

The Death of Vishnu by Manil Suri

by Linda Sandhaus

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I first read this book a dozen or so years ago and I remembered that I liked it a lot. I remembered that it was a story about religious intolerance between Hindus and Moslems that artfully combined humor and pathos, but I had forgotten the plot. I did however remember that it wasn't too long. So I thought it might be a good book to suggest for the Novel Club. If you didn't like the book, you can blame me.

As soon as I started the book for the second time, I immediately remembered why I had liked it so much. "Not wanting to arouse Vishnu in case he hadn't died yet, Mrs. Asrani tiptoed down to the third step above the landing on which he lived, teakettle in hand." It's an intriguing opening sentence that arouses your curiosity and compels you to read on. As the first scene unfolds, it might remind us of comic strips, soap operas, or 1950's era TV sitcoms with stereotypes of scheming wives and hen-pecked husbands —except that this one has some features that are unique to the Indian culture, or at least, foreign to Americans. That Vishnu, a homeless man would have the privilege of sleeping on an apartment building landing in exchange for running errands for the tenants, that he paid a bribe to secure this coveted space, and that this is a usual practice in cosmopolitan India is definitely not an American experience. Now, after many years of living on the landing, we learn that Vishnu lies dying and barely conscious. He is the title character in the drama that plays out around him in which he never utters a single word - a clever literary device. Will Vishnu's death be the central drama of the novel, we wonder?

After reading it for the second time, I thought it might be helpful to learn a little more about Hinduism to better understand the many religious references in the book. What little I already knew about this religion I had learned very recently in my training to become a school tour docent at the CMA. I learned about androgynous gods with 4 arms and some of their many avatars, consorts, and attributes. There are Gods with the body of a man and head of another animal, such as an elephant or a monkey and a complex mythology associated with each of them. I selected some images from the CMA collection of the Hindu deities mentioned in the book to share with you and to set the mood for our discussion. ([images](#))

I turned to Huston Smith's *The World's Religions* to learn more about Hinduism and to see if it might give me some insights into the author's intentions and underlying themes in this novel. Like other religions, Hinduism offers a philosophy about what it means to be human and a structured approach to living. The number four seems to be important in the Hindu religion. Please excuse my oversimplification of a very complex religion. According to Huston, there are 4 things that people want, there are 4 layers of the self, and there are 4 stages of life. The 4 things that people want are sensual pleasure, worldly success, satisfaction in their duties, and the fourth thing is to have all these things infinitely. The 4 layers of the self are the physical body, the conscious mind, the subconscious mind, and the infinite eternal being that is attainable in life through the practice of yoga and meditation. The 4 stages of life are (1) student, (2) householder, which is the stage of marriage, family and work, (3) retirement, a time of self-discovery and reflection, and (4) the fourth state defined in the Bhagavad-Gita as "one who neither hates nor loves anything," which is the state of infinite freedom. The Hindu quest can be summarized as how to achieve a higher state of being and escape the limits of being human. The universe takes part in an infinite cycle of creation and destruction that is overseen by the Creator Brahma, the Preserver Vishnu and the Destroyer Shiva.

Interestingly, and perhaps intentionally, the story is set in a 4 story apartment building (the entry level plus 3 apartment levels) in which all of the residents are Hindu except for the Muslim Jalal family on the middle residential level. The 2 Hindu families on the 1st floor, share a kitchen, which is the basis of a long-standing feud between Mrs. Asrani and Mrs. Pathak over accusations of stealing cooking staples. They are also very socially competitive. Their husbands would be allies, if they weren't so cowed by their wives. However, the 2 women are able to put their bickering aside when an opportunity arises to disparage the Muslims upstairs. The wealthy, widowed, and reclusive Mr. Taneja lives on the top level. The author introduces him late in the story and he does not participate directly in it.

Enter the 2 lovebirds. A forbidden interfaith romance between Salim Jalal and Kavita Asrani that has been aided and abetted by Vishnu is a set-up for a tragic outcome that we know all too well. They are two rebellious, naive, self-absorbed, infatuated teenagers, who are totally oblivious to the

effect their actions might have on their families. This Romeo and Juliet “screenplay” drives the plot forward, but not in a predictable way.

While the two lovebirds are planning their elopement, we learn more about the main characters, their religious beliefs, and their relationships with each other and with Vishnu, along with a cast of minor characters, the street vendors, gangas, and men who sleep on the other 2 landings. It’s a real “slice of life” of modern India. For years, Mrs. Pathak and Mrs. Asrani and her daughter Kavita have given Vishnu leftovers (Pathak) and tea (Asrani), and in return, they expect his daily greeting and blessing. It is a purely transactional relationship. Both couples feel some sense of responsibility for him, which is largely hypocritical and provides occasions for comical disputes over money. The one that we witness leads to a farcical dissolution of Mrs. Pathak’s card game. We learn that Mr. Asrani regularly visits a Hindu temple, a mosque and a church every Saturday to make sure he has all his bases covered for rewards in the afterlife. Mr. Pathak is more concerned with finding a little peace in this life by escaping his wife to enjoy his daily tea and biscuits in the quiet of the local hotel. Mr. Jalal, an intellectual who prides himself on his rationality, has been on a path of self-denial and self-inflicted pain in search of religious enlightenment and the “rapture of faith.” He admires the Mughal ruler of India who attempted to unite the country by combining the Hindu and Moslem religions into a common religion. His wife is a kind, simple woman and devout muslim who fears he might be under a curse, or, worse yet, be totally out of his mind. We also meet the gangas, lower caste women who work for the tenants and give us their perspective on the the caste system.

