

Fie, fie, self-fie!!

Priyanka Chatterjee



She wasn't quite happy with my work. It didn't come well; I hadn't caught the 'moment', she said. Before I could be surprised at her choice of words, she took charge, adjusted the device, focussed it to face her, tilted her neck, broke into a huge smile, and completely dodging the sleep-heavy eyes, and took a perfect picture in her new dress for pujo. And I sat dumbfounded, gaping, with a mix of hilarity, surprise and fear, at my five year old! Further instructions followed- the picture should be WhatsApp-ed to people she could trust for comments and should not be put on Facebook, as that could be done in real time, not during dress rehearsals. Why did she need someone else's opinion, didn't she like the dress? Or herself in it? Definitely she did, which is why she had asked the picture to be

sent so that the target audience would validate her likeness and their comments would pep her up to dress properly before she lodged a selfies on Facebook where many would see it. Of course she said all of this in a muddled up manner, as a relatively quiet five year old could be expected to speak. By the grace of god I was still sane enough to comprehend all of it relatively well and to my utter surprise. Why so much decking up for Facebook, I gingerly asked. She corrected: decking up for the selfies during pujo for Facebook. I lost words.

To gauge my portion of guilt I rummaged through the photo albums in the memory of my phone once it was returned to me. I scrolled down to find a lot of me, with context, without

context; memories created by moments; moments I had no memory of. I was there looking at the lens- in a dress, at a place, after a simmering cup of tea or a delicious meal- insignificant, scattered occasions, frozen in time, doing nothing much other than capturing my moods, or more specifically, me and most had made their way to the window- Facebook- the place which markets visibility. With its agenda of removing the distinction between significant and insignificant, with its focus directed to the celebratory self at all moments, very tellingly, its very name professes itself as a space which would read the face as a book of stories created by the face, where the face could have multiple forms. The face is always eager to add a new story to the book, to make his or her presence count in the world of stories where the face is the protagonist. Hence, the need for focusing on the face, that acts as a channel to reach to the self and creates the unquenchable desire- to make the self visible. Imagine the potential of this space! It could in fact turn all of us into story-tellers- a space from where the small, the insignificant could take a leap to create a wonder! But what Facebook has been reduced to is, in fact, a wonder. The way we allow it to direct our lives, commands our ways, the way it makes the surface visible and makes it matter, the way it has rendered the world superficial enough to rob it of genuineness, Facebook has made us servile pretenders.

In its masterstroke, Facebook creates the illusion of making us the author of our stories. So 'What is on your mind?' is the question that greets us every moment we open the window, as if creating possibilities of the thinking being with a 'mind' to emerge and seize the world. And it is in this expedition of the self via the 'mind'

that we embark upon with an almost Ulyssesian urge. We post ourselves- the touring-self, the eating-self, the drinking-self, the reading-self, the partying-self, the achieving-self, the friendly-self, the beautiful-self, the amazed-self! A celebration of self- or should it be- the celebration of the celebratory-self? Where can we find the discontented self, the morose self, the bore-at-home self, the struggling-self, the frustrated-self, the dissenting-self? Not in the 'mind' for sure! These selves are to remain invisible- as these lesser, objectionable unmarketable selves are laden with equally unsalable properties like sympathy, empathy, compassion, consideration which is shunned by the glamour-driven market economy. These are not to be considered until they are attached to a fashionable 'cause', latching onto which can allow one's whims to flutter in the air of charitable involvement. And then complacency can find its coveted (or acquired) place, while whim can once can turn to the self-involvement.

This self must remain visible. It must keep churning news out of itself which will feed the hungry index finger looking for fodder. However, the finger abhors the taste of anything unpleasant and so it must be served a platter of favorable news only. But in a world of self who decides what is favorable?

Interestingly there is a consensus at work to facilitate the choosing of the favorable news. So while the self can emerge out of its isolation and get the tongues talking all over, it must gulp down the unpleasantness, as sadness has no glamour until it can give a tangible peak into private life through wordy emotions that make sadness poetic enough to go on the 'wall', where amidst the tsunami of habitual, unfeeling

condolences, a comment like 'So well written!' can act as the coveted thump on the authorial back. Another face of news on its way thus!

This news is, however, not news that stays news once it becomes news. Once fed, it vanishes down a tunnel making way for more- hence the churning of news becomes incessantly necessary and can do away with all sense of responsibility in the creation and dissemination of this huge bulk of news. Eliminating the unwanted news, we focus on that news which is commonly wanted. While this spotting of news keeps us aware and alert to the probability of news, the commonness of it makes us overuse the spots of time, creating repeated cycle of news, which become trends. The mind speaks through pictures or words, which bear the cudgels of reflecting the self and must be part of a common pool of comprehensible knowledge. Thus, pops up sameness displayed by multiple performers. Yet the urge to join the band wagon of sameness is inexhaustible so much so that anything out of the block makes the chill run down our spine. We cannot tolerate diversity until it has the propensity for creating oneness. Anything that can stand out as not-majoritarian frightens us, as if by standing out it has equipped itself with the power to usurp all visibility. Visibility is only for the common to remain in view, whereas the ordinary, out of place, different is always invisible. Hence the 'mind' that is invoked at every log-in is always, already premised within known coordinates.

It is by soldering this responsibility to adorn ourselves with visibility that we can become ubiquitous in everyone's newsfeed, fanning the ambers of awe, surprise, jealousy, happiness so zealously that nothing can let it die out.

