

A Story Aably Tabled: A Critical Perspective on K. Srilatha's Novel *Table for Four*

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ABSTRACT

A close look at the history of Indian English writing, especially the genre of fiction, reveals that till the late 80's only a few names of women writers surfaced regularly. However, as the century wore on a new dynamism was visible that prompted the younger generation of women writers to experiment, innovate and create an identity for themselves. Writers belonging to this latter group extended their range from creative writing to criticism, translation and even free-lance journalism. Each activity of theirs seems to be a tributary for their total contribution to writing. Among the vibrant literary personalities of our time the name of Dr. K. Srilatha stands out distinctly. A novel that makes us pass through four chambers of horror before ending on a note of ambiguity is not an ordinary novel. The stories are also very different from one another as they focus on multiple socio-political and psychological issues and the writer has to a large extent succeeded in holding them together in a credible manner.

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A close look at the history of Indian English writing, especially the genre of fiction, reveals that till the late 80's only a few names of women writers surfaced regularly. However, as the century wore on a new dynamism was visible that prompted the younger generation of women writers to experiment, innovate and create an identity for themselves. Writers belonging to this latter group extended their range from creative writing to criticism, translation and even free-lance journalism. Each activity of theirs seems to be a tributary for their total contribution to writing.

Among the vibrant literary personalities of our time the name of Dr K. Srilatha stands out distinctly. She was a Charles Wallace writer-in-residence at the University of Stirling in Scotland in 2010 and has two collections of poems -- *Seablue Child* and *Arriving Shortly*. In her first novel *Table for Four* the focal point is a dinner hosted by the landlord Prithvi Uncle who invites his boarders (Sandra, Maya and Derek who happen to be the main characters) to taste his cooking for the last time. From the folds of this pretext of a farewell dinner emerges a prodigious outburst of reminiscences binding the various narrators together. Their past is the proverbial albatross round their necks, and they attempt, through their recollections, to come to terms with it.

The huge tortoise-shaped dining table in the landlord's house becomes a prompter for the characters' tales. At first, the table, called Nikolai, exudes an aura of mystery but is soon stripped bare of it and the readers are cajoled into believing that it is only a piece of furniture. However, even this fleeting reference to its magical powers clings to our imagination and we begin perceiving Nikolai as a possible carrier of some unearthly quality. This act of transferring onto the readers the task of adjusting perceptions gives the narrative a unique flexibility.

Nikolai draws to itself Sandra and Maya—two young Indian women who are in the U. S. to do their PhD in English. Derek, an American, is expected to come and join them but he stays away and Maya gauges that unfurling his past would be too painful an experience for him and may not lead to a catharsis of any kind. He is the third boarder who was a correspondent cum photographer in the Afghanistan War. Now he is studying History in the same university where Sandra and Maya had enrolled for a doctoral degree.

The exterior of the house seems to reflect the strange and unpredictable but colourful nature of Prithvi Uncle. The house, painted purple, has a green staircase which is located outside the house. It winds its way up to the top floor where the landlord lives in deliberate seclusion.

Indeed, food, especially of the Indian variety, is the leitmotif that binds together the diverse ingredients of the novel. In fact, all the chapters have been named after some well-known Indian dish. Chapter two, which happens to be the sole exception, bears the significant title 'The Listening Table' and refers to the way it facilitates the ritualistic sharing of meals and of secrets that, unless released, would continue to feed on them. The single kitchen in the house is another motif for bringing together the different boarders and offering us glimpses into their complex lives. Sandra and Maya try to fit together the tiny nuggets of information that will open up a vista on the actual personality of Prithvi Uncle. His self-imposed exile prompts the girls to speculate about him—his elf-like activities, his source of income, food habits and his connection with India. The contents of his shelf in the kitchen, the culinary aromas that sometimes waft downwards from the top floor of his house, his periodic mysterious disappearances and his indifference towards money matters baffle their attempts to categorise him. A diminutive figure that barely inches up to five feet, Prithvi Uncle is regarded more as a wizard with magical powers than as a dwarf.

The two young ladies slowly piece together his past by attributing to him a caste identity and class distinction:

Grew up in Hyderabad, he did,' she said. 'One of those wealthy Reddy families that own acres and acres of land,' I said. Going by the bottles of Priya pickles on his shelf, she was probably right about the Andhra bit. Avakkai, gonghura, lime, bittergourd—Prithvi uncle seemed to have quite a collection".1. (K. Srilatha, *Table for Four*, Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2011, p.22).

