

Subraj SINGH

An Excerpt from Part Two of
THE REBELLION TRILOGY: MASQUE
(An Experimental, Postcolonial Play)

Dramatis Personae

Rhona – a ghost, deceased mother of Kai and Kita

Chief Kano – chief of the tribe, blind, father to Kai and Kita

Kai – a young Amerindian man

Kita – his sister, a warrior

Annabel – a white woman, captured by the tribe

Mara – an Amerindian healer, in love with Kai

Tanna – a mute warrior

Lady Radcliffe – a young white woman, owner of a plantation

Mammie – a slave on Lady Radcliffe’s plantation

} after *Laugh of the
Marble Queen*

Children – Young Kai, young Kita, young Tanna

Villagers/Warriors/Europeans

Caiman – a monstrous and supernatural caiman that lives in the river close to the village

Fairmaid¹

Darkness – the sounds of howling winds and the rustling of trees is heard. Music – a strange mix of drumming, contemporary rap, flutes and jazz from the 60s. Rhona is onstage. Blood drips from her dress. A circle of blue light flickers at the back of the stage. Rhona escapes it and runs to the front of the creek. There is a pause as she inhales deeply and faces the audience directly.

RHONA: Let me tell you a story. A ghost story... I am the ghost, dead as history...

Before the white man; before the black man; before the chinese and the coolies, there used to be just we, the first people, living in this forest... But then... A night... A night black like my hair, is when they came... Glowing with they white skin in the blackness of the night... Murdering in the blackness of the night...

(A burst of sound and action as a great war commences all around Rhona. European soldiers rush from one side and Amerindian warriors from the other. They fight – with guns, knives, spears, arrows and bows. Warriors shoot arrows from the tree. Soldiers carry off Indian women. Just as suddenly, there is a tableaux).

RHONA: *(weaving around the frozen people)* I am dead. Did I tell you? Yes? No...no... You must know. Look here, where they shoot me, one time, two time... *(She points to two bullet holes in her chest, then covers her ears as two gunshots ring out).* AAHH! The pain! The pain! Pain like they slice open me head and fill it with white, white salt – stuffing it until all that salt had nowhere to go but to run out me eye, till is bare salt on my face, all on my lips, forever on my lips *(licking her lips)*. Is a curse, I think. Tasting this bitter, burning salt till I dead... But wait, I already dead. *(Laughs insanely)*.

(The battle rages on once more. Soldiers leap from the creek and on to the land, killing people. Again, just as suddenly, there is a tableaux).

My children... I never see they face again... The white men sink me body in the creek... Yesss... I sink down to the mud and I breathe the green water. The gunfire and smoke went killing the deer and the deer-like, and I swim down and hide between the lotus root. When they iron sword went cutting the roots of my people, I hide in the creek – with the water-spirit covering me – for eight days and eight nights...

(Spotlight on Rhona alone as she moves to the water's edge) All the fire on top of the water frighten me so much, with them flowers curling into ashes and the feathers from we head-dress flying away with the smoke... That frighten me more than the Caiman who swim with me, black tail cutting the water like one of them black slave-men slashing cane in the white man's fields... *(The silhouette of a caiman ripples through the water)*. The Caiman talk to me, on the eight night. He had teeth that gold like sunlight. He say to me...

CAIMAN: *(voice)*: Rhona... These white people killing you people and murdering you plants and smoking out all you animals...

RHONA: I couldn't say nothing, because was true, so I just cry and cry... Caiman watch me and smile he gold smile and he say...

¹ Fairmaid (Guyanese folklore) – half woman and half fish; mermaid-like beings that live in rivers and use their beauty to lure men to their demise

CAIMAN: *(voice)* Rhona...the water-mother will give you another chance. The water-mother will send you back...to unleash the mother-spirit fury on all the white men who think they could come here and destroy the forest and do as they please...

RHONA: And now, here I am... Returned, like a fairmaid from the river – thirsty for blood. White man, I am here now.

CHIEF KANO: *(as lights rise on the entire set, holding a bowl of smoking herbs – inhaling, unable to see Rhona but aware of her presence)* And where exactly are you?