Facebook gradually but unmistakably becomes our advertisement bulletin which can carry news about us to anyone who cares, and also to those who do not care. To call this self-absorption, a side effect of urbanity, might not be over stretching the limits of thoughts. Facebook, indeed, is a veritable trigger which opens up an alternative space for the self to take a dive into pseudo-happiness, pseudo-perfection, pseudo-positivity in the face of the worse. Thus comes up an illusory world of performances which are staged under super constraints imposed by the others on the self. It is only the favorable self that needs to be put up, as that alone is the acceptable self which can elicit favorable response thus creating a favorable distant communication which assures mental, social, and all other forms of safety. Thus while everything and anything goes up on the wall, all we can do is 'like'; Zuckerberg makes sure of that. There can be no space for dissent in social media, else it would become anti-social media, thus putting its own existence in jeopardy. Hence one cannot disagree until the scope of discussing disagreement is prefixed by other 'social' standards; one cannot be different until one is positioned well to carry on being different despite all odds, a herculean task possible for few!

Although I can hear you advise me to not log in if I don't wish to, and not bore you with truths that are open, I ask you, will my invisibility in a world, where sight/being visible is directly proportional to memory, register my protest, record my dissent? It won't, because my invisibility will make me vanish. I will not pop up in anyone's newsfeed as 'not updated status since'. No one will tag me to anything because my name will not be suggested due to my

inactivity. No comments from me will ultimately render me opinionless. And let me not even dare to think someone as insignificant as me will voluntarily crop up in someone's memory and she will drop by a message. Most of our birthday wishes on Facebook come as our moral responsibility towards the notification that pops up during the day!

Thus to protest too I have to remain visible, in news, within the cycle. And to remain visible I have to go down the road commonly taken. I cannot remain visible while shouting out to say, I cannot accept everything that is happening around me; I cannot accept the triviality that is being passed as excellence; I cannot accept the brutality that masks the face of every self-proclaimed hero; I cannot accept the wide gap that lies between announcements and application; I cannot accept the complacency with which we accommodate and adjust to any injustice; I cannot accept how we are constantly betraying trust; I cannot accept how we can constantly become oblivious of the old; I cannot accept how charity is becoming mere propaganda; I cannot accept how we are constantly running after perfection; I cannot accept what we have made of ourselves and of the generations to come. Our words flow without meaning, our actions are without intent. We live multiple, incongruous, incompatible selves, which makes us difficult to realize which is that self that we are/were trying to frame. If isolation is all we intend by this frantic over-celebration of the self, why does every action drive us towards getting people talking as if that is the only legitimization? Profundity has lost its glamour, we live in a world of moments, of the surface, of the face. And to go on living in this world our moments must be made visible. And

to remain visible everything we do must be pleasant, favorable, acknowledged via appreciation. In this make-belief world of visibility we are a lost generation clinging to what we think matters or makes sense. We find excuses of sharing information- meeting long-lost friends, plunging into nostalgia, celebrating success, sharing ideas, achievements, fashionable protests- we cling on. How much of it do we allow to enter our lives? Our lived-realities are too personal a front which we would not like to meddle with. In this world replete with sadness, we believe our moments of happiness (however conjured), our praises (however crafty), our intellectualism (however void) can become anecdotes that we offer in charity to save the world from drowning itself in a deluge of unhappiness.

Hence we can go on performing, as my friend puts it. It is our best performances that win most of the accolades (read likes). What we fail to realize is that our performances, however pretentious or not, might become examples for many who could take it all up to survive, to dream, to strive and sometimes, also to perform, to pretend thus becoming part of this vicious cycle of shallowness. In the world of post-truth we live and do most of the things consciously, may be even anticipating the outcomes. Hence we prepare a stage for ourselves with every right click, every word from the qwerty, every update of the status, creating the best of times, while overlooking the worst within and without us. That is the norm; there must be no complains; life is about going on pleasantly, hushing out the unpleasant. So the frames catch us in full awareness of projecting a face that is only a mask, of projecting a group that is only about multiple tags completely disregarding thoughts

of those who could not make it to the frame that was either too small, or too distant, or too snob, or too exclusive. In fact despite being hailed as the medium of launching united movements, this unity leaves out those who cannot make it up to the wall, or make an impactful visibility. They are dismissed conveniently as disposable. They do not matter, their deprivations do not matter in the happening world of Facebook which is free and would always be, yet, is levied with constraints costlier than cash could possibly be.

So this pujo, while my little one decks up and insists on a selfie for Facebook, I decide to make her realize that celebration of the self does not require visibility always. If visibility becomes a medium of showing off, that visibility does not matter as shows keep changing. It is only when visibility makes its presence felt through an impactful intervention that prompts change, it can matter. For visibility to be profound one has to extend beyond oneself, sharpen one's consciousness to stand up truthfully, use its wide reach to bring about small changes. May be this will make her move out of the isolation of social pages, and bond with people over genuine friendships, compassion, love, togetherness, freeing her of the need of creating credibility for her moves by legitimizing them on bill boards.

May be then pretension would not become a way of life for her, and she would not lose herself amidst a hoard in selfies. Let me sharpen her range of understanding so that the stars hidden behind dark clouds of the times may become visible to her. May she be able to see the humane in herself, and spread happiness just like the cottony clouds spreading across the blue

blue skies. This will be my learning too, my crusade as well. ●