dubey in the novel; a white girl called Alice, writing a book on Bollywood, is perhaps Jessica Heines; Vikas Dhar, a filmmaker who 'remakes' Hollywood films, bears resemblance to the Hindi film director Mahesh Bhatt. These two intertwined narratives negotiate through imitation ("Why don't you rewrite a story you have liked in the past?" Binod's friend asks him, and Binod considers the option by revising Chekhov's story, "The Lady with the Dog", changing the European seaside to Hardwar and the "Dog" in the story to "a small, four year-old boy"); challenge through foreplay (Binod changes the setting of his story from a Hanuman temple with a group of policemen to a "a young, well-dressed man at a tea stall in a tiny town" in the space of two days); surrender through mock-betrayal ("I have changed the story a bit. I have made it more romantic," Binod tells Dhar); claim through borrowing ("Binod had borrowed from Chekhov's story and now it seemed that Rabinder was borrowing from his editorial"), so that the borders between them, the "shadow", as it were, between the Eliotian conception and creation, between the green room and the stage, are erased. Kumar, therefore, like many others before him, the modernists, and then Borges and Cortazar, among others, reveals, like the silkworm, both the yet-to-be-finished product and the raw material and remainder.

This, also, is the story of Rabinder, Binod's cousin, who, at the beginning of the novel, is in jail for running an "internet brothel", from where he thinks of stories that could be turned into films. This, again, is the story of Bua's husband who asks her the name of the capital of Mongolia on the first night of their marriage, and Binod's father, a collector of irrelevant stories. For this is a book that is not just about writing a story; it is also a story of other stories, of Mahatma Gandhi and a goat, about a father telling his journalist-son that "journalists should write why people resort to spreading stories," about Saddam Hussein "writing a novel in which he had cast himself as the hero," about the cricketer Mc Grath, about madmen, Manto, Premchand, Tennessee Williams and Chekhov.

What holds the novel together is its love of literature: “Binod’s childhood, and to some extent therefore his life, was shaped by the stories that his mother told him”. Binod wants to know “how Mala had discovered literature”; “Baba would have much preferred that Binod was a writer”; a police inspector asks Rabinder, “Gandhi and Nehru ... wrote a lot of books while there were in jail. What are you going to do?”; Baba recites a poem by Sumitranandan Pant while Lalji chants Wordsworth’s *Daffodils*; Bua’s poems in a diary; the mother’s story from *Hans*; Bhalchandra Nemade’s story about Mani; *The Death of a Salesman* and *The Glass Menagerie*; the stories of everydayness from everywhere.

In this story about cinema, the narrator becomes a clap boy, merely ushering in beginnings with no control over ends. “The Making of a Movie” is an analogy which seems to suit the novel perfectly, for just as film clippings about the making of a film have begun to annotate the pleasures of film-viewing, the story about the making of a story regales the reader. This is no postmodern stunt; which reader can deny that stories of Milton’s blindness, Michael Madhusudan Dutt’s poverty, Yeats’s dalliance with automatic writing or Blake’s trance have not coloured their appreciation of these writers’ works?

This is also a sign of our times – a grand return of the diary, the confession mode, the personal blog, the “About” stories that sell products, books and writers; and the “makeover” programmes which work on the arithmetical difference between raw material and finished product. Kumar’s novel reflects, without dipper lights, that subculture of arrogant intrusionism, where the palette of colour is often considered to be a work of art as important as its surrogate child, the canvas; in doing so, he obliquely also critiques this nouveau desire of citizens of new capitalist states to be “made” into a story. This “story”, as Kumar shows, embodied in the material form of film reels, for “consumption”, is as much a “product” of the human factory as Page Three, Paris Hilton, Parliament and proxy wars in deserts.

*Home Products* marks the much welcome return of Home as home, not as space but place, not as metaphor, not in quotes, but as a real place with a doormat outside the door,

a place where history works silently, like sunshine or moss, to produce what only it can – stories, with whom it incestuously fathers children, their home products. Home is ghar, without italics, for whom Sehwag, the Indian cricketer, speaks in Hindi; home does not begin in capital letters, when it lets out a warning for attention, it is always the lower case, Binod’s Motihari, Om Puri’s Ambala; home is laboratory where the first experiments with the world take place, where Harvard becomes “Harward” and “lawyer” “liar”, where Sartre’s play, in the “Indian version”, creates melodrama instead of shame, and where Macbeth becomes Maqbool.

*Home Products*, a study of distance (Part I – “The Car with the Red Light,” a journey “to the heart of power”), of the ignorance of what travelling these distances entail (Part II – “Ulan Bator at Night”, a journey to the heart of an impending madness), of the blind lanes in the map of that travel (Part III – “Bandini, or, The Prisoner of Love”, a journey to the heart of immobility), of borrowed wanderlust (Part IV – “Kiss of the Spider Woman”, a journey to the heart of darkness), and eventually, of the impossibility of transformation that the journey had promised (Part VII – “The Glass Menagerie”), is a history of the failure of the expedition of the self, and its inability to remain or become either “Home” or “Product”.