RHONA: *(looking around wildly)* Here. Home. I am home... I feel it. But where the trees? Where all the trees?

CHIEF KANO: *(gesturing)* The trees are all here, like always. Watching us, and waiting.

RHONA: I can't see them. They are not here! And who are you?

CHIEF KANO: You are blind and you see only what you want to see –

RHONA: *(seeing his eyes, scornfully)* I am blind?

CHIEF KANO: Mad woman...

RHONA: Show your face!

CHIEF KANO: This is my face. It is I, your husband, Kano.

RHONA: *(stunned)* You speak with his voice...but I don't recognize your face. You don't even look like somebody from my tribe. That is not my husband's face.

CHIEF KANO: Whose face is it then?

RHONA: *(rushing to him, observing and touching his face)* Whose face is your thief's? This is not your face! It is a face from the future! *(Observing the modern set)* What is this? How do you get this? How? *(Pointing to his jacket)* And you even dress like them, like those from the future!

CHIEF KANO: *(sitting down wearily)* I dress like I always dress. My dear –

RHONA: No! No! *(A pause as she withdraws herself from him. Cautiously, she moves in again).* If you are Kano, then you must listen to me... I have seen the future! I have seen it!

CHIEF KANO: And?

RHONA: *(beat, moving to the lamp)* What is this?

CHIEF KANO: The bonfire, Rhona.

RHONA: *(moving to the chair)* And this?

CHIEF KANO: A trunk, to be used as kindling later...

RHONA: I... I don't understand. These things are from the future... I went there and we are not in it. *(Getting angry)* Our tribe is not in it! We are missing from the land, Kano! It is peopled with every person except us, the first people!

CHIEF KANO: Stop talking in riddles, my dear. You are not –

RHONA: I slither like a snake in the water of the creek and I went to the future... The future don't have no trees, like this place –

CHIEF KANO: But there are trees all around –

RHONA: *(panicking, low humming music introduces panels in the shapes of large buildings that move on to the set to create a cityscape. Rhona dodges and dances around the buildings as they move around her)* There are no trees in the future and we, we are long gone. I know the white man burn the trees to flush we out, but what happen to we? I see strange things there, strange things... People flying like birds and people moving like jaguars. People living in stone kingdoms in the sky. People like gods... I try to talk to them, to make them see me – but they did not. They did not. I scratch them and scream at them. But they walk past me, walking past the past, as if I was nothing but a ugly insect hiding on a tree trunk. All of them had faces like the one you wear now. But I could not find the faces of our people, Kano. We were not there. We were not there...

CHIEF KANO: *(as the city disappears)* Maybe you didn't look hard enough.

RHONA: *(angry, scoffs)* I cannot believe you is the father of my children. You are weak. You is nothing more than a hollow mask... At first when I look at you and see that whiteness in you eye, I thought you cry the bitter salt-tears like me...that the blackness you live in would remind you of what they did, of how they pressed the flaming coal to your eyes and gave you a night to live in forever. But no, those are chips of marble in your eyes, a blindness where you yourself blind you to everything around you. You cannot see what I see –

CHIEF KANO: I am blind, and yet I see more than you –

RHONA: Did you see them deceiving you, lying to you, when you were trading with them and helping to catch their runaways –

CHIEF KANO: I saw them as people –

RHONA: They are monsters –

CHIEF KANO: YOU are a monster, Rhona! Look at yourself –

RHONA: They kidnapped our son! Our Kai! They raped our daughter, Kita! They raped –

CHIEF KANO: Kita is a warrior now, brave and beautiful, and impulsive like you –

RHONA: And Kai? Who get rip from we and tie up like a hog and turn into the white man's puppet, into his slave! Five years done gone and he still there, serving alongside the black man while you sit here and do nothing. You let your only son be turned into a –

CHIEF KANO: Kai has returned.

(Stunned silence).

RHONA: *(rushing to him, clutching his shoulders)* What you just say?

CHIEF KANO: Kai come back to us. He escape from the white man somehow and he made his way back to us, even though the village is now hidden... Our boy, Rhona. I don't know how he do it, but he come back.

