

Fifty-year Old Engine

N.D. DANI

He loved to digress,
to go,
into the lanes and bylanes,
when the straight road ahead
shone in the bright sun.
The audience for him were
not audience
but morale-boosters,
a massage to his bruised ego.
The text before him was a
launching pad
to shoot missiles
at his undergraduate, uninformed listeners.
The dish he served them was
too heavy for their underdeveloped minds.
Bits of philosophy, shreds of sociology, a dash of economics
and a liberal dressing of cinema
were mixed in that strange, queer bowl.
For him a lecture was a parade of knowledge
not always well-digested.

You guessed it right.
Yes, he was my professor and
taught us poetry.
To change the metaphor,
the poem in his hands made
brilliant, exploding sounds
as if from a showy firework
that finally spluttered out
ending in a sulphuric smoke.
I often wondered as he wiped
the spit on the corners of his mouth
what made him go round the poem
like ever widening circles in a pond.

It was many years later
having left the college for fairer pastures
that I learnt the secret of the steam
that drove professor Shekhar's engine of fifty years.
He had been trying to impress the girl
who always sat on the front bench.
But his flashy lectures and his flashy shirt
couldn't the beauty on the front bench convert.
She turned his proposal down
saying he didn't have enough sperm count
to give her the three babies without whom
marriage for her was a complete doom.



BOOK REVIEW

Review of Ramesh K. Srivastava's *My Father's Bad Boy – An Autobiography*

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[*My Father's Bad Boy – An Autobiography*, Ramesh K. Srivastava, New Delhi: Authorspress, 2017, ISBN: 978-93-5207-397-9, 395 pp. Rs. 895.00. Paperback]

An autobiography can be taken as an art of transforming a person's life into a public representation to be judged, evaluated and examined by the readers endowed with their own likings, disliking, prejudices and whims. Numerous pulls, pressures and vicissitudes of his own life allure the writer to form his autobiography – a palpable mixture of hopes, aspirations, disappointments and defeats. Ramesh K. Srivastava writes in the "Preface" that "an autobiography is a valid channel for the release of accumulated stresses and pains, sorrows and grievances but no less ecstasies" (9). A true autobiography thus is a bare it all stuff in which the writer under his psychic compulsions relives his life in words. Not all autobiographies are perfectly true but realm of literature allows the writer the liberty of inclusion of such material as breaks the monotony and refreshes the readers. On the back cover of the book, the author writes: "facts have been given a fictional form, allowing humour and fun at my own cost." Ramesh K. Srivastava's *My Father's Bad Boy: An Autobiography* stands apart as it comes very close to the real life without being insipid. Being an illustrious writer, a

popular teacher, and an experienced academic, Srivastava narrates the inspiring tale of his struggles, triumphs, and occasional disappointments that usually accompany the lives of self-made people who build up their careers from scratch.

Embracing the truthfulness with dignity, Srivastava puts forward the account of his life constantly in struggle with obstacles on the path of self-empowerment and personal growth. This unpretentious chronicle of his life not only depicts his external hardships but also gives us a peep into his psychological sufferings and their ultimate reflection on his persona as well as in his writings.

The book, consisting of 21 chapters, acquaints us with the journey of the writer's life in a chronological sequence. The beginning of the book deals with the village Banpur in Lalitpur District. His early life in the village seems to be constantly plagued by poverty, apathetic treatment by father, and absence of any judicious concern about his health, hygiene and education. As a result, the writer suffered from the erratic functioning of spleen leading to dyspepsia and other ailments which had lifelong effect on his personality. His father, an honest patwari and a highly devoted brother, seemed completely unconcerned with materialistic and psychological needs of his own wife and children. The unquenched thirst for paternal love left a deep scar on the author's psyche and destined him for an eternal search for love. He writes: "But this denial of love from my father – whom I called Dada – in my childhood resulted in my quest for love all my life – among friends, among elders, among teachers, among ladies, among students and even among small boys and girls" (45).

