

**THE CURSE OF THE MOON- AKHIL MOHAN PATTANAİK
(TRANSLATED BY BANAMALI MISHRA)**

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(Note: Akhil Mohan Pattanaik is the most acclaimed short story writer of Odia literature of the twentieth century. He is honoured with the Central Sahitya Akademi award in 1982 for his volume of short stories entitled *O Andhagali*. His “Chandrara Abhisapa” is translated into English as “The Curse of the Moon”.)

(I)

Ten years have passed.

Saroj and Simadri were very close friends to each other. They were the students of the third year of the city college. Simadri was an artist. He does not draw pictures nor does he write poems bearing marks of moonlight, spring or roses by sleeping. He says, to live the life is a great art in itself. And there is no greater artist than one who lives the life everyday by making it fresh and renewed. Therefore, he prefers more to become the character of Chesterton’s “strange profession” than Chesterton. He does not like to be world-famous like Maugham. He desires to die bit by bit in an incurable disease somewhere in an unknown mountain pit like his character, “Stick Land”. Simadri is a pure artist and it is not an exaggeration to say that romanticism is one of his inborn instincts. But Saroj is absolutely a cynic. He never believes in the words that something will happen in the world or something profitable can be done taking human life into consideration. He is indeed the counterpart of Simadri – and, therefore, they would have probably come closer to each other.

The din and bustle of the city cannot especially attract them. The two friends go on strolling towards the canal in the evening everyday. After flowing some ways and diverging suddenly this canal has disappeared somewhere at the outskirts of the city. They have discovered a place there while walking everyday. The place is lonelier behind some tall trees. Sands have been deposited in some limited place, and a stone pillar has stood upon them from time immemorial bearing the rigours of rain and wind. That is probably an old decrepit cemented platform with a basil plant, and the place where they sit is probably a rejected bathing ghat. Owing to the lack of use of the one, the other has become defunct in course of time. The place comes out to be quite romantic in a lunar fortnight. Simadri says, “ I fancy that the fairies of Shakespeare’s *A Mid – summer Night’s Dream* probably dance in the moon light clasping hands with each other by coming down here at mid-night.” Saroj says ironically, “You know that it is a controversial issue among the European scholars of literature if there was a man called

Shakespeare and at last the existence of the fairies in his writings – and again in the bank of the canal!”

Saroj knows it well that Simadri’s patience will collapse at this point. Simadri shouted, “How many times I have told you that it is a matter of extreme foolishness rather than anything else to think that it is not there in the world which we do not know or it cannot be. Think – if a stupid like you had laughed at the idea of aeroplane in the fifteenth century he might not live for so many days but if he would live he would have realized his extreme stupidity!”

There is no need of anything. The time passes wonderfully if any topic is at hand Simadri throws the bunch of keys of his hand to a distance at the climax of the argument. If it is not, he throws to the canal water pounding a whole packet of cigarette. It seems as if things like this cigarette and keys have supported Saroj in the argument by conspiring against him. Any one of them offers the inevitable term of compromise when time comes. All right “Let’s agree to differ” – The two friends are tired and remorseful – sweating with labour the two friends sign in the agreement paper.

The college reopens after the pooja vacation. After alighting from the night express Saroj sees that Simadri has already arrived. His articles have been placed in the room – but Simadri is not there. But, the second show of the cinema must have come to an end. Where did Simadri go? Arriving at the inevitable conclusion Saroj walks towards the canal bank. Saroj sees at the canal bank that his speculation was accurate. Simadri has surely slept there. At first, it becomes embarrassing to Saroj. It is as usual that the solitary environment of the place will arouse fear in the mind of any lonely man. What is Simadri doing here alone in such deep night? There is no end to Saroj’s astonishment, coming near he sees that Simadri is never in a state of getting afraid of. He has slept definitely. It is a matter of surprise that coming close to him Saroj called him many times. But Simadri does not hear. Under compulsion, he shook him once or twice putting hands on his body.

