

**CHAPTER TWO**

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*Your Life to Live* is as it were, an introduction to Romen Basu's favourite themes and techniques. As a globe-trotter and widely experienced author, he deals with characters from different countries, different ethnic groups and different cultures. His method is simple: There is usually an Indian hero who is westernized, rather modern in his outlook, who confronts various characters - men as well as women - and who belong to different cultural backgrounds. A cultural clash on the individual level becomes too focal point to either strike a balance between contrasting cultural values or highlighting and upholding one culture over the other.

In the novel, *Your Life to Live*, the main woman character Zarina goes through the tyranny of caste system. Her father strikes at the very idea of marriage between Ashoke and Zarina, a Hindu and a Muslim, when he says angrily:

I don't want this boy's name to be mentioned again in this house. You have found me quiet and uninterfering, but today you have enraged me beyond what I believed possible. If there is one thing I do not want in this world, it is a marriage between a Muslim and a Hindu. In the name of Allah,

I want to know what I have done to deserve this, that my own daughter should shame me this way.<sup>1</sup>

*Your Life to Live* is not only a tender love story; on the contrary, it presents the contrasting values of East and West through the Indian characters of Ashoke and Zarina. Ashoke, an attractive and enterprising young man from Calcutta, has made a success in the competitive New York business world. Romen Basu has illustrated the difference between the women characters from the East and the West. Zarina earnestly demands that their life together be based on true understanding. Sex is not everything in life. She urges upon intellectual quest for self-knowledge. Ashoke is living in the world of illusion where human beings are reduced to mere objects. Life is like a chase and Ashoke reveals in it. His views towards life and marriage are conservative and hedonistic and falsely modernistic, as he says:

Darling, what else is there in life so important as sex? I am one hundred percent Freudian.<sup>2</sup>

or

When it is about me and my life, yes. I am the boss in the house and I shall give you anything and everything in the whole world. My life is yours for the asking.

In return, I must have undivided, undiluted unashamed love and attention.<sup>3</sup>

Ashoke is very proud of being a passionate man. His desire to make love to Zarina everyday, several times a day shows how much he loves her. But it also reveals two aspects of his character: one, his self-indulgence, and two, his duplicity as regards his Westernization and conservative beliefs. He is never convinced when Zarina tells him that sexual passion has nothing to do with love. He always calls her 'ice-berg'. Besides, Zarina craves for something else. Ashoke is influenced by the Western culture. Mere enjoyment in life is his motto. But now in the twentieth century, as the woman's sense of individuality is awakened, Zarina refuses to remain a sacrificial, shadowy creature. There is a change in woman's social status, her thinking and her feelings. The past half a century has witnessed great changes in the attitude to sex, love and marriage. The prevailing ideas about women's status in the family and society in the advanced countries are affecting other countries through mass media. Modern Indian wife confronts the problems of multiplicity of roles she has to perform. Zarina once expresses her feelings -

If you have everything else to offer besides constant hugging and kissing, I am ready

to listen. We never sit and discuss a book or a play, or music or any of the issues of the day. We never have any serious conversation. Everything for you is motivated by lust and pleasure of the senses, food, sex, drink, excitement. I need a little something besides.<sup>4</sup>

Romen Basu's *Your Life to Live* represents a contrast between the East and West through the characters. The book is semi-Eastern and semi-Western in treatment and sensibility, its movement towards a conclusion exalting traditional Indian wisdom at the expense of the Western values involves no commitment; it is little more than sop to conscience for continuing to enjoy all the Western benefits.

Ashoke, fully Westernized in his conduct, is seen sometimes to be sensitive when Zarina is blamed by her parents for her decision to marry a Bengali Hindu. She decides to flyaway to Europe. Ashoke sells his Akai Tape Recorder, the pearl-studded gold cuff-links, the only thing he ever acquired from his father and his second-hand white convertible Chevrolet to send Zarina money for her air ticket.

