



Reclaiming the Night: A Realistic Approach in Santhosh Nair's Social Thriller

Mrs.P.Amirthayogam

Assistant Professor of English

V.V.Vanniaperumal College for Women

Virudhunagar

Santhosh Nair was an engineer by profession, and he turned to writing out of passion, that he nurtured in the course of service writing on current affairs for HW News Network. His book, *The Tale of Two Women* features two novels, *Reclaim the Night*, and *The Evolving Jurisprudence*. It is characterised by its realistic, non-sensationalised portrayal of social issues, aiming to provide a thoughtful critique of the Indian legal system and pervasive nature of patriarchy. The narrative of *Reclaim the Night* centres on the rape and murder of a female lecturer. The act of violence is not depicted as a random crime but as a targeted retaliation for her probe into a paid admission scandal involving senior officials at her college.

Ayushi Sarkar was a junior lecturer in Victoria College, Thane. She completed her Ph.D. and was waiting to be assigned a senior rank and position. She uncovered an admission scam in her college, which motivated her to bravely investigate the racket and seek justice for students who were denied admission despite their merit. The consequence of such alarming defiance against the top echelons of governance proved fatal to her. (Nair vi)

Ayushi went missing for two days. A complaint was filed on the third day of her disappearance by her parents. The FIR was filed in Mumbai and the enquiry was started in Thane. Thane Police began their investigation. Her body was retrieved from Ulhas River at Badlapur. The postmortem report revealed horrific details of brutal rape and murder. The police collected details about Ayushi from staff and students and the investigation was directed to irregularities in the admission process and the persons involved in it. The agitation that spread among the students gained momentum as lecturers joined the protest demanding immediate arrest of the offenders.

The protest escalated into a full-scale rally, mainly comprised of students, junior staff, and lecturers. Ayushi was projected as a good-looking, friendly, and helpful lecturer who was inclined to bring some forbidden dealings into the public realm. It was widely reported in media, as is the norm, without her name being publicised. (Nair 34)

The title of the novel directly references the 'Reclaim the Night' movement, which began in the 1970s as a Protest against the idea that women should stay home to be safe. It represents the demand that public spaces to be safe for women at any time of day or night.

The first 'Reclaim the Night' march is often traced back to Leeds, England, in 1977, where women organised a protest against sexual violence and the 'blame victim' mentality, which often suggested that women should stay indoors at night to avoid being assaulted. The march was a statement against curfews imposed on women and instead called for safer streets and communities. Participants in 'Reclaim the

Night' marches and events demand an end to gender-based violence and the events are typically held at night to symbolize the right of women to walk the streets safely at any time. (The Hindustan Times)

The novelist uses the technique of 'Rip from the Headlines', incorporating current events into a fictional narrative. The rape and murder of the protagonist, Ayushi, is highly relatable to 2024 Kolkata medical college case. It reflects the deep-rooted social issues that make women vulnerable, similar to the previous cases like Delhi Nirbhaya.

A 31-year-old post graduate trainee doctor's rape and murder in R.G. Kar Hospital, Kolkata, has caused huge uproar across the country, while protesters holding a Pan-Indian Protest under 'Reclaim the Night' campaign. Besides Kolkata, cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Chandigarh, Hyderabad, saw large number of Protestors, mostly women, taking to the streets to demand justice for the trainee doctor. (India Today)

As a social thriller, *Reclaim the Night* uses suspense and horror elements to provide a critique of society. The villain is not just one person, but systematic social issues such as political corruption, gender inequality, cultural norms, institutional biases that disadvantage women.

The investigation team started their inquiry with Ayushi's neighbours, and the stakeholders of the college. They had a strong suspicion on some of the men. Suhas Pednekar, the laboratory technician, was a womanizer. His wife divorced him, but his daughter Nirmala, who is in her tenth standard, stayed with him. During the police questioning, Nirmala sobbingly reveals to a woman officer his father's misbehaviour with her in his drunken state. This girl did not have the safety atmosphere even in her home. The safety of a woman as a national interest is a subject of continuous emphasis by Indian judiciary.

While speaking at the national annual stakeholder's consultation on "Safeguarding the Girl Child: Towards a Safer and Enabling Environment for Her in India", Former Chief Justice of India, B.R. Gavai, said that the collective conscience of a nation is measured by how it treats its vulnerable, and therefore the strength and destiny of a nation are inextricably linked to the well-being and empowerment of its daughters. While quoting Rabindranath Tagore's "where the mind is without fear", he said India's true freedom will remain incomplete as long as any girl in the country lives in fear of violence, discrimination, or denial of opportunity. (The New Indian Express)

The police arrested the suspects, Suhas and Wilson, and they are remanded to custodial interrogation. They did not admit their crime immediately. After the rigorous trial and the structured interrogation techniques with the strategic use of evidence, the police were able to elicit the truth from them. Wilson Rodrigues was an old student still trying to clear his PG. He had a crush on Ayushi and often visited the college with ulterior motives. But Ayushi wanted to nib it in the bud. She invited him to meet her at the college twice. She made him wait for hours and finally blocked his phone as he was a nuisance to her. Wilson was outraged at being publicly disgraced and humiliated.

Sudhanshu Aggarwal, the founder member of the institution, asked Suhas to intimidate her not to intervene in the admission process. Suhas went to her home to threaten her of serious consequences. He was a lustful person driven by intense sexual desire and immediate gratification. Ayushi always wanted to avoid the company of such lecherous men. When he misbehaved with her, she bit her face hard and caused him profound harm. His face was soaked in blood and his skin had almost come out. He rushed back home after being treated in a hospital.

When a woman is assaulted, she may not stoop to think in terms of himsa or ahimsa. Her prime duty is self-protection. She is at liberty to employ every method or means that come to her mind to defend her. God has given her nails and teeth. She must use them with all her strength. (M K Gandhi)

Suhas sought the help of Wilson Rodrigues to teach Ayushi a lesson for her irreverent behaviour meted out to him. Their plan was not to kill her but to rape her. The guards were asleep when they entered her place. Suhas stole the key to the apartment. They managed to get inside her house. Ayushi was in deep sleep. Suhas was

more inclined to sexual pleasure than Wilson. She bit Suhas with greater intensity. Wilson held her by the throat, and Suhas cut her wrist with the intention of injuring her. But the cut was deep, and she died.

Politicians often use their influence to sway investigations, influence police officers to protect culprits and use the incidents for political gain. The court considered Wilson and Suhas as the primary accused, Mr. Sudhanshu Aggarwal was arrested for plotting the crime. But there was high pressure from the top officials of the ruling party to release Mr. Aggarwal since he has been a frequent fund raiser of the party during all elections. Such interventions could weaken the autonomy of institutions, leading to slow trails and low conviction rates.

The student community formed human chains to honour the victim and to prevent such reckless crimes in future. It aimed to raise awareness about the impact of such a heinous crime on the victims and their families. Ayushi's mother could not take the shock and died within a week and her father became mentally ill. "More than anything else, it's the students who have lost a professor they valued. She could have added cardinal value to the subject, economics! It was a significant loss to the institution". (Nair 95)

Reclaim the Night serves as a wake-up call to confront the grim realities of violence against women, and a tribute to the resilience of those who fight for a safer world. The challenges faced by women in precarious situations cannot be solved by individual action alone, they require collective action, policy reforms and institutional changes. *Reclaim the Night* strongly emphasises that eradicating violence against women is not merely a social issue, but a major, urgent concern for the stability and progress of a nation. A 'whole of society approach', combining legal enforcement and inclusion of all members of society is a necessary for a peaceful and equitable society.

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