But Saroj was not ready for what happened after that. Simadri jumps to some distance in a single leap. And standing there he looks at Saroj motionlessly for a moment. He shouts after that, “Who, who are you?” Simadri’s voice is quite apprehensive. He is quite frightened. If it had been some other day, Saroj could have made a little fun taking the opportunity of this condition of Simadri. But Saroj himself got quite frightened at this plight of Simadri. Without delaying a moment he went towards Simadri telling, “I am Saroj”, Simadri stood silently for some time. He is perspiring. Saroj says like a criminal, “I do not know, Simadri that you will get so much frightened.”

Simadri looked at Saroj from top to toe again and said after seeing his wrist watch, “ I myself do not know when I slept. Why did you not wake me up though the night has advanced so much?”

Then Saroj says that he has reached there a few minutes past only after searching him. Why does he expect that Simadri has slept here in so deep a night.

Simadri is again astonished. He wonders, “Are you speaking truth, have you not come here with me?”

Now Saroj is a little cheerful. He says, “I have not any insightful pleasure to come to the canal bank after passing a sleeplessness night till two o’clock in the night mail.” Simadri extends his feet in silence to return. While walking he says, “ I also arrived at six o’clock in the evening in Janata. I had become very tired – I lay on the bedstead in order to take rest after spreading out the bed. A little time after that – I remember clearly – you also arrived carrying your torn leather

suitcase and holder accurately in that careless manner. You told, “Good evening Simadri, you have come back then – that is like a good boy.” I do not recall what I have responded – then you became very worried and said – “What has happened to you, Simadri, I have never seen you so bad tempered.” I have not probably replied anything. Then you lifted me from the bed in a single pull and said without changing your dress. “Let’s go to our Kurukhetra – we have not gone there for many days – everything will be solved there. Expressing displeasure you said, “How bad a boy you have turned to in a few days of this vacation! Fie, fie....”

Then the two of us came out and reached here through our known way.

I remember accurately, sitting here, I was telling you about Rita for the first time. I was somehow helplessly attracted towards Rita but I have no courage to propose her opening my mouth.

Your face was bursting in suppressed laughter. You told me patting on my back. “Tell me that matter, young Lokinvar has entirely broken down in long separation in this vacation.” Then being grave at once you said, “Sumadri, I knew it for the first time, you have so many things which you do not think necessary to tell me.”

Then I do not recall anything. I do not know when I have slept. I have slowly forgot everything. I really got frightened all of a sudden discovering myself here.

Saroj was listening everything silently. He asked at last, “What do you want to say then, you have come alone this half a mile way from the hostel to the canal bank in your ignorance in complete sleeping condition?

Simadri stopped replying only a small “yes”. Saroj says, “But

Simadri says – There is no place of “But” here – it is accurately the same thing what is called “Somnambulism” in the medical science.

Simadri continued taking a long breath.

You must have remembered that I had fallen down from the staircase. That was also in the sleeping condition. You must be thinking why I have not told you this to you till today. Many people do not tolerate to live with a somnambulist in the same room – you understand certainly – some uncanny feeling takes place. I have suppressed the fact for that matter only.

Saroj did not reply anything. He asked briefly after some time, “Who is Rita, Simadri?”

Simadri said – she is a student of second year science – lives in the Girls’ Hostel. My meeting with her takes place by chance in the botanical garden. Discussion also takes place.

Saroj said, “yes”.

The two friends had arrived at the hostel.

(II)

It is a very clear moonlit light. The two friends sleep silently in the same confined place on the sandy bed of the canal bank. Placing the burden on their elbows they remain looking at that abandoned, past – installed and old, decrepit platform with a concentrated attention. They are subjective in experimenting a new discovery of a few days ago.

Simadri speaks very slowly – see, she has held a pot under her left armpit and her body has leaned towards the right after being slightly bent to the left. The head has also bent slightly towards the right in order to keep balance.

Saroj exclaims, “Yes, do you see the folds of her sari!”

Simadri adds, “There is certainly no veil on the head otherwise such a beautiful lock of her hair would have been concealed.

A healthy rural bride stands holding a pot in hand in front of the overwhelmed eyes of the two friends for a moment.

Saroj says, her name is “Tamisra”.

Simadri protests, “But I will give her name “Jyotsnarenu”.

