

Tilottama MAJUMDER
Extract from the novel *Denudation*

Translated from the Bengali original *PRAHAAN* by
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I



“DON'T kill me! Please don't kill me! I am your friend... am I not? How can you kill me, Sujoy? Are you really going to kill me? Ahh...”

The wall behind rushed up to meet his back. Slogans on democracy and socialism were scrawled along the length of the wall and meandering tracks left by dripping paint disappeared into the two-foot gutter at the bottom. Even the gutter advanced on him menacingly and the ground beneath his feet retreated with extreme hostility, denying hope. All he could do was cry out, “Ahh...ahh...”

“We have known each other since our school days. Tell me...isn't that true? Am I not your childhood chum? How can you kill me? Sujoy...please, listen to me. I will move away, I will leave the party. I swear...I swear on my mother! Oh dear!! Sujoy, please...spare a thought...what will my mother do without me? Agh...ahh...uck...”

And that was where words deserted him. After that, all that his mortal body released were some meaningless garbled utterings, mechanical sounds emitted in the moments prior to annihilation. The gurgling sounds were accompanied by blood which spurted forth and flowed into the gutter below to mingle with its infested water. His lifeless body slid down the wall, his back grazing against its roughness; his feet lifted off the ground which had long ago betrayed his trust; and, he slowly slipped into the gutter, his body an inert slumped mass. The dirty water flowed over and around his

slit throat. The same throat which had been his instrument of expression for so long. His eyes were still wide open. The same eyes which had for so long identified friends and enemies. Sujoy Banerjee still remembered how, just before the murky water drowned those eyes, he clearly saw tears trickling down from them. Yes, Pulak was crying.

Was he really crying? It remained a mystery yet. Why? Why would Pulak cry? For his mother perhaps. Huh! No one cried for his mother in the instant before death. Not even for his wife or children. At that moment, a man cried only for himself!

But wait...maybe it was not so. Not at all. Perhaps, one forgot about himself. 'Me' and its existence ceased to exist. All that rushed through the mind was 'them'. One only thought of those near and dear ones with whom his life was entangled, who made up his memories, who made his life worth living. Perhaps one realised the depth of this feeling only when at the threshold of death. Hence, the tears. The pain of eternal estrangement could be felt only by a person who is faced with it; and it was a pain beyond description. The anxious anticipation of death was manifested through the welling up of the eyes. Death—an end to everything, ceasing to exist in every sense. How piercingly painful was the feeling of being wiped out? Tears were possibly the only way of its expression. But all in vain. One could only hope to express...and perhaps fail. Because, another person, who was not in a rendezvous with death at that moment, could only watch and try to feel a meagre sliver of that pain. In all probability, he would not even be able to understand it or believe in it. He would be unable to trust the tear-streaked expression of agony. He could very well think that those tears, which were flowing in tandem with the ebbing life, were not really a conscious expression of any inner feeling; they were nothing but a physiological reaction of the dying

body. Could these tears then be associated with crying? Were they not similar to the tears which flowed when dust pricked the eyes?

So today, like the many times before, Sujoy Banerjee could not ascertain whether Pulak had truly been crying. Perhaps, the only person who could clear this doubt was the dead Pulak. Or, could he? Did the brain function in all its capacities till the final moments of death so that a clear description of feelings was possible by the dying? From amidst these thoughts, Sujoy asked, "Pulak, where are you now?"



The car screeched to a sudden halt. Propelled by inertia, Sujoy jerked forward in his seat. Manjil gnashed his teeth and cursed, "Buggers! These bastards are born to die!"

Sujoy looked up to find a little boy just about a couple of inches away from one of the wheels. He looked about four years old, was dirty and near to naked. His eyes almost popped out and he gulped a few times while breathing heavily. Sujoy's gaze was drawn to the boy's throat. Used bus tickets were strewn all around and the boy quickly busied himself collecting those. As Sujoy rolled down his window, he heard a female voice.

"He could have died. Can't you be more careful while you are driving?"

Sujoy traced the voice to a girl on the road while Manjil retorted, "How is it my fault? He flung himself in front of the car."

"Come here." The girl started to pull the boy away by his arm but he twisted free and took to his heels. He spared a quick glance backwards and then kept on running. As if the car could again try to run him over. As though, he was another Pulak

Biswas – or, for that matter, some other being – who needed to escape the moment he saw Sujoy Banerjee in the car for fear of losing his life again.

Manjil drove on and Sujoy sat back comfortably in the rear seat losing himself in his thoughts. While being driven around by Manjil, Sujoy preferred to surrender his well-being into Manjil's hands and weave various thoughts—some logical, some scattered, some self-motivating and others self-destructive, some perhaps without reason.