Like Dickens' grim childhood reflected in his *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*, Srivastava's world of penury and pain, his fight against jealousy and conspiracies of others find expression in his autobiography. The passage of formative years of the child in such a miserable ambience was undoubtedly bound to leave

indelible scars on the writer's heart and soul. Consequently, he grew into a nervous, introspective, diffident and self-conscious person who drowned himself into the pages of literary works as an escape from his inner anguish and pain. Some of his own characters are imbued with this sense of inadequacy and insatiate thirst for love and appreciation. In addition, the atrocious behaviour of relatives, particularly of Tulsa Bua, and the indifferent attitude of his own father have poignantly been well narrated.

Srivastava excels as a writer in presenting his world with minutest accuracy and photographic memory through his dogged perseverance and adamant grit. He overcame the insurmountable challenges that life presented before him. What troubled his innermost being was not so much the lies spread out by his Bua or that he was ill-treated in comparison with her own son, or even when he had to remain hungry but the fact that the person who should have taken loving care of him – his father – paid no attention to him. What miraculously comes out as a positive gain out of negative circumstances is the fact that he could always manage to salvage some benefit or the other from what appeared to be a total loss. The publication of his first short story "*Ek Rupaya*" (one rupee) as a result of the real loss of a rupee is a case in point. His act of reading one Hindi novel a day might have been to save him from tension, but it gave him a flair for writing which resulted in twenty short stories in Hindi during his two years of B.A. studies.

After his M.A., Srivastava endeavored to achieve Fulbright Fellowship – his coveted dream. After securing fellowship in the third attempt, he was destined to soar to unimagined heights. Strangely enough, he had to go to the U.S. with a paltry amount of seven dollars! The writer's description of his early days in Hawaii and the mainland U.S. makes us aware of the huge cultural difference between the two countries – India and the U.S. The naked bathroom conduct of the fellow Americans and

open intimacy among boys and girls were in sharp contrast to the orthodox and highly conservative cultural ambience of India. The lavish aristocratic American lifestyle contrasts well with the harsh living conditions of India. He gives an example of the American lady in Kauai island of Hawaii state: "In our house in India, we were 30 members in the family in a house without electricity, without water and with only two bicycles among us for conveyance whereas that American lady was alone, yet had all means of transport" (202) – an airplane, a helicopter, and three large-sized cars. She had six air-conditioned rooms for six dogs!

After Srivastava returned home from the U.S. and joined Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, his career in creative writing soared high even though the atmosphere in the University was far from congenial. His stay in Amritsar too was marked with departmental conflicts, theft of his academic letters, departmental conspiracies, feeding of unhygienic material and finally his forced resignation from professorship with threats to his own self and his family. In the last portion of autobiography, the writer narrates the story of his post-retirement familial contentions, the tirade of his youngest brother against him and the latter's act of filing false court cases against the author. What made it worse was his father's partiality due to his ignorance in taking side of the youngest brother which amounted to the approval of the latter's criminal activities. The factors that saved his sanity and balance of mind are his jobs at Bundelkhand University, Jhansi, and at S. R. Group of Institutions, Ambabai, Jhansi. Though Srivastava confronted minor hiccups in the University as well, the SRGI provided him with a very congenial atmosphere which accelerated his creative writing work.

The autobiography is a gripping account of the vicissitudes of Srivastava's life from his early childhood to his old age. It is highly appealing as well as inspiring in the sense that the struggle of an underprivileged young man and his adamant

determination establish him as an erudite English scholar and writer of national renown. The undercurrent of a throbbing rebellion against his own penury and injustice both in his working places and in the family is discernible throughout the narrative. Despite all the trials and tribulations which life afflicted on Srivastava, the tone of the autobiography remains bright and optimistic. What is particularly good with the autobiography is that it establishes an emotional rapport with the readers who have their own pains, sufferings, struggles, emotional turmoil and occasionally sunny days which are an integral part of every man's life who strives to excel from his humble beginnings to scintillating heights. In this sense the autobiography has an universal appeal. Goethe once wrote: "Talent alone cannot make a writer. There must be a man behind the book." I can write with confidence that Srivastava is an versatile genius and he is not only behind the book but so deeply immersed in it that they become one indistinguishable entity.