The argument does not go on for long. Everyone gets satisfied with everyone’s name. Then they suddenly loosened the tension of their minds. And with them there was an untimely death of the rural bride moulded out of some darkness and moonlight.

Both Simadri and Saroj know that they are creating a certain mirage in their minds looking at that decrepit platform with a basil plant. Their distance from the platform will be less than fifteen yards, this mysterious existence of the platform still goes on creating thousands of jugglery for their eyes. A long disturbed and extended branch of some unknown tree being extended has created a wide cover over the platform. Innumerable particles of moonlight trickle within it. Countless particles of light and darkness play hide and seek on that platform. Holding them in the lens of the eyes they are to be decorated according to one’s own choice.

A post-peon is probably constructed slowly after the accidental death of the rural bride. The post bag of the peon is fabricated by shifting a little the particles of darkness in which the hairy lock of the new bride had been made. The bottom of the post peon’s hat is made by taking the silvery flower shining on her thick dark hair. The Khaki trouser is made by taking the colours of the sari.

This transformation does not happen according to the rules of the exercise or the set of mathematics. It happens in the light movement of a sensitive mind – like the lotus being contracted slowly in the evening – like the black watered Yamuna being one with the clear water of the Ganga. It is like a dream being merged in another dream without having any law or keeping any sequence.

They get into trouble for some days in the beginning. But the two friends have got habituated with the practice in a few days. First, the muscles of the mind are to be loosened – then giving mind and soul and fixing an object in front of the eye it is made strong by applying some mist around it with concentration. Gradually the mind is made credible by flattering like pampering an obstinate child by showing chocolate.

Every evening they fabricate and destroy many shadowy images like this. The intoxication of their first discovery has faded away. They are searching a working relationship within an airy happiness.

Being serious at once Simadri said, “This is probably the first step of meditation” – if we practise a little more we can see the thing probably from a distance of five yards only which we see from a distance of fifteen yards. The magic which we are creating for the eyes that we can probably construct for touch and smell after the practice of a few days.”

“It is not only that.” Simadri continued, “I or you can only persuade each other today, but we can probably make jugglery for others. For that matter the only necessity is to sow the seeds of faith after making the sphere of the mind ready.

Saroj burst with a laughter of ridicule. “Yes, what else if it is not – if we practise a little more. We can probably prove by convening a big general meeting that it is not a raised platform what they see – that is a live dancing beauty brought immediately from the Konark temple – did you understand Simadri

There is no limitation to Simadri’s irritation. He rises up to the kingdom of the ancient philosophers in the speed of an arrow like a fruitless rebound in the game of carom – and who

has given what kind of opinion on a subject like this – and right after that watching Saroj being completely cheerless – comes down to the course of events in the same speed. He shouts, “cynic-cynic-heathen – it is not possible on your part to develop ideas about the eastern philosophy with so light a mind.”

The two friend come back to the hostel. Saroj snores lying on the bed and Simadri gets upset upon the bed. One desire flashes in his mind only. He intensely wishes to go and see what that platform will be doing after their departure. That raised platform will probably be cursing them by sitting and taking long breaths. It has turned to be a chameleon from moment to moment. Or it might have slept like Saroj in unconscious sleep. Simadri is anxious or she would tell like the burnt-skinned beautiful bride of Bengabati in the grandmother’s tale. If he can touch that raised platform in a moment of carelessness then the raised platform she would stand up suddenly like a stringless bow. Once again it would rise up wearing the dress of the raised platform. “Oh, what did you do, you touched me? I cannot live here anymore.” Then she would fly stretching her two shining wings illuminating the sky apart in her light like an angel liberated from the curse. He can probably convince Saroj of this incredible truth by bringing him in the evening next day.

It is a mistake of the eye only. Serious doubt has been created in the mind of Simadri. The discovery of light which the ancient Aryans made within the lifeless object is not probably lie. The myths and stories like this have shrouded his entire childhood. He has listened many thrilling stories like leaving one’s own physical body and transmitting life in another lifeless object by entering into it. Are they imaginations only?