RHONA: *(crying)* Kai come back? Kai, my sweet child? After all these years, he come back! You telling the truth to me, Kano? He free from them? How? Husband with the wrong face, Kai come back?

CHIEF KANO: Yes, but I need you to stay away from him...from him and Kita.

RHONA: *(pushing him away)* You must be a mad man! They are my children!

CHIEF KANO: You is nothing more than a memory to them now. They moving on with their lives, so let them. In the same way that people five hundred years from now do not see you, so too your children, five hundred years before them, will not see you...

RHONA: Kai is my son, and he will avenge me! The great spirits lead he back to me! How else can you explain it? He come back to clean this country of the white man's stain!

CHIEF KANO: *(gesturing around at Rhona's bloody dress and the bloodstained stage)* YOU are staining the land with blood wherever you go, Rhona. There is no hope for you... Spirits are terrible, yes, but you, a spirit of vengeance, is the worst of them all... We will have no part of it. Leave the white man alone. And leave the boy alone.

RHONA: *(growls)* Kai is a man now, not a boy! The spirits lead he back to we, and he will work for the spirits, for the great Caiman, and help to rid us of the white men! He will save us and he own children will have a place in the future! *(Looking at the blood around them)* You see blood and nothing but it. You know what I see? *(She leans down and traces the lines of blood)* I see my son's name written here, bright as the red of the Caiman's eye... *(She suddenly snatches Kano's spear from him and he almost falls)* You no longer need this... You, who has grown so old... I will go and find my son now... He need it more than you. He will tear they heart out and let they blood spray over the land so the trees will rise once again, wild and green, like the beard of the earth spirit...

CHIEF KANO: There are trees all around you –

RHONA: No! I am cursed to see the future and nothing else. Nothing!

CHIEF KANO: Then you are losing sight of many wonderful things, including yourself... It's a pity...how you've changed... You may sound like a fairmaid, but you have the silver blood of the kanaima² running through your veins...

RHONA: And the sharp teeth of a kanaima as well. Be warned, husband. *(Exits)*.

(Kita rushes in, breathing heavily).

KITA: *(stamping the ground with her spear)* My people, come out! Come out! COME OUT!

CHIEF KANO: What's the matter, daughter?

KITA: *(beckoning a few villagers who have arrived)* Things starting to look up again for this tribe! Kai, my brother, come back to we, and now the spirits have sent us a great gift!

MARA: *(with a basket of bloody rags, entering with some other villagers)* What is this gift, Kita?

² Kanaima (Guyanese folklore) – a creature from Amerindian myth; the spiritual embodiment of vengeance; shape-shifter and very dangerous

KITA: The gift of vengeance! *(She stamps her spear again and several other villagers join in)* Bring the bitch forward!

(Tanna and other warriors enter with Annabel, her lower lip bleeding, the bottom part of her dress torn to shreds).

ANNABEL: *(crying, fighting against the men)* Please! No! Please, let me go! Let me go! Please, please... Listen to me, listen! My husband's name is Richard Radcliffe; he's the doctor at the port! Doctor Radcliffe! Return me to him and he will pay you! He will give you whatever you want! I don't mean you any harm! I come in peace! Pleeeaaaseeee! No!

KITA: Be quiet!

ANNABEL: Oh god, please let me go! I will do anything! Anything! Oh! I...

(She faints and falls on to the couch as they all surround her).

MARA: I didn't know a white woman could be so loud... What she went saying?

KITA: How I must know? I look like I does talk the white man language? I rather die before I have that filthy pig-language in my mouth! *(Moving around the crowd, speaking to them)* She was most likely apologizing on behalf of the white man for killing all we family and friends...and taking we land...and poisoning the water...

TANNA: *Mimes, points to his mouth, makes growling noises.*

KITA: Yes, Tanna! The bitch might even be apologizing for cutting out you tongue, poor friend... *(Everyone begins to stamp their spears again).*

CHIEF KANO: *(observing Annabel's torn dress)* What happen to her dress?

MARA: Did you do something to her, Tanna?

TANNA: *Shocked, shakes his head and backs away from Annabel, mimes that he did nothing to her.*

CHIEF KANO: Where you find her, Kita, and why she here?