The action plays out on the stairwell of the apartment building within earshot of the semiconscious Vishnu. He overhears the conversations and smells the aromas around him with his seemingly augmented senses that awaken old memories of his childhood, his mother, and a romance with Padmini, a prostitute. The transitions between the real, live drama and Vishnu’s re-activated memories bring out the author’s literary artistry and sense of humor. For example, when Mr. Jalal sets down a mango next to Vishnu’s head, the aroma of the mango triggers an erotic memory of licking mango juice off of Padmini’s body. Haven’t we all experienced the semi-conscious state between sleep and wakefulness when we hear what’s going on around us and it becomes incorporated into our dreams?

As part of his plan to attain enlightenment by renouncing his comfortable bed, Mr. Jalal decided to sleep on the landing next to Vishnu. That night, he had a vivid dream that Vishnu was a God with multiple heads and that he has commanded Jalal to be his prophet. Upon awakening, Mr. Jalal interprets the dream as a divine vision and the enlightenment that he has been seeking. However, while he was sleeping, he became entangled in Kavita's dupatta that she left to cover Vishnu in her dramatic parting gesture when eloping with Salim in the middle of the night. Kavita's dupatta now implicates Jalal in her disappearance in the minds of the "wallas" and gangas who congregate outside the building gossiping. What follows is a brisk recounting of how the gossip became embellished by each teller as it passed among the gangas and walls, ultimately mutating into anti-Muslim hate speech and cries for mob justice against Mr. Jalal. The humor has now darkened and there is an immediate transition to a sense of ominous foreboding.

On re-reading this turning point in the drama, I was reminded of a basso buffo aria from *The Barber of Seville*, called *La Calumnia (The Slander)* in which the scurrilous Dr. Bartolo explains how gossip can be used to destroy an innocent person. The words and the music describe how the gossip grows and mutates as it spreads until it erupts like a tempest, an earthquake, or a volcano. I've included a translation of the lyrics below. If you substitute *Prejudice* for *Slander*, the song describes the trajectory of the gossip in the novel fairly accurately. I would like to play a short video of this aria.

La Calumnia (The Slander)

Calumny is a little breeze,
a gentle zephyr,
which insensibly, subtly,
lightly and sweetly,
commences to whisper.

Softly softly, here and there,
sottovoce, sibilant,
it goes gliding, it goes rambling.
Into the ears of the people,
it penetrates slyly
and the head and the brains
it stuns and it swells.

From the mouth re-emerging
the noise grows crescendo,
gathers force little by little,
runs its course from place to place,
seems the thunder of the tempest
which from the depths of the forest
comes whistling, muttering,
freezing everyone in horror.

Finally with crack and crash,
it spreads afield, its force redoubled,
and produces an explosion
like the outburst of a cannon,
an earthquake, a whirlwind,
a general uproar,
which makes the air resound.

And the poor slandered wretch,
vilified, trampled down,
sunk beneath the public lash,
by good fortune, falls to death.

Even though this was my second reading of this novel, I was still surprised by the turn of events — I didn't see it coming. I guess that's either because the author is so good at manipulating the reader, or because my memory is failing, or maybe I repressed it. I do think it's a cleverly constructed novel. The title and the opening paragraph initially suggest that Vishnu is the protagonist. Then, when the Romeo and Juliet romance emerges, we expect some variation on that familiar plot line. It isn't until the gossip explodes more than 2/3 of the way through the novel that we realize Mr. Jalal is the tragic protagonist of the novel. The religious animosity had been subtly hinted at earlier, but was so overshadowed by the animosity between the 2 Hindu women and the condescension towards lower caste Hindu characters that I didn't pay enough attention to it. My one criticism of the novel's construction is that the late introduction of Mr. Taneja's personal story slowed the momentum, but maybe this was also intentional on the part of the author and something that I hope we will explore further in our discussion.

The book reminded me of another book I read several years ago that also combined humor and pathos with a surprise ending, and that is Jonathan

Safran Foer's first book "*Everything is Illuminated*." This book made me laugh out loud even though it's a holocaust novel. It weaves together a tragic past narrative and a comical narrative in the present time to arrive at a surprising intersection of the two timelines. (Note: The movie based on the book is terrible.) The combination of humor and tragedy seems to be a winning formula —it's been around for a long, long time.

Discussion Questions:

1. The author describes Vishnu as lying in a semi-conscious state, with heightened senses of hearing and smell. He appears to have an out of body experience and climbs the stairs which allows him to overhear dramatic events as they unfold. What is your interpretation of Vishnu's ascent?
2. How did you interpret Mr. Jalal's journey of faith and his behavior?
3. What is Mr. Taneja's role in the story and why is he introduced so late in it?
4. What do you think the author is trying to say about religion and about Indian society?
5. How does this book compare to last season's selection, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*?

Bonus questions:

6. Do you think this book would make a good movie?
7. What actor would you like to play you in the movie about your life?