Simadri is sleepless. He is oscillating in the swing of the ever unsolved doubt. He cannot think any more in tiredness and depression. His eyelids go on closing slowly. This truth is not probably realized through argument – Astonishingly, this truth comes within the reach by chance. Simadri sleeps.

(III)

Saroj is very intelligent. Therefore, he is never prepared to accept any subject which beyond the limits of his intelligence and power of thought. When Simadri constructs a heap of faith by preserving drops of faith and tries to enjoy his own creation like a miser, at that time Saroj hurts at his weak point and shows that Simadri’s whole reserve is based on a little fundamental distraction. But until Simadri gets something in hand till that time he cannot convince Saroj in any way that the range his intelligence is very limited – and his egoism has made that limited range more restricted – and the fog of argument.

Now-a-days Simadri goes to the canal bank without accompanying Saroj. He makes and breaks many images sleeping in that particular place. Sitting there, he babbles with himself. That place seems to be Simadri’s laboratory, he does not want anybody to cause obstacle in his experiment before discovering any particular data. The existence of anyone between him and his object is at once unbearable. In the mean time his mind has also got obliged to tameness. A very little time and labour are being required to shape his images. Simadri probably goes there everyday, and comes back carrying new wonders and beliefs.

He has also absorbed the image completely. Sometimes he draws that broken platform in the empty sky sitting near the window in the hostel and then he transforms it into many strange shapes. He tries to expand that raised platform in emptiness, the platform goes on expanding incredibly in the great void of the skythe very long small-sized platform stands at the

backdrop of the sky like the ‘Leaning Tower’ of ‘Pisa’. Then the top of that big tower probably hits a shining star. The sign of satisfaction brightens in Simadri’s face. It appears almost like the light-house of the harbour. The decrepit platform of the canal bank has become a big light post in the sky, who says the platform to be lifeless- inert, immobile? Simadri tries to minimize that long “light-house” in the lens of mind. His object starts to be small very quickly and becomes static coming to the right height of the platform. But no – it is to be made smaller. Simadri does a little labour, it appears to him that he is making the platform small by beating it in the hammer of his mind like a blacksmith. Small – smaller – it becomes very small. He appears to be watching in front of his eyes a lonely ‘pun’ only standing on the big chessboard of the sky. Oh! Simadri gets delighted. How much will be the weight of that ‘pun’? He tries to expand. He tries his thumb and the first finger of her right hand in the great void. Does Simadri not dream? Then the nodes of the finger have started expanding. Then his palm --- and his entire hand slowly extends a very long way into the sky. It is only a space of few inches. The two fingers of Simadri are getting shaken. Can he pick up that small-sized ‘pun’ from the sky. He can touch clearly within the little gap of the two fingers – he is feeling accurately that he has held an object. This time it is contraction. He thinks as if he is picking a great valuable object out of the sky. King Midas would not have probably brought a piece of gold brick more carefully than this. Once again his hand is becoming small – his palm – and all his fingers. Bringing up his long cherished object Simadri has kept it on the palm of his left hand. The surgeon doing operation of the eye would not have probably held the eye ball so carefully in the forceps. He can realize its sole weight in his expanded palm. The two eyes of Simadri have been brightened in the new discovery. He thinks if stupid Saroj were there at this moment he would be telling him, “Go, run and see going to the canal bank that the platform is not there. I have taken it away in the strength of my mind.” And when he would come back being astonished from the canal bank then he would show him this small edition by opening his closed fist slowly.

A group of children came to Simadri’s room shouting and laughing. Simadri got startled. The palm of his left hand is still open. But his beloved object was not there on it. It appears as if it dissolved on his palm like a shining jellyfish of the sea – shore. Simadri got irritated. He said to them something in a rude voice probably – they returned silently.

Simadri tried to sleep.

It is late night.

If it is seen it seems that Simadri is in deep sleep. But Simadri is clearly visualizing that platform of the canal bank in his closed eyes. That platform is no more static. It seems that its nerves have got enlivened taking beams from the mind of Simadri. The sick muscles have become lively. The wind is blowing probably – and that stone platform is swinging in that wind in a relaxed mind. The platform is at once bending down from time to time in a gust of wind – as if that is a quadrangular tower of rubber. It appears to him as if it is inviting him by swinging to go there.