KITA: Why she here? She here so I can stick my knife into her pretty face! *(She pulls out her dagger and leans over Annabel. Everyone cheers).*

MARA: No! Don't –

CHIEF KANO: Stop this right now, Kita!

KITA: But father –

CHIEF KANO: What I send you to do?

KITA: She is a white woman! She –

CHIEF KANO: What I send you to do?

KITA: Her people killed my mother –

CHIEF KANO: WHAT I SEND YOU TO DO??

KITA: To hunt –

CHIEF KANO: To hunt, and now you come back here not with deer or hog but with a live white woman! You want us to eat she? Is that what you want we to do? Become the savages all of them think we are? I ask you to bring us sustenance and instead you offer me vengeance! You is a disgrace, Kita! And to think you would have been leader of this tribe if Kai didn't come back... I command you to return this woman to her home, AT ONCE! *(He storms out).*

KITA: I is a disgrace, he say...

MARA: *(touching her gently)* You know he didn't mean it... He just upset about this –

KITA: *(shrugging her off)* And why he upset? Is the death of a white woman not something to celebrate? *(Everyone murmurs in agreement).* We should let her go home and have she bend over to the white men and then create lil white children who will grow up and come to burn we great forest, we home, to the ground? *(Cheers, villagers screaming "No! No!").* Why we don't do to this white woman exactly what she and she people do to we? *(Cheering, cries of agreement).*

MARA: Kita, please think about this. She is a woman. She didn't do anything to you. I think your father is right. This is something the white man would do. Don't be like –

(Suddenly Annabel springs up from the couch, she snatches Tanna's dagger from his belt, grabs Mara from behind, and holds the knife threateningly under the girl's neck. There is a hush in the crowd as they watch the two women).

ANNABEL: *(crying)* Let me go...please... Please, I am begging you... I have to go...

MARA: Kita! Help me!

KITA: You see how treacherous they are? Even if you save they life, they will still cut your throat.

ANNABEL: *(trying to be strong)* I...I said...let me go!

MARA: *(as the knife presses against her neck)* Tanna! Help me!

ANNABEL: I am leaving! Don't follow me! DON'T! *(She waves the knife inexpertly at them as she and Mara move backwards, away from the crowd).*

MARA: *(terrified)* Kita, do something! Do something!

KITA: *(moving towards them)* Why?

ANNABEL: Don't come any closer or I will kill her! I will do it! I will –

KITA: *(smoothly)* You deserve this, Mara. You, who been in love with Kai since you was children and even after the white man took him –

ANNABEL: Stay away!

KITA: You still try to protect this white bitch–

MARA: Kita!

KITA: And now you beg me to save you? This is what does happen –

ANNABEL: No! Don't come closer –

KITA: WHEN YOU TRUST WHITE PEOPLE! *(With one swift motion she hits the dagger from Annabel's hand and pulls Mara away. Kita leaps on to Annabel, slamming her into the ground and slaps her hard).*

(The crowd grabs hold of Annabel and begin to attack her).

KITA: *(To Mara)* Do you see why she need to die?? You see?

MARA: She...she was scared! Anyone of we would have done the same!

KITA: You is a fool!

ANNABEL: LET ME GO!!! AAAAAHHHHH!!!

Tanna: *(mocking her screams)* AAAAHHH!!! AAAAAHHHHH!!!

(Rhona enters, attracted to the noise and commotion. No one can see her).

MARA: Why it so cold? You feeling that? Where that coldness coming from?

RHONA: *(looking around)* What you wearing? What all of you wearing? What happen to you face? Who face ya'll got on??

KITA: *(pulling Annabel from the fray)* Now, what should we do with you?

RHONA: *(seeing Annabel)* Daughter? My sweet girl... What happen to your face? It so different now... Daughter! Daughter! My Kita, is that really you? Could it be? So tall and strong... And who is that white woman??

KITA: *(as Rhona touches her face)* Maybe I should sink you in the river like the white man do to my mother after he kill she!

RHONA: *(as Kita forces Annabel's head down to the creek)* Yesss, Kita... My good daughter...yesss! *(She laughs maniacally).*

ANNABEL: Don't hurt me! Please! I am sorry! AAHHHHH!!! NNNOOOOO!!!