However, the two young women notice that the pickle bottles are past their expiry date and the rice is practically untouched. They wonder how he manages to survive unless he cooks for himself upstairs. Both of them argue about his mysterious ways of functioning and then they dissolve in good-humoured laughter.

Laughter soon gives way to more soul-stirring emotions which Maya has to learn to cope with. Although she does not see much of Derek but certain gestures on his part leave a deep impression on Maya. She recollects later on, after she leaves U.S. for Chennai, the emotion she experienced before falling deeply in love with Derek. From the vantage ground of her childhood home she can ponder about Derek with a certain amount of detachment. She reminisces the way she oscillated between hope and sadness and finally resigned herself to her fate by seeking to know his story. His long narration in the university cafeteria told her that she could only win his confidence but not his heart.

The story-telling session that follows the last dinner shared by the protagonists is supposedly a form of catharsis. After Sandra's recounting of a tortured childhood in an orphanage where she loses her twin sister, Uncle Prithvi unburdens his heart about betrayed his wife's daughter who always considered him to be her father. While Sandra's story is about the agony of separation due to circumstances beyond control, Uncle Prithvi's story is besmeared with guilt and repentance. Listening to them Maya feels that her story will reveal the kind of monster she was during her childhood years. She recoils upon herself anticipating the traumatic impact on her unsuspecting listeners. She dithers, withdraws from the scene and in spite of Sandra and Prithvi Uncle calling her a renegade and a coward she refuses to unleash the phantoms of her past. There is an implicit suggestion that she can do so only when she comes to terms with it.

At the end of the story-telling session Maya looks wistfully at Prithvi Uncle's quaint house with a garden, a duck-pond and the ducks quacking away with bucolic humour. It is as though this secluded sylvan setting can be rent apart by the force of her confessions.

Sandra's story has a haunting quality about it. She and her differently abled twin sister had been brought up in an orphanage in Bengaluru. They are forced apart when Sandra gets adopted by a childless couple. Later this orphanage is devoured by a fire at night with all the occupants trapped inside. However, an auto rickshaw driver in the neighbourhood informs Sandra that he has seen her sister hobble away on her crutches. Since he was forced to park his vehicle immediately at the command of the traffic police he could not follow her then. A little later he set out to find her but to no avail.

This faint ray of hope sustains Sandra and she exhorts Maya and Prithvi Uncle to assure her about a possible reunion with her twin sister. Unlike Sandra's story which sounds more like a circumstantial tragedy Uncle Prithvi's story has its sinister shades. A happy-go-lucky man, he had saved from doom his college friend Shyamala, pregnant with a treacherous lover's child, by marrying her. In time, he treated this child Mira as his very own and concealed successfully from her the secret of her birth. But a concatenation of events makes him realise his true potential. He discovers simultaneously his wife's marital infidelity and the unconditional adoration of a pretty and affluent American woman who promises him a new life in the West. As he leaves India behind to begin life afresh in the U.S. he wreaks vengeance on Shyamala by revealing to Mira that she is not his biological daughter and snaps his relationship with her. This truth gradually destroys Mira while Shyamala watches her helplessly. Of course, Uncle Prithvi does not forget to support them financially and Shyamala slowly recognises her folly.

Uncle Prithvi's special powers sprang from the sole virtue of swallowing poppy seeds rendered magical by a guru in India. He could read effortlessly other people's minds and thus exert immense power over them. In the U.S. he applies this power to his real estate business which flourishes much to his and his wife Karen's delight. Unfortunately, they do not beget a child and Karen has an untimely death. Filled with grief at this stroke of misfortune and tormented by his cruelty to his foster daughter Uncle Prithvi renounces his power to read other people's minds. The aridity of his life acquires a complex dimension when he takes in boarders for the sake of company but cannot socialise with them in a normal manner. Maya tells the readers that in her three years' stay in his house she has seen him only a couple of times. In contrast to Sandra's passionate and desperate efforts to locate her sister Uncle Prithvi laments for his daughter but refuses to drag her back from the brink. Does he feel too old to venture forth as a crusader for Mira or has complacency dulled the very edge of his determination? We have no clear-cut answer.

Derek seeks his self-purification by enrolling himself for a course in Afghanistan's history in the local university where the two young ladies were pursuing their doctoral programmes. When he was there in Afghanistan as a staff photographer an Afghan boy called Haleem had drawn very close to him. Derek began regarding this fatherless refugee boy as almost his alter ego. Derek recalls that while photographing Haleem, the light tricks him into believing that the Afghan boy looks almost like him. Somehow the duo, without anything in common, strikes up a warm friendship. During his stay in Afghanistan Derek promises to arrange for Haleem's stay in the U.S. Once he returns to the U.S. he postpones fulfilling his promise till he learns that Haleem has been killed in a landmine blast. What is the true nature of Derek's relationship with Haleem? Did Haleem invite his untimely death because of Derek's long-drawn aloofness in the U.S.? Maya wonders but can never penetrate into the truth of the matter. She also knows intuitively that he will never reciprocate her romantic feelings. The reader wonders why Derek is obsessed with Haleem. Is it because of his guilt or because of an unfulfilled passion for the young boy? The novel skirts around this issue.

