



The politics of desire

Tell Me How to Be

By Neel Patel

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In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Theseus says, "The lunatic, the lover and the poet are of imagination all compact." In *Tell Me How to Be*, the poet, in this case the novelist tells the story of first and second-generation Indian immigrants in America, their loves and their lunacies. Torn between the old ethnicities and new sexualities, finding a place of acceptance in the New Country, these immigrants tell a familiar story. The setting is Illinois, the central players are Renu, and her two sons, Akash and Bijal. The trigger for the novel's plot is the death of Ashok, the gentle patriarch of the family. A year after his death, Renu has decided to do a final puja for Ashok's anniversary, leave the family home in Illinois and move back to London where she grew up. Her two sons, Bijal and Akash, will continue to live in America. While the successful Bijal is an anaesthesiologist, her 28-year-old younger son Akash, a closeted homosexual and an alcoholic is adrift, struggling as a songwriter. Both Akash and Bijal come home to help their mother pack and move to London. As they gather in Illinois, Akash is hopeful that he might finally see his first love Parth, the boy for whom he has held a torch all these years. Similarly, Renu's thoughts turn to her early love Kareem, whom she hopes to reunite with now that her husband is gone.

The novel revolves around Renu's and Akash's secret life which they confess in short episodic chapters in the novel. Told to their first loves, in an internal monologue, the narratives of Renu and Akash, work towards creating contradictory realities. Recalling other places and times, our two characters spend most of the novel in silence, dreaming of alternative histories. Both mother and son are haunted by a sense of regret and failure in the past. Akash ruefully recalls, "My mother always told me to be a good boy. I suspect she knew that I wasn't." Renu resents her own invisibility: "I have presided over this house, sinking my teeth into it like a shark...I have become a seer, arriving in advance with the jar of pickles or peanut butter they were." Now she wants to reclaim the lost time. In Renu, we are given a feminist Indian woman who is firmly grounded in traditional cultural expectations. She is proud of her son Bijal, whose life has mirrored his father's: medical school, private practice, golf. Regarding homosexuality, deep prejudice guides her. "Indians are not like that," she'd once said. Contradictions of old-world values and the new exist side by side. In her internal conversations with her ex-lover, Renu dreams of smouldering love that

she views on television in her favourite series *Deserted Hearts* but prevaricates when Kareem does ask her to go away with him, "I told you I needed more. A promise. A plan. You gave me nothing but blind hope." Akash on the other hand, labours as a double minority: as an Asian and as a queer. The bullying and the ribbing come as early as high school where his class tormentor, Bryce Burnham had snickered, "You worship a fat elephant?" Epithets such as "a faggot", "a sand nigger", "a camel

happiness and fairy-tale endings. In the end, Renu's love of her life Kareem never shows up in London for their dramatic rendezvous. Akash's "glow-in-the-dark dream lover" Parth himself has a lover, he realises with a shock.

The final chapters bring the novel to a hasty end, in a way that almost seems too pat and undramatic. After having inducted the readers into palpable dread, and impending revelations, the final denouement feels anti-climactic. Renu sums it up [Akash] "told me

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jockey", "Apu" are a constant reminder of his marginality.

Both mother and son retreat to the memories of their first loves. Memory is where intimacy for their lonely souls not only becomes possible, but where it is created, imagined and experienced with pleasure. Renu recalls exactly the "...day your hand reached for mine on the train. Our letters, but each one is like a song I'll never forget." Kareem comes to Renu in fragments, until finally he becomes real in her imagination.

Akash's thoughts returning to Parth his first love, "I see you, too, Parth, my face reflected in your eyes." By embedding the men they've loved in phantasmatic scripts, our love-sick protagonists reconceptualise their lives in neatly packaged versions of pristine

about Jacob. He told me about Parth. I told him I loved him no matter whom he loved." Akash reciprocates, "I'm not angry with her. I don't resent her for loving a man who was not my father." Suddenly and hastily there is acceptance and redemptive love all around. While Akash, on the one hand wisely surrenders his certainty and decides to remain open to the terrifying and joyous possibilities of life. "I don't know where I'll go from here, or where I'll live. I don't know whom I'll love either. I don't care to know these things. For now, there's this. I turn up the volume and sing." Renu it is obvious, still has some life lessons to learn — that neither love nor passion with the perfect man will support the total weight of life.

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When he is dealing with Akash's sense of tragic futility of being queer in an Indian American family the prose perfectly captures the confusion, the hesitancy, the self-discovery, even humour of the situations. Akash's aimless yearnings, the casual fucking, and the radiating pleasures of love are brilliantly done. The prose breaks to poetic form and smoulders off the page in its shockingly intimate erotic scenes. The homosexual encounters are sensual, languorous, tender, evoking the pain and pleasure of unavailable queer love. Patel is on less sure ground when it comes to other characters, including Renu. Here the scenes lose their voltage. Renu's victimisation as an Asian woman feels less credible and many of her limitations of life seem self-imposed. The novel is thin in another way: neither of the characters extend their thoughts to the histories they have been written out of nor does the novel bleed into the social and political fabric that might be the source of both their repressions and their ambitions. Unruly sexual desire has as its flip side the political disciplining of the body, whether by the State or its stand-in, the Holy Family. The novel focuses instead exclusively on desire's "audacity of hope" within personal relationships.

Patel's voice is at its most vibrant when he is describing the Asian experience from the point of view of a second-generation millennial. A friend of the family we are told pronounced the word 'special' like 'spatial'. "My daughter is very spatial." and again, "rotli, dar, baath, and shaak" becomes a mnemonic...RDBS. Hilarious moments of rebelling against parental scripts are strewn throughout. The novel is loaded with cultural clashes, cultural humour. He explains his reluctance to wearing kurtas, because "they make my balls itch". Really well done is the novel's structure by which we are put into the consciousness of each character's solipsistic world. The technique conveys not only the degree to which we are victims of others' imaginations, but that we have become deaf to anything but our own victimhood. What we think we know about ourselves often is a measure of our indifference to others. To Patel's credit, the novel firmly interrogates the idea of pure belonging and clear identity. The uneasy connection of homosexual sons and their naïve mothers poses a particularly strong challenge to the master blueprint of the Holy Family. This difficulty of "coming out" was echoed by EM Forster when his friend Joseph Ackerly, trying to encourage Forster to publish his novel about homosexuality, *Maurice*, told him that Andre Gide had taken such a risk. Forster replied, "But Gide hasn't got a mother."¹ On the other hand, the novel demonstrates that to open oneself up to another is to risk being overpowered by one's own interior and uncharted chaos. But in being overpowered, one opens doors to intimacies beyond the traditional borders of where we're born and whom we're born to. *Tell Me How to Be* teaches us that sometimes one's struggle is often also the only gauge of success. ■

REFERENCES

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