Sujoy pondered...another Pulak. Another Pulak Biswas. He had already come across many of them. Countless Pulaks in the place of one. It pleased him to note that the Pulaks were back in this world. And, like every other day, he shrugged off the feeling of melancholy and gazed at the crowd of lives. He liked human beings, innumerable human beings. As he rolled up the window, he recalled how Pulak's left hand had been raised. No, not to attack but in an attempt at self-defence. Pulak did not try to retaliate. But why? Well, there could be various reasons. Not far from them, had stood the alert Jayshankar who would unfailingly deliver Sujoy from any untoward or unexpected situation. Or, perhaps, the dagger in Sujoy's hands had filled him with such dread that he did not dare think about retaliation. Also, retaliation usually came with prior mental preparation. And, for Pulak, the concept of Sujoy raising a dagger to him was so implausible that he was not prepared to counter-attack. Pulak was confident that Sujoy Banerjee was capable of raising only a pen or a paint brush. But, even the lowliest creatures have an inborn inclination towards self-defence. Had Pulak been devoid of even that?

No! Sujoy shook his head and concluded, the hand was surely raised out of an inborn tendency to attempt self-protection. But yes, a feeble attempt, no doubt. A while ago, he had witnessed the same and it once again reminded him of Pulak. And, as was the case with him, such incidents always drew him

closer to the past. If an incident occurred in the present then it remained just that but when an incident recurred from the past, it snowballed into a prominent event, demanding more attention and analysis. It was in human nature to scrutinise the causes, workings and associations of such events to arrive at conclusions and decisions. Past experiences always contributed towards this in a considerable manner. Knowledge born out of experience shaped a man's present and future. In fact, a man's past often brought him to a mirror which gave him the opportunity to converse with himself.

In Sujoy Banerjee's life, his past was as active as his present. His past was also extremely responsive because it sprang to life at the slightest provocation from the present. For instance, just a while back, when the car was stuck in traffic near Aurobindo Setu, he looked out of the window and noticed an irate mother spanking her daughter on the roadside. The girl was about four but it was hard to home in on the mother's age. Prolonged struggle with penury had given her body a battered look, and beneath it was buried an enraged mother's real age. Could this little girl be Pulak reborn? Perhaps...perhaps not. Let us say, that little boy he saw earlier and this little girl being beaten before him now were both born of Pulak. Let us say, for argument's sake, that there were many such tortured, poverty-stricken and despairing humans around. Then, was it true...could it be true that one person's soul could divide to create numerous human beings? Could one death be the reason behind many births, like in the fairy tales where a thousand devils were born from a single drop of blood lost by one?

The little girl stood there with a head of rough, unkempt hair. Her filthy frock, a few sizes too big on her, repeatedly slid down her shoulders. But for her mother, she had a negligible and weak existence amidst this swell of human beings.

Her mother was taking the rod to her well and hard. Perhaps the girl had been nagging about something, craving some food...perhaps her love for a handful of some roadside treat had landed her in this predicament. Or she could have been naughty, quite expected of a child her age. But her mother, bogged down by poverty, was in no mood to indulge her nagging or make little of her mischief.

Mother and daughter stood before a soil-filled flower tub on the pavement from which a couple of flowering stalks reared their heads. The mother first slapped her daughter and then gave her a rough shove which landed her hard against the flower tub. Then the mother kicked the little girl in her belly, flinging her farther—as if she wanted to squash the tender belly with her foot. She grasped a handful of the child's hair and banged her head against the ground. The girl was crying with her mouth wide open...or, at least, she was trying to cry. Her breath was probably stuck in her throat due to the pain. For quite a while she could not close her mouth or utter a sound. It appeared, she couldn't breathe in enough air to make a sound. She was caught in a strange stranglehold, neither able to inhale nor exhale. And then she was racked by the heartless hiccups which always followed such a bout of choked crying!

The mother continued to rain frenzied blows on her daughter. The girl curled up on the ground in pain, her laboured breath mingled with hiccups. She supported her sprawled body on her right elbow and held up her left hand in a weak show of self-defence against a ferocious assault. Her eyes brimmed with tears as her mother again lifted a foot.... Sujoy closed his eyes, perhaps the only way to detach himself from the cruel scene. He rolled up his window, eyes still tightly shut. Many sounds bounced off the glass windows of his air-conditioned car and everything conspired to remind Sujoy of

his daughter, Sree, and wife, Ragini. Ragini and Sree—mother and daughter. Surprisingly, such cruel assaults had no place in their relationship. But why? Perhaps due to the absence of paucity. Was poverty the only thing that could taint the invaluable relationships in this world with assault? No, not really...jealousy could. So could rivalry, and hero-worship... and an extremely insensitive form of selfishness.