Getting up suddenly, Simadri sat on the bed.

He has to go there at this moment. He does not remember to switch on the light of the room. There is no consideration whether Saroj is there or not. His hand went up on its own accord to open the shutter of the door. The long veranda of the hostel is lovely at once. No boy is found there. He has gone on walking under the cover of a dim light like a mesmerized one. Then the staircase, climbing down every step accurately Simadri has walked and then came out at once through the main gate.

The street is also very lonely. The high pitched whistle of the train is heard in intervals from the station. The lines of street light are seen to Simadri as some wonderful stars climbing down from the sky. A drug addict rickshaw puller drove the rickshaw in an arrow speed rubbing Simadri in his body probably. But Simadri is almost indifferent and detached to all incidents happening around him. That platform makes gestures only in front of his half-closed eyes. Being completely overwhelmed like a musk deer Simadri is pulled being controlled in the attraction of an unseen and indispensable chain.

The moonlight has spread like liquid silver. The canal water, the sand and the trees, all have turned silver. An unexpected loneliness has shrouded the whole atmosphere. It appears as if the change of the earth's surface has become slow around its axis. Simadri has walked very slowly – it seems as if the magic of that ever-mysterious atmosphere will be spoiled if he walks a little forcefully. There is no means to know how much the night is. The long dense branches of the tree appear to be more black on the backdrop of the shining moonlight. Simadri does not know the name of the tree, however, the trees have a uniqueness of their own. If it is observed every tree appears to be an unfinished painting drawn in the hand of an artist!

The two – storied building of the girls' hostel is being seen nearby. Many young girls must be sleeping within that. It seems as if they have become senseless in the magic chant of some demon. Rita has also slept among them. Oh! How tortured is Rita's youth! Does Rita not desire to roll in the moonlight on this cool bed of the sand. Will she not be wishing this wall to fall down by getting saturated in the light of this drunken moon.

Simadri's mind became wet in compassion in a moment. Will Rita be saved from this citadel of Kubera? It is probably possible. One day he has to come like a prince in search of the hand he has to climb up probably to the second storey holding the iron pipe after keeping his turban on the saddle of the horse then Simadri probably turned his attention to that decrepit platform. If he made this platform the Demon of Light of Allauddin then he probably order him to rescue Rita. Oh! If he could induce consciousness in this lifeless stony decrepit platform only once?

Simadri has looked at this platform in blank eyes, he does not want to think anything today. He will wait for a change of his own arrangement. Firstly, it seemed to him that many particles of light and darkness are floating on that platform in an unsteady manner. Then it appears as if those floating particles are slowly coming to be motionlessthey are accepting shapes.

The disturbed moonlight is drizzling from the sky.

The humans often turn lunatics in this broad moonlight. Is Simadri not turning mad? Is not this experiment of his a great madness? He does not understand anything clearly. Simadri looked at that platform once again. It appeared to him for a moment as if that platform has been transformed into the image of a man.

..... The man has put on a khaki coloured full pant. The two orderly strong parts of the wide chest have grown up from the narrow waist. The face is not accurately seen owing to the felt cap bending over the left eye. Simadri tried to proceed slowly towards that man. It appears as if he is going to be introduced with a bodiless one. But that is still standing motionlessly. It is nearer – Simadri has come nearer to the man – the breath of Simadri is probably touching that man – but there is not any change to that man Simadri goes on looking at the man with an incredible wonder in his eye. It occurs to him that he has seen somewhere But Simadri is forgetting he is forgetting. Simadri asks slowly in a suppressed voice. "Who are you?" The

words got diffused in the air like the soft sound of the breath. Simadri got startled. A bit of few words in this lonely atmosphere appears to be unmatched to the ear. Who talked? He does not understand anything accurately. Everything appears to be disturbed within his mind.

