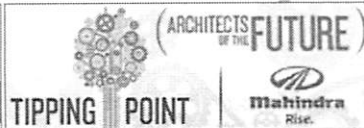


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CULTURE & SOCIETY

MIND THE G|A|P - Writers on Life, Art & Politics

Singing the blues

High tide. The waves are lapping the shore only 20 feet away from me. A man has come out of his house next door and is tossing small pieces of bread at the seagulls. In two or three hours, when the water retreats, my children will catch tiny sand crabs.

This house where I sit, a few white clouds framed by my window, is in Provincetown in Cape Cod, and belonged to Norman Mailer. It's now been turned into a writers' colony. Every year, during the summer, writers gather here. I have been teaching a workshop on finding your voice on the page.

A book that I read recently, and which represents the achievement of voice, is Toni Morrison's latest novel, *Home*. A short novel, hardly 150 pages long, it is the distillation of a lifetime of writing practice. Here is a voice that records violence in brief, brutal detail, and then, in a testament to human survival, finds honey in the rock.

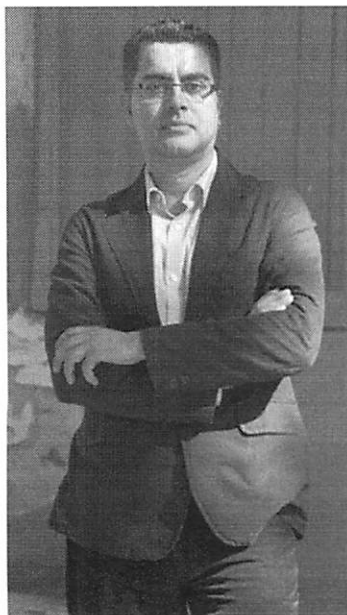


Photo: Shalendra Pandey

Frank Money is Morrison's protagonist in *Home*. He has survived, if only barely, the Korean War and come back to his segregated motherland. Each page reveals the shock of living in a society built on the exploitation of blacks. Reading the book at a time when the White House is occupied by a black president further heightens the pain of these discoveries instead of assuaging it. And yet, as steady as the cruel blows, are the comforts of community. The strength of conscience. The tender spark of love.

Piercing sorrow mixed with a sense of hope, or sometimes, only a keen appreciation of life's bittersweet taste. Isn't that the sublime truth of the blues?

We read, for instance, about an ordinary day in *Home*: the swallows who have brought back with them a light breeze, and the odour of sage growing at the edge of a yard, and a young woman, Cee, who is very sick, and is dwelling on sad, sweet songs. In reading that brief paragraph about Cee, it struck me that Morrison was

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Cinema & Me
'The Godfather' is the best fil about a family that I have

taking lyrical measurement of devastation and loss. But more than that, I wondered when was the last time I had encountered a voice like that in Indian writing.

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Every week I receive notice of new titles brought out in English by Indian publishers — some with titles so trivial that it'd be embarrassing to repeat them here — and the question that arises is about the ambition of such art. Where's the desire to touch on life's sufferings *and* its meanest pleasures?

If I had money to bet, I'd put it on our vernacular literatures. On reading Morrison, I am reminded of Ismat Chughtai, whose portrayal of tragedy is marked by tender intimacy with life's small consolations. Those familiar with other literatures — particularly from the South — would name many more contemporary voices.

How different they must sound from our Chetan Bhagat wannabes — and, in fact, from Chetan Bhagat himself!

The India in which Bhagat lives is a world removed from the one in which the UN Human Rights Council recently damned caste violence. Last month, I read this news report: "Atrocities against Dalit women include: verbal abuse, sexual epithets, naked parading, pulling out of teeth, tongue and nails, and violence, including murder. Dalit women are also threatened by rape as part of collective violence by higher castes."

In a handful of Indian writers who work in English, we find sophistication and subtlety. But we don't have a Premchand because no one writes about caste. Yes, an Aravind Adiga can win a Booker for representing caste in Bihar but like those with no experience of rural life, his writing can only present tabloid horror. His is a world without sweetness, and therefore, without real sadness.

When presenting the National Book Foundation Medal to Norman Mailer in 2005, Toni Morrison praised his "carnivorous intelligence" and his "huge and provocative talent". Yet, she reproved him in the same speech for his "almost comic obtuseness regarding women and race".

Our chaste authors will probably not write about caste; instead, in a language that is lyrical and attentive, rough and still rhapsodic, I hope Dalits sing the blues.

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about a family that have seen,' says Zoya Akhtar

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