In a flash, the familiar posture of self-defence bounded back into his mind. And with it, followed thoughts of Pulak Biswas.

Pulak, you are my childhood chum. We have played together, run through the fields side by side and dressed our kite strings together. We have sat patiently by the pond in each other's company, waiting for fish to bite our baits. Once you split my lip with a blow...another time, I punched you so hard you needed stitches in your cheek. We have been at our worst and at our best with each other. During our exams we helped each other on the sly. We were friends. Yes, we were friends till the day our political leanings differed...till the day each developed his own principle and charted out his own path. Oh Pulak, can different political beliefs truly turn friends into foes?

Rubbish! All this hue and cry about principle and opinion was meaningless. The only thing of any relevance was gaining control and setting a goal. One had to set himself a goal to serve his own interests and then reach it by hook or by crook. He had to overcome all obstacles and take every situation by the scruff of its neck. All competitors had to be bettered and left behind. The way you, Pulak, wanted to deal with me. The way I have dealt with you. We were neither enemies nor friends. We were rivals. And rivalry is filthier and more ferocious than enmity.

"Dada, where to now?"

Sujoy jerked out of his reverie. Had he nodded off? Manjil had stopped the car beside Tala Park. He was not familiar with Rani Harshamukhi Road. Sujoy gave him directions and settled back. This was the first time he was visiting Dibyangana at her home. His art dealer friend, Anjan Kar, had told him about Dibyangana. For that matter, Anjan too had never been to Dibyangana's house. He had only kept himself informed about her. Every year, Prajit Mukherjee, an artist, hosted an exhibition of his students' paintings and till a couple of years back, Dibyangana's paintings had captivated Anjan.

It was not necessary for an art dealer to also be a connoisseur of art but yes, it did help the business manifold if he could be one. The business did not only involve trading of the work of established artists. Fresh talent had to be identified and promoted. If one could be the prologue to a new artist's success story then he could rule over and benefit from that artist's work for years. Also, the manner of trading differed for the works of established and new artists. The works of renowned artists brought in profit but also required more investment. Compared to that, trading the works of upcoming artists was faster moving. There were many buyers in the market, with easy cash at their disposal, who were not too bothered about the artist's claim to fame. Besides, the works of new artists were in much demand for interior decoration purposes, especially in offices.

Hence, it paid to have a trained eye in business. Anjan Kar was blessed with it and made every effort to continuously develop it. His trained eyes had seen the promise of a bright future in the paintings of Dibyangana. Of course, it was a different story that for the past two years Dibyangana had not attended Prajit Mukherjee's classes. Her in-laws were of

the opinion that no one got rich painting pictures and this hobby was nothing but an expensive indulgence.

Those who were of such mind-set always had a retort ready to demean the success of anyone who has made a name. Along with pointing out that those celebrities 'were different' these people did not forget to add an insulting line about some shortcoming or the other in their persona or appearance.

Dibyangana's in-laws' place was home to many such discerning experts and they had not noticed any promise in Dibyangana. Hence, she had parted ways with art.

Sujoy learnt these details from Anjan. Anjan heard everything from Prajit. And Prajit was briefed by none other than Dibyangana herself. Over the telephone. She called infrequently, when an opportunity presented itself, because at her in-laws' place she did not enjoy the liberty of dialling a number at her will.

Sujoy had asked Anjan whether Dibyangana had given up painting for good. Anjan replied, "Possibly...not sure. But even if she doesn't pick up a brush for two years, it would hardly make a difference. I have seen her and I have seen her work. That kind of talent does not burn out so easily. You go ahead and ask her to paint for you."

So now, Sujoy was on his way to Dibyangana's house. As a successful businessman, Sujoy nurtured some basic tactics. For example, before facing an unfamiliar situation or an unknown person, he liked to arm himself with as much information as he could gather. He did the same for Dibyangana, and in this too, Anjan proved the worth of their friendship by helping him out. For this Sujoy was grateful to Anjan. Also, it assured him that Anjan's and his lines of business were absolutely different. What Sujoy Banerjee dealt in was ancient, in demand and eternally tarnished. Hosting art exhibitions had been a hobby with him. Just a hobby,

though a fair amount of selfish motive was tied with it. And it had developed into a genuine interest gradually.