An electric wave seems to pass through Simadri's backbone. It appears to him as if he is looking himself in front of a large big mirror. It is that his unknown youth, see, he has himself stood there for so long a time. Yes, it is right probably. Simadri has stood accurately in front of his own self. But, is this possible? But Simadri has been meditating upon this problem till today. How many times he has not imagined that he will enliven himself in this speechless lifeless stone. Today that cherished moment has come by chance. Simadri seems to be getting tired. He cannot think anything. His limbs are slowly becoming lifeless. Paralysis probably starts like this. He is helplessly becoming stony little by little. He is devoid of the power of motion.

The stony meditation of Simadri has become complete. It is not possible to move his eyelash. But this time that other man has started walking, the second version of Simadri. He seems to be waiting this transformation of Simadri. But Simadri's brain is working well. He understands well that the man will go to the girls' hostel. This is not Simadri's own thought. It seems as if every thought of that man is being reflected in the mind of Simadri in the force of some unknown power. Simadri never tries to guess, but he still understands his every stream of thought.

Simadri can see clearly in the moonlightthat man is climbing up holding the pipe of the girls' hostel. That man has to labour hard certainly. The muscles of Simadri's stony legs are bursting in the endeavour of that man's rising. Then that man walks on a narrow boundary keeping his own balance any-way. Simadri feels that pulsation accurately. He is also turning sometimes to the left and sometimes to the right. Simadri is swinging in an indispensable movement. Then the man is rising above a narrow parapet – the man is walking rubbing his back on the wall he is certainly going to the window of Rita's room. But he has to go further in that narrow way some earth seem to go down from under the feet of Simadri all of a sudden. There is only a narrow ridge of earth beneath his feet. Simadri's balance has started to shake. Oh? How astonishingly every topic of that man has continued to influence Simadri.

No – it is not probably possible to remain standing on the part of Simadri. He probably stopped once from falling down. But these few moments are very uncertain – nothing is spoken. Simadri fell down completely into the emptiness like a piece of dry log. Simadri's power of consciousness is being suspended right after that

(IV)

A crowd of a large member of people is gathering on the ground of the girls' hostel. Being careless Simadri has fallen down from the roof. Saroj has also come there. The skull of Simadri being smashed the face is looking somewhat disfigured. It is impossible to identify him as Simadri apart from his wearing clothes.

The police is investigating. Saroj cannot throw any light on the accident. Arriving at an inevitable conclusion all the people of the city have opined that Simadri has confronted the accident or committed suicide being involved in any affair born out of love.

Saroj is wandering from this side to that side thoughtfully putting a cross of his two hands on his chest. No clue is found to Saroj. Saroj comes to the canal bank and sees there that decrepit platform has also broken down from the foundation. Some pieces of brick has been scattered to a distance in the blow of the fall.

Saroj has got astonished. There was not even a slight indication of rain or storm last night – then how did it break. Simadri could have probably entered into the spirit of this stone pillar till the end.

(V)

Ten years have passed.

Saroj was going by that way carrying his wife in a motor vehicle. Saroj halts the vehicle at that particular place of the canal bank. Getting down and asking his wife to wait in the vehicle, Saroj walks towards the top of the canal embankment.

All those sands have turned to silver in the magic wand of the moon. All those trees have stood like embodied mystery even today.

It is being seen from a distance, a gentleman was wandering there bending down the head. He is probably a noise- agonized refugee of the city seeking shelter in this ever lonely canal bank. Getting a slight indication of Saroja's advancement that gentleman seemed to become motionless for a moment and getting panicked sat down on that sand all of a sudden.

Saroj rose onto the sand. Going a few steps forward he sees there is no sign of any man at the place of sitting of the gentleman. That broken platform has fallen there being speechless. Moss has crept upon them owing to the rigours of nature..... sufficient grass has grown in the gaps of the brick.

Being hypnotized Saroj remained standing there for some moments. He slept out mentally, "Simadri, you have slept here since that day sleeping here how many nights we have not imagined the story of our marriage – I have married – come – see to my wife How will I show you"

Saroj's eyes were full of tears.

Saroj came back to the vehicle.

Saroj's wife asked, "Who was that gentleman wandering here in so late at night.

Saroj said cleansing his eyes in handkerchief, "Come home, I will narrate."

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