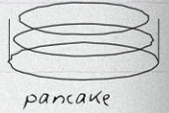


Poets and Pancakes

— Asokamitran (Flamingo, Ch 6)



About the Author

Asokamitran (1931 - 2017) — Tamil writer, worked at Gemini Studios, Madras for ~~70~~ 14 years. Famous for spare prose & gentle, dry irony. This memoir is from his book - 'My Years with Boss' translated from Tamil.

Setting

Gemini Studios, Madras — late 1940s & 50s. Founded by S.S. Vasan ; one of the biggest & most influential film studios of its time. Over 600 employees from many ~~religions~~ regions.

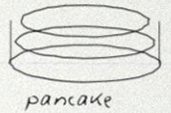
Plot in 4 lines

1. Author works at the publicity office — his desk faces a glamorous makeup room.
2. He sketches the makeup dept, the office boy, Subbu, the lawyer & the MRA visit.
3. Stephen Spender visits — no one knows him.
4. Years later author discovers who he was.
—> connects pop cinema with serious lit.

The Make-up Department

Housed in a building once a stable.

Lit by half a dozen incandescent lights
at close range — gave a feeling of ~~fire~~ hell.



Reflected glare of mirrors all around.

'Pancake' = Max Factor brand

<- main cake-make-up
<- used in tonnes

Strict Hierarchy

Order of seniority in the make-up room :

1. Chief make-up man - Bengali
2. Senior asst. - Maharashtrian
3. Junior man - Dharwar Kannadiga
4. Andhra make-up man - 'crowd' painter
5. East-Indian + local Tamil boys

* Office boy — applied paint to extras' bodies.

Point of Irony

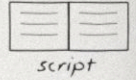
Pretty faces were turned ~~ugly~~ 'frightful' on screen
by the thick coat of paint — the make-up
industry made beauty look monstrous!

* National integration -- Author's wry note :
men from every region working together,
united in turning humans into clowns.

The 'Office Boy'

Who was he ?

A man in his early forties — joined Gemini hoping to become star / director / writer / lyricist. Ended up applying make-up on the heads of 'crowd' extras.



His Frustration

Educated, knew Tamil & English literature.

Felt he was wasting his ~~life~~ talent here.

Often visited Asokamitran's table -- the only quiet desk in the studio -- to vent.

'Are you a Brahmin ?' he would ask

<- key line -

<- shows caste resentment

His Blame Game

Blamed Kothamangalam Subbu for his stagnation -- thought Subbu, being a Brahmin, had unfair advantages.

(Author hints : not true — Subbu just happened to be more useful & cheerful.)

Why he matters

Symbol of countless failed dreams the film industry quietly produces every year.

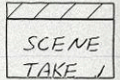
Kothamangalam Subbu

His Position

Officially -- story dept member.

Unofficially -- 'No. 2 at Gemini Studios'.

A ~~director's~~ Boss's right-hand man.



Skills & Traits

- * Always cheerful, never said 'no'.
- * Could improvise an entire scene in minutes — solved every story crisis.
- * Wrote Tamil poetry, novels (Thillana Mohanambal), film lyrics, prose.
- * Acted in films too -- versatile.
- * Devoted to the Boss & to his family — truly loyal, not sycophantic.

talent + loyalty = indispensable

<- Author's verdict

Author's Tone

Admires Subbu, yet notes the unfairness :

Subbu's talent let the Boss bask in credit ;

Subbu himself faded into the shadows.

- * He had enemies (jealous colleagues) but Subbu was 'genuinely a nice man'.

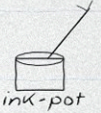
The Lawyer & the MRA

The Legal Adviser

Officially the Story dept's legal adviser.

Author calls him an 'illegal adviser' --

a man who ~~helped~~ ruined a promising actress's career by secretly recording an outburst & playing it back — the studio shut down her film. He himself lost his job soon after.



MRA Visit (1952)

Moral Re-Armament Army -- led by Dr. Frank Buchman, American evangelist. *

200 people from 20 countries visited

Madras -- shows : Jotham Valley & The Forgotten Factor (anti-Communism plays).

MRA = counter-movement to int'l Communism <- Cold-War context

Influence on Gemini

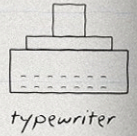
The Boss (S.S. Vasan) was ~~for~~ against Communism -- warmly hosted the MRA. Tamil dramatists copied their stage style for years.

Author's irony : a film studio playing host to a moralist movement -- contradiction !

The Stephen Spender Visit

Who is Spender ?

Stephen Spender (1909 - 1995) —
British poet & editor of 'Encounter'
magazine. Friend of Auden, Eliot, Yeats.
Contributor to ~~Encounter~~ 'The God That Failed'
— famous anti-Communist anthology (1949).



What happened ?

- * One afternoon : a tall Englishman with pink hair arrived at Gemini Studios.
- * All 600 staff assembled in the lawn.
- * The Boss made a grand welcome speech.
- * The visitor delivered a long speech -- no one understood his British accent.
- * He thanked them & left. Audience clueless.

Q : Why is a poet at a movie studio ? central irony
← no one ever knew

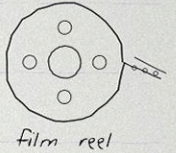
Answer (years later)

Author later finds Spender's name on a book at a bookseller's — realises he was an MRA-friendly anti-Comm. editor invited by the Boss for his political stance.

Themes & Devices

Major Themes

1. Irony of Indian film industry --
beautiful stars made ugly by makeup ;
famous poets ignored by their hosts.
2. Creative hierarchy & hidden talent --
Subbu's gift swallowed by the Boss's name.
3. Frustrated ambition (the office boy).
4. Cold-War politics seeping into Indian arts
via MRA & Spender's visit.
5. Gap between popular cinema & 'serious'
poetry — ~~never~~ rarely cross paths.



Literary Devices

- * IRONY -- the ruling tone of the essay.
- * SATIRE -- gentle, never cruel.
- * HUMOUR -- anecdotal, deadpan.
- * HYPERBOLE -- 'truckloads of pancake'.
- * OXYMORON -- 'illegal legal adviser'.
- * METAPHOR -- studio as a microcosm of India.

Tone = dry / wry / detached /

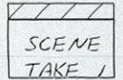
Remember this
← for board answers

- * Narrator persona = quiet observer at
the next desk -- almost invisible.

Quotes / Exam / Revision

Key Quotations

- * 'Even the worst-looking person looked ugly enough for the camera' -- pancake irony.
- * 'A man of many parts' -- on Subbu.
- * 'He was a poet' -- Author's late epiphany about the pink-haired Englishman.



Exam Pattern Pts

- Q1. Why does the author call the lawyer 'an illegal adviser'? (3 marks)
- Q2. Sketch Subbu as 'No. 2 of Gemini'. (6 m.)
- Q3. Why was Stephen Spender's visit a ~~success~~ puzzle? (6 marks)
- Q4. Comment on the irony in the title. (5 marks) pancake = popular cinema,
poet = high literature.

QUICK REVISION (60 sec)

1. Setting : Gemini Studios, Madras, 1950s.
2. Cast : Boss, Subbu, office boy, lawyer.
3. Two visits : MRA team & Stephen Spender.
4. Mood : ironic, affectionate, satirical.
5. Message : popular & serious arts meet --