Dibyangana was around twenty-three or -four. She had lived with her elder brother and his wife after her parents passed away, till she was married off. Her brother was a clerk of lower order in the Food Corporation of India and his wife a dedicated housewife. Her father too had been a government employee, working in the life insurance sector. He had managed to build them a house in Amtala, Howrah and put aside enough for Dibyangana's wedding. It was courtesy the same money that she was now enjoying domesticity as the legally wedded wife of an architect. Her in-laws were quite supercilious and at the same time conservative. Somewhat unrefined too. All they cared for was food, wealth and security. They preferred to regard Dibyangana as a docile and amicable girl without much in the quarters of personality. And, they firmly believed that a peaceful household was only possible when the women in it were timid, cordial and not prone to rebellious behaviour. Besides motherhood, women should not harbour other dreams. Besides the welfare of their husbands, they should not aspire for anything else. Furthermore, they should not complain even in the direst of situations.

Dibyangana's talents began and ended with painting. But her in-laws were oblivious to this fact. So there must have been something else in her which had impressed them. Some attribute which landed an architect husband in her basket. Well, appearance may be taken into account here since, even today, girls are valued against their looks in the marriage market. But, what else? Of course...the seventy-five thousand worth dowry which came from the money left by her father. No, let's not call it dowry. Assistance, perhaps? By calling it dowry we would be affronting the laws of the land. So, assistance it shall be.

Artist Dibyangana was not too keen on marriage in return for lending assistance. But she did not have another option. Her sister-in-law was already over the edge trying to keep this art-crazy girl in control. So, Dibyangana chose this very easy way of freeing her brother and his wife from their responsibilities.

So...? Sujoy Banerjee initiated a conversation with himself.

“So...I can very well plan the killing of Dibyangana. If my art exhibition is successful then the dead artist within me will surely be pacified, besides other things.... But how to get Dibyangana? Her in-laws were sure to object; hence, the plan needs to include a way to dissolve those objections. But what way? Well...the same way I take care of all the obstacles which bar my way in business. By identifying the Achilles' heel of the opponent.”



UPON Sujoy Banerjee's orders, Manjil got out of the car and pressed the calling bell by the door. Sujoy rolled down his window and watched. It was a two storied, box-like house, stripped of all appeal, whatsoever. The veranda had a grille at the front from floor to ceiling. What could one possibly call this house?

Yes, it was a house. Not a home. Why not? What crime had this house committed to be ineligible for the title 'home'?

A house was simply a shelter. Four thick walls with a roof on top. There was no need to care for or decorate it. Nails could be hammered into walls haphazardly and household paraphernalia hung from them without a care. Everything from clothes, pictures of gods, photographs of deceased family members to mementos collected on the odd holiday found place on these walls. Perhaps a photograph taken in Darjeeling or a fire-spewing monstrous, yet sacred, dragon from Bhutan. The beds were raised on bricks, the number of bricks varying according to need for space under. The peeling paint on the walls was ignored till wedding bells rang in the family. No one spared a thought for the fading curtains or the moss gathering in profusion on the terrace. The damp and musty bathroom sported myriad patches. The soap lay melting in its wet and limp wrapper in the absence of a proper soap-case. At the door corners, there were small mounds of soil dug up by the ants. And termites created their own network of poisonous abode on the walls, gnawing the foundation hollow.

This was a house. An everyday necessity. Like answering the call of nature. A home, on the other hand, involved mental peace and heart's content. A home was set up keeping aesthetics in mind. Various items, carefully collected, occupied positions of honour in a visually pleasing manner. The curtains hung in perfect folds. The paint on the walls, the design on the floor, the furniture and the upholstery complemented each other. Even the shoes had their own place of rest. In a home, the sight revelled in serenity.

So, Sujoy concluded, Dibyangana's in-laws' place was a house. He tried to take in the house with a scrutinising glance. But the time was dusk; moments before, darkness descended in a hurry. Soon the sky would darken, accompanied by the blowing of conch shells—the sound floating in the air. By the houses and along the roadside, the dark blue of the sky would mingle with these sounds. At this point, time stood still for a moment. To ponder whether it should allow the sun to set. And then, inevitably, it let the sun set. The decisions of time never changed. And with every passing day, time swallowed up a sliver of the present.

Sujoy Banerjee looked at his hands. The smooth, taut skin was witness to his thirty-seven rewarding years on earth. When he looked in the mirror, a confident face lined with intelligence, experience and honesty looked back at him. His face appeared as pure as the pink-tinged, fragrant calamine lotion. And, truly, Sujoy Banerjee was yet to touch sin. He was a pure and honest man living a life of solitude. Suddenly, his gaze fell on a little boy of four. Or, was he five? Could be six. Unclothed, except for a loose and tattered pair of pants, the boy walked along twirling the rickety stick he held.

