

The Two Houses and The Wooden Swing

Nishi Pulugurtha
Asso. Professor
Brahmnanda Keshab Chandra College

Nayakampalli, near Kakinada in the East Godavari district in Andhra Pradesh was a small village, a sleepy hamlet. I use the past tense as it has changed much now I am told. One of the reasons why it figures so much in my thoughts is because of the number of memories associated with the village. Quite a number of childhood memories of the village, the people with whom I interacted that go back to the time when I was about five or six years old and a few to a much later period as well.

Twice a year Amma took us to Kakinada till we came up to middle school. Before I joined school, she went home, to Kakinada, every other month. She made the journey by what was then called the Madras Mail and was received at Samalkot station, after a journey of 18 hours, by her brother. It was a bus or another much shorter train ride to Kakinada town. On each of these visits to Kakinada she made it a point to visit Nayakampalli. That was her maternal grandparents' home, a home where she had been till she came of the age to join school. Ammamma, my maternal grandmother, had another baby daughter to care for and hence Baby, that was Amma's nickname, was kept in the care of her grandparents till it was time for her to attend school. Her maternal grandfather, called her Babylu, the 'lu' at the end is a suffix of endearment and could be added to any name (I call my nephew 'Adilu', his nickname is Adi). Years later, in her late seventies, in the throes of Alzheimer's Disease Amma did react to the name 'Babylu' with a smile, always. There was also a time when she broke down into tears when she was called by that name. When asked why she was crying she replied she wanted to be with her grandfather. I had never seen Amma cry like that ever.

Amma's grandfather's house was just near the place where the local bus made a stop in Nayakampalli village. We alighted from the bus and ran to the second huge house just a few

yards away. There were two huge houses, side by side. They looked almost the same and there was no boundary between them. Tathagaru's (grandfather's) house, was built on a raised plinth, that was covered – the *vaakila*, a social space where Tathagaru often sat in a huge armchair. During school vacations a number of his great grandchildren would be visiting and he would gather all of them in the *vaakila*. He spoke to us, told us stories and gave us small colourful lozenges that he kept in a big glass container. Living in Calcutta, my Telugu was not good and I was not that fluent in the language. It used to take me a few days to be comfortable in Telugu on these visits. Tathagaru insisted I sing a Bengali song and dance to it too. I did that with no hesitation. He was a slim tall man and was always draped in a dhoti. Amma's maternal grandmother, was thin and short, almost half her husband's height. She would mostly be in the kitchen or in the backyard with her daughters, daughters in law and the other women of the household, planning and rustling up special menus for all.

As one crossed the threshold that was smeared with turmeric and kumkum and entered into the house there were rooms on all sides that opened into an open, lower square space that was in the centre of the house. This square space had a raised roof. As children we loved jumping into that lower space in the centre, light streamed in through a glass window in the tiles, that was mostly kept open, lightening up the space. The kitchen was at the other end with a large pantry as well. Steps from the kitchen led out into the backyard, a huge open area that had a large well, the only source of water for the household, a couple of cows tethered in a corner too, a few *kanakambaram* plants in full bloom, a tall coconut tree, a few jasmine plants and two banana trees as well. As a child I loved that vast expanse of space in that house, those wooden pillars all around - I loved moving through rooms, playing with my cousins. In the evenings the women would prepare a mixture of some cow dung and water and layer the mud floor with it. I found it smelly for a while but then got used to it. Some years later the mud floor

gave way to a cement floor and a bathroom was built, while the rest of the house remained much the same.

The house next door, belonged to cousins, and I was more interested in that house. It was built in exactly the same layout as this house. Amma's aunt was married into that house. We called her Pedda Ammamma (she was my Ammama's elder sister, Pedda meaning elder). Pedda Ammama was short, like her mother while my Ammamma was tall and slim and resembled her father. They had three brothers, the eldest helped in the family business – agriculture, the youngest brother worked in the town of Kakinada. The one in between was autistic and he was a favourite with all his nieces and nephews and with all of us too. We spilled over into both the houses, running, playing, just having fun.

The biggest attraction of Pedda Ammama's house was a wooden swing that was larger than a single bed and that was hung to the beams in the roof by iron chains. We didn't have to take turns to be on this swing, we could all climb it and be there for as long as we wanted to. Years later, when I visited Nayakampalli, the house was mostly empty, just one uncle lived here. I remember spending my entire time in the village on that swing. Most of the inmates of the house had moved away to Kakinada and other nearby towns by then. After a few years no one stayed in this house any longer. The roof gave away after some years. It still remains like that. Tathagaru's house was pulled down some years ago. It was over 100 years then. A new house was built in its place. An aunt and uncle live there now, they are still involved in the family business, agriculture. The last time I visited I got some fresh pigeon pea (arhar dal) lentils packed nicely in a packet to take home to Calcutta. Lunch that day had some of that dal roasted and cooked with just some salt. This dal is a favourite, it has a subtle taste as one mixes it into some steaming rice to which a generous dollop of some homemade ghee is added. Some fritters and a fried papad to go along as well. And some curd and rice to finish the meal with a pickle. All either from the fields or the farm. To my city bred tastes they all were exotic, tasted

heavenly – a taste that still lingers on. That was the last time all the four of us visited Nayakampalli. My parents went back many times after that, we sisters could not. Work and other commitments held us up. Appagaru and Amma have moved on to another world. It has been years since I visited Nayakampalli but this place with all its associations, and most importantly memories of those two houses and that swing remain.

(First Published in *Café Dissensus*, 9th July 2021)

Dr. Nishi Pulugurtha is Associate Professor, Department of English, Brahmananda Keshab Chandra College, Kolkata. Her areas of interest are British Romantic literature, Indian writing in English, the diaspora, Shakespeare adaptations in film. Dr. Pulugurtha has published in refereed international and national journals – in the *Coleridge Bulletin*, *The Encyclopaedia of Postcolonial Studies* (Blackwell Publishing), *Shakespeare and Indian Cinemas Local Habitations* edited by Poonam Trivedi and Paramita Chakravarti (Routledge, London, 2019), *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism and Religion* edited by Jeffrey W. Barbeau (2021) among others. She has a monograph on *Derozio* and a collection of travel essays, *Out in the Open*, an edited volume of essays on travel, *Across and Beyond* (2020) and a volume of poems *The Real and The Unreal and Other Poems* (2020) and a collection of short stories *The Window Sill* (2021). She has edited a special issue of *Café Dissensus* on “Epidemics/Pandemics and Literature” (February 2021) and a special feature issue of *Muse India* on “Shakespeare in Indian Cinema” (July-August 2021).