I don't want you to spend one extra night  
in that house more than you have to<sup>5</sup>

The above words are repeated in his telegram. This shows his

earnest love for Zarina. At home, he is one with her feelings, sorrows and happiness. Romen Basu portrays emotional scenes quite convincingly. The conflict is between the two religions, the two totally different modes of life, two different value systems. At the same time, Romen Basu shows the impact of Western mode of life on Ashoke and reveals its true nature. We can say that Romen Basu has created in Zarina a heroine full of complex, intellectual and emotional layers as one who resolves in her character the contradictions of traditionalism and modernism. She is from a sophisticated, but orthodox upper class family, so she feels uncomfortable when introduced to Ashoke's friends in New York. Margo, one of the friends of Ashoke learns that Zarina is his fiance; so she openly asks Ashoke in the party:

Is that Indian girl his fiance, she screamed.  
Is that true, Ashoke, why did not you feel  
me? It is okey with me honey, but you  
might at least have told me you had new  
girl.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile another girl teases Zarina when she asks her whether she has any objection if she borrows her husband for a while. Romen Basu suggests that the attitude to sex in the West is a little too free and uninhibited. Having the impact of those Western ways, Ashoke makes no secret of his 'Nymphaean needs'. He gives too much importance to sex in his life. He expresses

these feelings to Zarina:

You have not understood the fundamentals of life. Any marriage which is based on plans of how many children, how big a house, how big a bank balance, where to vacation ends with doom. Marriage is for love and love alone. You do not have to rag your husband for your dreams. If there is love everything falls into a pattern. Things sort themselves out.<sup>7</sup>

Zarina is shocked by this theory of Ashoke and reacts to it saying that hugging, kissing and making love seems to be the sole business of Ashoke. It is a school kid's idea of love Ashoke believes in. He never bothers about the criticism of the people even. He is unaware of her hopes, dreams and wishes. He is happy with Latin rhythms, fast car driving, mere enjoyment in life. He laughs and criticizes if Zarina reads out a quotation from the writings of a famous poet or a philosopher. Being a practical man, Ashoke feels unconcerned about philosophical or intellectual world. Instead of burning oneself in books, he advocates to fight against the odds in life. Sentimentalism, softness, and emotionalism do not have any place in his world. Boldness and hardness are the prime necessities of today.

Confrontation with the West for the discovery of

one's own country and of one's own self is not an infrequent motive of contemporary Indo-Anglian novels. Hence coming after a sojourn abroad and the consequent readjustment and revaluation of the terms in which to face life constitute major issues in a number of these novels. Of course, the level on which this revaluation takes place varies considerably. The recurrence of the theme itself is significant. In this novel *Your Life to Live*, of Romen Basu, the protagonist Ashoke returns home after a period of time spent abroad. In each case, the protagonist's awareness of two cultures intensifies his concern with his own identity. He is in search of his true image, torn between the traditional values he has absorbed from childhood and the new values which his education abroad has bestowed upon him. Ashoke, after a long departure from New York to his native place India, feels the difference between the two cultures. He is anxious to change everybody's life at home. But no one accepts his preaching. After a great loss in religious sphere, Ashoke turns to social reforms.

Returning to the same environment at night he would find the difference as wide as nature. The love that roused the passion and generated the harshness, brought tenderness under the dim kerosene lamps. In that misty light, the meagre meal was made with tenderness.<sup>8</sup>



Zarina's character differs from that of Ashoke. Zarina snaps her emotional ties with her parents by accepting the truth, reality in life. She is truly liberated to choose a course of life, implementing her own decision rather than to betray herself by handing herself in the arms of Ashoke. She is feminist in the real sense, for she faces the odds in her life courageously. Readers are dazed by her inner growth and extraordinary powers. Though her condition appears to be pathetic, she is sturdy enough in her new faith. Romen Basu displays great perceptions in delineating Zarina's character with deep sympathy and understanding. A truly emancipated and independent, intelligent woman. Although Ashoke is an agnostic, he would resist his children being brought up as Muslim. Zarina is not very religious herself but she feels that her children should be taught about religion.

I would like our children to have some faith in religion. I would like them to be Muslim since you do not believe in your own faith.<sup>9</sup>

Ashoke insists that his son will be Hindu and not Muslim. Here we see the contradiction in the character of Ashoke who, as a Western-educated man, should be expected to be secular-minded. But Romen Basu suggests here that the Western values seems to be all right in the West, but in the East they are not fully practicable. In other words, Ashoke has double standards as

regards Modernism, whereas Zarina, inspite of her orientation, has truly absorbed modernism in practical life. And Ashoke is revealed as a weaker character compared to Zarina. Indian society has been under the strong grip of religious traditions and customs for ages. The relationship between husband and wife rests firmly on the foundation of religious rites. According to the Hindu religion, marriage is not merely a contractual agreement but a sacrament, solemnised by religion. The husband takes an oath before the sacrificial fire in the presence of the purohit and other Brahmins that he would not transgress the prescribed limits in Dharma, Artha and Karma. The woman on her part, enjoys to treat her husband as her lord, master. This conception of marriage has undergone radical changes with the impact of education on women and the important role she has been playing in society consequently. The process of urbanization and modernization has placed new economic and social responsibilities on women and given them a new status. M.K. Naik comments on this marriage system:

In order to continue to remain firm and strong (marriage) must be inter-woven with stronger bonds such as family traditions and loyalties and commonly shared spiritual and cultural ethos.<sup>10</sup>

Zarina is a new and vigorous version of modern emancipated

woman, and intellectual partner of her husband, sharing his ideas. Zarina's character is more complex than Ashoke's. She is a departure from the norm and yet she has to merge her personality in her husband's. Romen Basu seems to suggest that the typical Indian woman will never be too Westernized to be in a constant conflict with her norm. It is difficult for Zarina to cope with the conservative Bengalis, the family of Ashoke. Zarina is welcomed by her father-in-law on the airport where he sprinkles the Ganges water on them and gives them Indian sweets. The father comments:

We Bengalis do not like Western ways. Our conservation is our strength. Every man in Bengal is proud of his heritage. What Bengali thinks today, India thinks tomorrow that is so true even today. After all, it was Bengal who produced sons like Bankim, Ghose, Tagore and many leaders who fought for Indian independence.<sup>11</sup>

Romen Basu wants to show a clear picture of Western culture through the conservatism of Zarina's friend Matilda. Matilda characterizes Western culture as progressive, yet directionless. The Western society has become so merchandised that they do not have any time to spare for the glory of God or for knowing the grandeur of the Universe. Zarina has an extraordinary gift of being able to make people feel at ease in her presence. Soon they have such a busy social life. It is difficult to

be alone even one night in a week. The complex character of Ashoke is revealed when he has observed in the West how woman fought for equal rights. In India, he finds that poor women take for granted that they have a voice in matters which they feel important. There are arguments, quarrels but always there are happy endings. Ashoke is annoyed by the behaviour of typical Indian husband, who never gives due respect to his wife and comments:

Why did men feel threatened by giving women their due respect? How could one develop any deep relationship without dependence on one another?<sup>12</sup>

This comment of Ashoke is contradictory to his character, for Ashoke has been an independent operator throughout his life. But he cannot resist his feelings when he sees Zarina speaking freely with Harold and smoking a cigarette; and naturally he reacts immediately -

You lend yourself to any man who just smiles at you.<sup>13</sup>

There is a misunderstanding between Ashoke and Zarina. When two people get most from one another in sharing, there is a certain kind of joy. After a long departure Ashoke's heart

is craving for Zarina. She is his fulfilment. She occupies his mind with ecstasy. At last, when both come close after long separation, Ashoke shuts the light and reasons that he has learned to look into the soul rather than into the face. This drastic change in the character of Ashoke, a total Westerner, is the climax of this novel. Skilfully, Romen Basu has twisted and given a different turn to the ending of the novel. An impression is created that it is spiritual rather than physical affinity that draws them together. In this sense, the ending of the novel is not satisfactory. It seems to be intended to give a twist to the story and seems to satisfy the needs of the Indian sensibility. This is aesthetically unsatisfactory. It is typical of a "well-made-novel", to develop situations so as to give it an emotional turn in the end. *Your Life to Live* has only flashes of convincing reality. The experiences of both Ashoke and Zarina in the West have all the ingredients of a romantic novel. The domestic life of a Bengali life is traditional and as such realistic. But the requirement of the formula novel contains any possibility of deeper psychological investigation.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Basu, Romen. *Your Life to Live*, 1972, Calcutta, p. 47.
- 2 Ibid., p. 59.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid., p. 98.
- 5 Ibid., p. 86.
- 6 Ibid., p. 100.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid., p. 155.
- 9 Ibid., p. 86.
- 10 Naik, M.K. *Aspects of Indian Writing in English*, 1985, Delhi.
- 11 Basu, Romen. *Your Life to Live*, 1972, Calcutta, p. 123. p.
- 12 Ibid., p. 76.
- 13 Ibid., p. 93.