Pulak! You? Again?

There were numerous Pulaks roaming around him. On some days, Sujoy happened to meet quite a few of them. The

real Pulak had perhaps been delivered from his sins. Hence, now he was visible in all children around the age of four or so. Presently, all these Pulaks were living the Oedipus complex, having crossed the phases of lust and narcissism. They were gradually retrieving their selves.

Passing through a naïve auto-erotic stage, narcissistic stage and currently through Oedipus complex. Living in the sinless after-state of naïve lust.

What a wonderful elucidation! Whether it was palatable, was a different issue. Sujoy did not have the time to ponder on that. He was truly blessed with superior perceptions! Hence, he was almost unique as a pure and sensitive social personality. His sub-conscious mind revelled in this confidence and his conscious mind had never touched any form of sin. But yes, he was surrounded by sinners. Weren't there any pure and virtuous people around? But then, what was the difference between pure and virtuous?

Pure...or, untouched by sins. And virtuous...or, one who had amassed purity. Kind of like the arrangement of negative and positive numbers with zero in the middle. Purity was a state of zero. Those who sinned along life's path, gradually travelled down the line of negative numbers. While the virtuous people's lives were brightened as they moved up the line of positive numbers.

In that case, who were the pure and who the virtuous around Sujoy Banerjee? Anjan Kar – though a businessman – was a lover of art and a considerate connoisseur too. Hence, he was virtuous! Jayshankar was surely pure—he was untouched by sin. Incidentally, sin never touched man. Man touched sin and in the process became tainted. Sin dwelled in its own realm, it did not pursue anyone. Man was the one who succumbed to the attraction of sin and chased it. In fact, when man touched sin he actually tainted

it. So, both man and sin were reciprocally contaminating agents of destruction!



"Who are you looking for?"

A grating voice jerked Sujoy Banerjee back to reality. He heard Manjil ask promptly, "Is this Dibyangana-di's residence?"

A lady's face stuck out through the open window along the staircase. Patches of light and darkness settled over the uneven planes of her crumpled face. Her enquiring glance was full of irrevocable darkness.

"Yes, this is Dibyangana's in-laws' place. Why? What's the matter?"

Manjil now looked at Sujoy who was already getting out of the car.

"*Namaskar*. I am Sujoy Banerjee. I'd like to meet madam to discuss about some pictures."

"Picture? Whose picture? Bouma's?¹ But why?"

The lady appeared glued to the window. Sujoy realised it would take a while to get around her and asked Manjil to park as much to the side as possible. The name of the road belied its actual width and condition. By then, the lady had finally exercised some control over suspicion and opened the door to come and stand in the grilled veranda. The grill door, of course, had a big lock hanging on it. Her dyed hair hung loose, she wore a black sleeveless blouse and a pair of heavy gold earrings, besides other jewellery. Her eyes were thickly outlined with kohl and after inspecting Sujoy, Manjil, the car and, of course, Sujoy's confident demeanour, she unlocked the door and invited him inside. The living room was devoid

¹ Generic informal term of address for 'daughter-in-law' in Bengal.

of artistic touch, just as Sujoy had imagined some moments back. Without paying much attention to any invitation to take a seat that the lady might have offered, Sujoy unhurriedly sat down on the sofa. After all, he was there for a discussion which would take time. He heard the same grating voice hollering, "Are you there? Come here... Bouma, can you hear me? Come and see who is here...!"

Her voice carried traces of displeasure and disregard. Perhaps the irritation was due to the fact that a gentleman had arrived, in a car, to meet her daughter-in-law, and talk about some pictures. In a way, this unwarranted attention could very well be a blow to their honour. Sujoy's thoughts travelled along those lines and he became engrossed in them.

A little while later, Dibyangana entered the room and greeted him. She was thin, shrivelled up, yet pretty. Sujoy stood up and returned the greeting. Then he asked the girl to take a seat and sat down in the adjacent sofa, maintaining respectable distance. Sujoy noticed that the simply dressed, unadorned girl's beauty was marked by a faint streak of sindoor. As though, she had applied it quite flippantly, at the command of others. Her cheeks were touched with pallor, her lips devoid of colour and her fingers long and thin like paint brushes. But, the deep, dark pools of her eyes stood out as most prominent amongst her features. Slightly turbid. Like a mirror on which unwanted dust had collected. Sujoy Banerjee started by introducing himself, as a preamble to all that he had to say, "I am Sujoy Banerjee. I am here to talk about your paintings."

"Yes, but I..."

"Art exhibitions and trading of paintings are my hobby. Not a business...not at all. I have been doing this every year for the past seven to eight years."

"But I have never heard..."