RHONA: Yesss... That fool, Kano, said you would not be able to see me... But you will feel me!

TANNA: *(as Rhona kisses him on the cheek)* Growls and snatches Annabel from the men. He pulls her away and opens his mouth wide in front of her, pointing to the space where his tongue use to be.

ANNABEL: *(horrificed)* AAHHH! No! Where is – Where is?? AAAAAHHHHH!!!

TANNA: *Pulls out his knife and begins to pry her lips open.*

MARA: *(as Rhona presses heavily on her back)* Y-yes... WHERE that coldness coming from? Yes, Tanna! No! Yes! Kill...kill her! *(Grabbing Annabel and ripping off the sleeve of her dress)* Do it!

RHONA: *(weaving around everyone, touching them one by one, leaping on people, forcing them to attack Annabel)* Yes, my people! Rise up! Rise up like a spirit from the water! Rise up like a caiman when he ready to attack! Take back your land! Defend your people! Kill the bitch! *(Laughs, then softly to Annabel)* I is the only fair maid here... Me! Only me!

MARA: *(catching herself as Rhona releases her)* No, no... I didn't – I didn't mean that! Stop it!

ANNABEL: Oh god, save me! Save me from them! GOD!!!

KITA: *(clutching Annabel by the throat, holding her so they are face to face)* Look at you... Like a fat white fly caught in the spider's web. What is it that you keep saying? Eh? You don't understand by now that none of we does speak you language, that we don't understand all you shouting and screaming? We don't even care to understand... *(Tracing the outlines of Annabel's lips)* The language of authority and power is all you know, since you born. Is the only language you know... Maybe one day I will pull that language from you mouth *(she leans and kisses Annabel on the lips)* and then it will be me language...me power and authority. Perhaps then everyone will listen to me, when I talk like you –

ANNABEL: *(whimpering)* I want to go home –

KITA: Sshh... Today I will put a new language in your mouth – the language of death. It easy *(she releases Annabel and places an arrow in her bow and leaps up into the tree)* all you got to do is scream.

(Kita keeps the arrow trained on Annabel as the girl cries and runs, fearfully moving all around trying to get out of aim).

MARA: *(suddenly)* Kai!

KAI: *(entering, wounded and bandaged around the middle)* What is this?

KITA: Brother, you looking better... Mara been tending to you well.

KAI: *(weakly)* What is going on here?

RHONA: *(rushing to him)* Kai? KAI! My son! My son! Why you too change your face? Why?

TANNA: *Holds up Annabel to Kai.*

KITA: We find a white woman...with a few others, prowling around we forest, chopping down we tree, eating we fruit, spitting in we water... The men get away, but we caught this one.

KAI: *(staring at Annabel, speaking to Kita)* What have you done?

KITA: *(handing Kai a spear)* You should be the one to do it, Kai... Think about how they keep you a prisoner for five years...

RHONA: Yes, my son... Do it. Do it for me. Do it for all of we...

KAI: *(taking the spear, moving towards Annabel)* What...? How...?

KITA: There are some who whisper that you not what you used to be, dear brother. That you accept the ways of the white man as you own, and that is the reason why you have not painted your face even though you are three days back. Prove to them all that you is still a man. That you is still one of

us. Show we that you is the brown, hard trunk of the tree and not the white, dead leaves that fall from it! Run her through with that spear!

RHONA: *(gently leading him along)* Yes, my son... Avenge me... Do it...

(Kai looks at Annabel. A pause. He drops the spear).

KITA: *(to Kai)* Coward! I will do it then! *(She beckons to Tanna who presses Annabel's head on to the chair. Kita picks up an axe, raises it over Annabel's head and swings).*

KAI: *(leaping forward and shielding Annabel with his body)* NO!

(A stunned silence. Kita is left with the axe in midair. Kai and Annabel hold on to each other tightly).

KAI: *(softly)* Annabel?

ANNABEL: *(sobbing in his arms)* Kai! Oh god, Kai! SAVE ME!

(A slow horrified silence as Kai and Annabel continue to embrace, then audible gasps of surprise and shouts of anger from everyone else. Blackout).

[...]