

## THE CAR AND CALL OF THE ROAD

In a hurry to prevent the miners' further degradation of the mountains of West Virginia, she drives the rental car speedily along narrow roads on a bleak, foggy morning. Lalitha is inspired by her boss, Walter's environmental idealism, the initiative of his trust to save the air, the forests, and many species of birds being killed by both domestic and feral cats, and follies of man. Born in India but raised in the US, 'the suburban daughter of an electrical engineer', she is beyond love and longing for a home across the oceans, and has sailed across the early struggle for adjustment to a new culture. Lalitha is unlike the characters you come across in Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction. There is no in-between-ness. Her transition is complete. With remarkable courage, clarity, and passion she drives dangerously around the mountain curves to secure the most pristine, therefore most vulnerable, parts of earth before they are devoured by the greedy industry.

At a rare intimate moment, drinking her second martini before dinner in a restaurant, she confides in Walter what she wants to do with her life.

"Can I ask a personal question?' she said.

'Ah – sure.'

'The question is: do you think I should get my tubes tied?'"

Walter fumbles in shock, hastily looking around to see if the other people heard her. "'It just seems logical,' she said more quietly, 'since I know I don't want children.'"

By the time you reach the middle of Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*, a 562-page novel, you know Lalitha (or Lalita – a case of poor research?) is at its centre. I wonder why this gutsy Indian girl fighting her heroic battles in West Virginia has never captured the imagination of the Indian literary elite. Is this because Franzen does not make the grade? Would a similar character, Indian, playing a big role in an Ian McEwan or Kazuo Ishiguro work evoke deeper curiosity?

Anyway, Lalitha drives like she is possessed, as if a little delay would wipe out another fifty thousand of the rare birds. She, Franzen tells us, is 'a fast and somewhat reckless driver'. Since the author expresses his own manifesto for the environmental war through the dark, diminutive, black-haired South Asian woman, the novel's symbolic structure needs her behind the wheel. Sitting in the passenger seat, Walter realizes that the erratic, obstinate ways of the drivers ahead, their refusal to let them pass, have something to do with their subliminal racism. In these parts of the country, for many of them, Lalitha is merely 'dark meat'.

"...he yearned to vent when stymied by a driver refusing to make a legal right turn on red: 'Hello? Get a clue? The world consists of more than just you!... Learn to drive! Hello!' Better the adrenaline rush of Lalitha's flooring the gas to pass the uphill-struggling trucks than the stress on his cerebral arteries of taking the wheel himself..."

Thus an obvious question is answered – why the woman and not the man, drives along the circuitous mountain passes. “Lalitha swerved violently around a grouse on the road, a grouse greeter, an avian goodwill ambassador inviting appreciation of the brawnier forestation and less marred heights and clearer streams of Wyoming County.”

As her boss, and also her admirer, Walter cautions her, “Well, drive carefully out there, OK?”

But the inevitable happens.

A poignant, deeply moving passage records her final journey.

“Whether she did, in fact, drive carefully. Whether she was or wasn’t rushing on the rain-sleek country highway back up to the goat farm the next morning, whether she was or wasn’t rounding the blind mountain curves dangerously fast. Whether a coal truck had come flying around one of these curves and done what a coal truck did somewhere in West Virginia every week. Or whether somebody in a high-clearance 4x4, maybe somebody whose barn had been defaced with the words FREE SPACE or CANCER ON THE PLANET, saw a dark-skinned young woman driving a compact Korean-made rental car and veered into her lane or tailgated her or passed her too narrowly or even deliberately forced her off the shoulderless road.

Whatever did happen exactly, around 7:45 a.m., five miles south of the farm, her car went down a long and very steep embankment and crushed itself against a hickory tree.”

Franzen’s 2010 novel is a great work of fiction about the car and the call of the road, a subject that has fascinated writers down the ages, ever since the advent of the automobile.

On the contrary, J. G. Ballard’s *Crash* is a weird, hallucinatory story of a man’s unusual pursuit of a film actress called Elizabeth Taylor: for Vaughn, crashing his car into hers would be an ultimate orgasmic experience. It’s a macabre world populated by fevered men whose libido shoots at the hint of an imminent head-on collision, stuntmen with coloured blond hair doubling up for actresses in crash scenes, weed-smoking women on prosthetics after road accidents, and doctors, themselves survivors of crashes, treating and counselling victims.

No other mode of transport has inspired fiction so much as the motor. Flying is smart, businesslike; railways leisurely, romantic, but a moving car is part of your persona, your style, idiosyncrasies, and temperament on the road. It’s you on the move.

Armed with an interest-free car loan of ₹ 50,000 from the *Indian Express*, my employers at that time – to be paid off in fifty equated monthly instalments – one Sunday morning in early autumn I went with a company driver to see a car in South Delhi’s Malviya Nagar enclave. The owner, a genial chartered accountant, agreed to lower the price of his second-hand car to ₹41,000 – ₹ 2000 less than what his classified ad had mentioned. The year was 1993. Maybe 1994 – I am not sure. I drove it home – the proud third owner of the Fiat. The remaining money from the loan, and a little more, went in the *dent-paint* job.

Despite the new shine and seat-covers it was after all an old car, and it began to give way often. Almost every Sunday I would take it to a mechanic behind the local market. Mollahji, the wiry man with thick glasses and a sharp, flowing beard, was knowledgeable about every department of automobile mechanism. I learnt that a car, from the mechanic's viewpoint, has two major areas – electrical and oil. The horn, battery, sparkplug, headlamps, they belong to the former, and the engine and related issues to the latter. Over thickly sweet, milky tea he talked about his life back home in Aligarh, and many other things. I began to like him – his insights into UP politics, his likes and dislikes in Bollywood, his considerable knowledge of cricket.

One winter evening I drove my wife and little daughter to another part of the city to attend a wedding – riding through the dark, your headlights part of the unending procession of moving lights along the road, the winter air sneaking in through half-rolled down windows, a conversation punctuated with intermittent pauses.

Stepping out of the wedding hall after small talk, pleasantries and food, I walked towards the car. It was unlike any such evening before, when I had stood at the street corner waiting uncertainly for an autorickshaw, bargaining with the driver (it was a time much before the branded radio cabs and mobiles). The car, I knew, would take us home through the fog and emptiness of the winter night, we talking, laughing, recalling the evening in all its details. The car, I knew, was not going to break down.

Bhaskar Roy