

## 18 EXILE ROAD

***Rajanikanta Mohanty\****

***(Translated from Odia by Dr. Brajamohan Misra, Retd. Prof. in English)***

The Art College in front of his residence. Running in a rented house though. On its portico lie dozens of statues, finished and half -finished .Pasted on the easel a sheet of art paper ,colours, brush and a piece of cloth kept on the table nearby.

Nisith stares at it through window. At times, he jumps the gate and looks intently at the statues and artists engrossed in carving them . The artists turn images for him for a moment. On being conscious, he becomes quizzical, ‘why such feeling?’ He closes and opens his eyes then. The physical contours of the artists dispel his illusious..... no, they are human beings.

Close to the street, the art college catches every one’s eye, young and old. They stroll around such a creative world casually though. The statue of a maiden, robust and rotund, on the portico was their cynosure. Now shifted to a corner of the portico, wrapped completely. There stands another statue, a bird sucking the feat of a woman’s breast, while a baby below looks at her bereaved. The woman’s eyes are closed; she is virtually a mother. Whosoever sees the statue, is trans- ported to an empyrean beyond his physical existence. Students of the art college are never period bound, so has Nisith felt.

Period, time ....matter little for art. It may take minutes or months to carve the eye of a statue. Nisith gets topsy-turvyed when he cogitates such suprareal matters. At times he wakes up in dead of night, opens window and gazes at the interior of the art college.

That night, he saw in flood light an artist lost in work. The wall clock chimed 2 past 18. He sat on his bed quite bemused and enjoyed the artist’s absorption. Half an hour passed. Sabujima, his wife woke up and marked her husband’s ecstasy with a sence of amazement. She realized Nisith was beyond space and time. She nudged him. Nisith came down the earth and ejaculated, “Lo, art conquere slumber” But Sabujima forced him to sleep with a taunt, “So what? That is the affinity between art and artist. Not for you, please sleep now.”

- Fie, aren’t we stuff of art? You and I? Don’t we constitute such affinity? Nisith burst out with the deep emotion.

Dumb founded, Sabujima heaved a deep breath.

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One afternoon, Nisith was returning home for lunch. While crossing from the main road to the street road he halted and found four art students engaged in portraying persons passing by and gifting them their portraits. Nisith stayed and forgot the lunch. As he was late, his wife came on the road in search of him. Nisith saw her and came to senses. With long strides he reached home and stated, "O, such superb art and such excellent artists take away your hunger." His words struck Sabujima dumb. So many passerby pass by that way. They too see the statues. She herself also sees. Strange, she hasn't seen anyone forgetting hunger for hours together for the statues. Sabujima was confounded. The art college is just like any other college, she used to think. But her thought got hamstrung as she marked Nisith's unusual demeanour. What's his vision of the art objects? Now she thought of him deeper and deeper. She paid heed to his actions seriously.

Next morning an old beggar approached her for a handful of flattered rice. She went inside the house and returned with the food stuff prayed for. But where was the beggar? Taken aback, she turned her gaze all around. Her surprise doubled as she found the old beggar staring at the statue of a cowherd boy in front of the art college. The cowherd boy was playing a flute. Sabujima looked at it for a while and turned meditative. "How strange! The old man forgot his hunger for the statue!" Thus she went into her house.

The old beggar appeared again after a little while for alms, Sabujima came out with that plate of flattered rice and said. "You fellow! Forgot hunger for a mere statue so long!

Pat came the old man's reply, "O Mum, that's a hunger too, it reigns over physical hunger. The hunger has made me a beggar. Once I was a cowherd boy, playing the flute. A strange instrument indeed. It monopolises its player, though it sinks him in poverty." He completed with a deep breath.

Sabujima poured the plate into the old beggar's napkin. He departed not before casting a glance at the art college. Sabujima too looked that way like a fool. She failed to fathom its mystery, her thoughts notwithstanding.

These strange lives can create exactly as God creates. At time they surpass him too with a difference they can create also; O' God, Hell with these thoughts. One needs to get rid of such hypnotism lest one will be no where. Art is conundrum. Damn it.

She then hung unto her domestic chores. But in leisure she would feel crazy to glance through window at some recently hewn statues. She didn't know why such desire was irresistible. Yet she tried to suppress it. She thought it to be a sort of entanglement. After all, it's an art college where students are educated. That's all. But she has been marking a radical change in Nisith ever since the art college came into being. No more he gets irritated, nor does flare up even if his guests are not well attended to, not anxious about their hospitality; he appears quite callous and grave. These changes have satisfied her, but what about their conjugal life? Losing its warmth, getting frigid. Is Nisith dis-illusioned? All art, music or dance, painting or acting is earth bouth with its

power of enticement. But what has happened to Nisith? She was confounded with these unnerving thoughts.

The wrathful mewling of a cat disturbed the quiet in front of the college. Human eyes from all quarters got fixed at it. Nisith and Sabujima jumped over the gate and hastened to the spot. They saw a real cat quarrelling with a statue-cat made yesterday. At the denouement the cat jumped on the statue. The statue slid. The cat stood confused. It became silent. Left the place casting backward glances time and again. Even after the cat's departure, the onlookers stood there transfixed. A student of the art college took snaps of the scene. Because such a scene would not have taken place elsewhere. The student felt fortunate. By this time another student had put the statue of the cat in order.

Nisith was still sailing in an unknown world.

- Hello Mr., the Cat's quarrel is long over. But I see, you are still in it?

Sabujima thrust her hand unto him.

Nisith smiled. Sabujima felt as though he were a statue, a man no more.

She felt as if she had lost something even though she had got many rare experiences because of the art college.

- That night. Nisith switched on TV and then switched it off as the night grew. He pissed. Washed his legs, mouth in the bathroom. As he switched on light in the bedroom he discovered a nude Sabujima. He covered her with a bed sheet.

- He got stunned hearing someone sobbing near by. He searched here and there but of no avail. Opened the window. Moon beams flooded all around. He saw the vivacious statue of the woman at the corner of the portico of the art college gone.

His hands on the window railings got chilled.