Maya too faces a similar predicament vis-à-vis Parvathi. While Derek secretly blames himself for not rescuing Haleem in time, Maya cannot forgive herself for the cruelty she inflicted on Parvathi during her childhood. Maya feels even more mortified because Parvathi's mother Kamalakka has never blamed her and wants to wipe out the sordid memories. Parvathi, their old family retainer, is so devoted to Maya's family that she can never let the shadow of a doubt cross her mind about them. In fact, when Maya returns home from the U.S. Kamalakka says that there is a shrine to Goddess Parvathi on the beach now and she regularly goes there to worship. When Maya wants to visit the beach Kamalakka hesitates and wants to know if she has got rid of her phobia for the sea. Maya replies blandly that she used to live close to the sea in the U.S., indicating that our experiences of life and Nature are more or less universal. She cannot confide in Kamalakka that she had gone to the beach only once at Sandra's insistence and that was just before her departure from the U.S.

It is as though Maya seeks forgiveness not only from Kamalakka but also from the sea. She reveals to us gradually, while groping in the dark recesses of her memory, the truth shrouded by layers of hypocrisy. In a fit of jealousy, the nine-year-old Maya decided Parvathi's fate. During Kamalakka's absence on one fateful night, Maya's father enters the bedroom where the two girls, of the same age group, were sleeping. Parvathi, moaning in fever, has no clear idea of what Maya's father is doing to her. The child dotes on Maya's father so much that she does

not resist him and seems to treat him as part of her dream. Maya, who cannot distinguish their movements in the dark, presumes that her father prefers Parvathi over her. She decides that she cannot allow Parvathi to enjoy her father's affection and the two have to be separated. She concludes that the cat Karuppan, with its sattwik vegetarian habits, has rightly perceived the growing bond between her father and Parvathi. Parvathi, younger than Maya, does not realise what is brewing in her master's daughter's mind.

Maya, weaving a web of deceit for trapping her, tells her that far from the beach the sea transforms itself into mosambi or sweet lime juice and that explains this delicious colour it sports. Easily lured by the unending supply of mosambi juice in mid-stream, the child leaves Maya's hand and strides ahead into the deep waters. Maya watches till the waves close over Parvathi's head and then returns home to narrate about this accident.

Maya, who was ready to face her family members' wrath, is exculpated because of her apparent façade of innocence. Kamalakka's grief does not explode and she calmly returns to the kitchen two days after the cremation of her only child. It is their soothing words that leave a deep imprint of guilt on her heart. She grows up hiding the truth in her heart and cannot share her burden with anybody.

In her dream sequence Maya, a grown-up woman, sees Nikolai as the undertaker who has to cremate two stories. Could this mean that Uncle Prithvi and Sandra are liberated beings who have passed on their grief to this mythic object? As her dream ends, she sees Nikolai turn again into a table and we feel that the table is capable of exorcising ghosts of the past. However, juxtaposed against Maya's story is that of her mother, who has grown demented after the accidental death of her only son at a very young age. We have a morbid atmosphere enveloping us as we wander through Maya's Chennai home.

There is one question that crops up regarding the purpose of setting the story against the backdrop of the U.S. Is it only to give credence to Derek's confessions and Uncle Prithvi's story of migration? The author seems to imply that Sandra is in the U.S. to hunt out her lost sister and Maya to escape her turbulent past. However, the American background does not provide much succour when they seek it desperately. Sandra still endeavours to seek temporary shelter there but Maya is glad to return to India. It is in her childhood home that she can exorcise herself.

A novel that makes us pass through four chambers of horror before ending on a note of ambiguity is not an ordinary novel. The stories are also very different from one another as they focus on multiple socio-political and psychological issues and the writer has to a large extent succeeded in holding them together in a credible manner. However, there is an impression that she is trying to fit in the heavy weight of her narrative into a frame that is not hefty enough. Thus, though the novel is enjoyable, the readers may feel that more space could have been devoted to flesh out the characters. Quite often we are left on our own to interpret the ambiguities in the narrative and bear the forlornness pervading it. This novel cannot be easily categorised as it has a unique identity of its own.

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