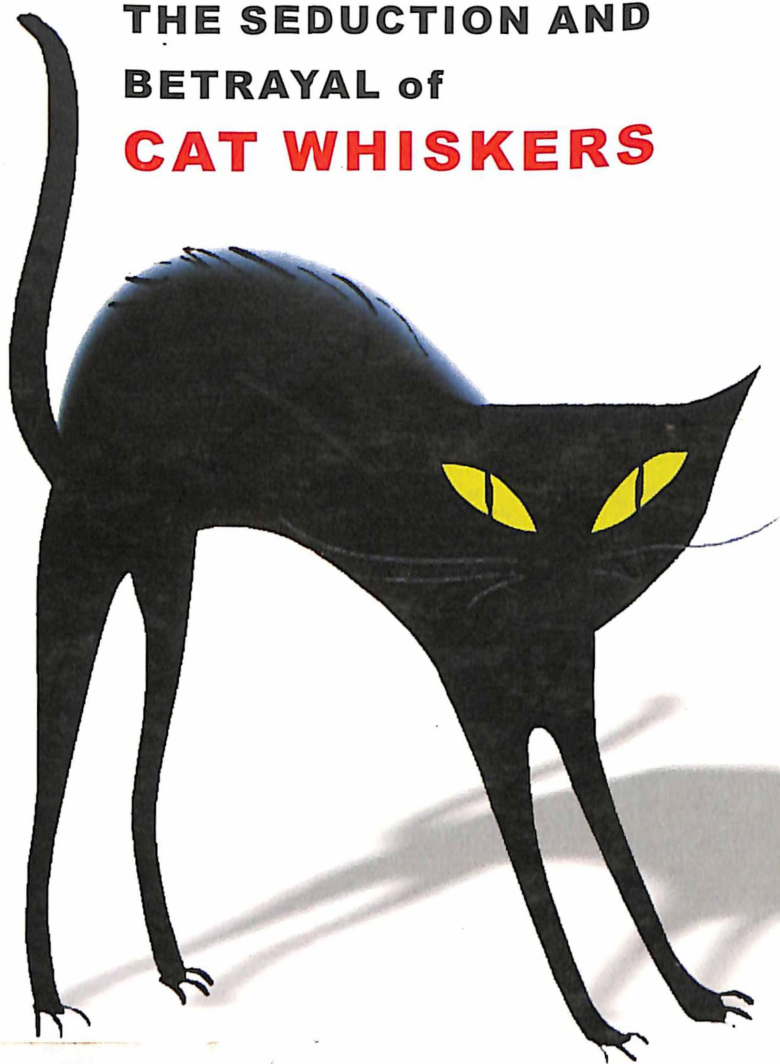


**THE SEDUCTION AND
BETRAYAL of
CAT WHISKERS**



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Manju Jaidka ■

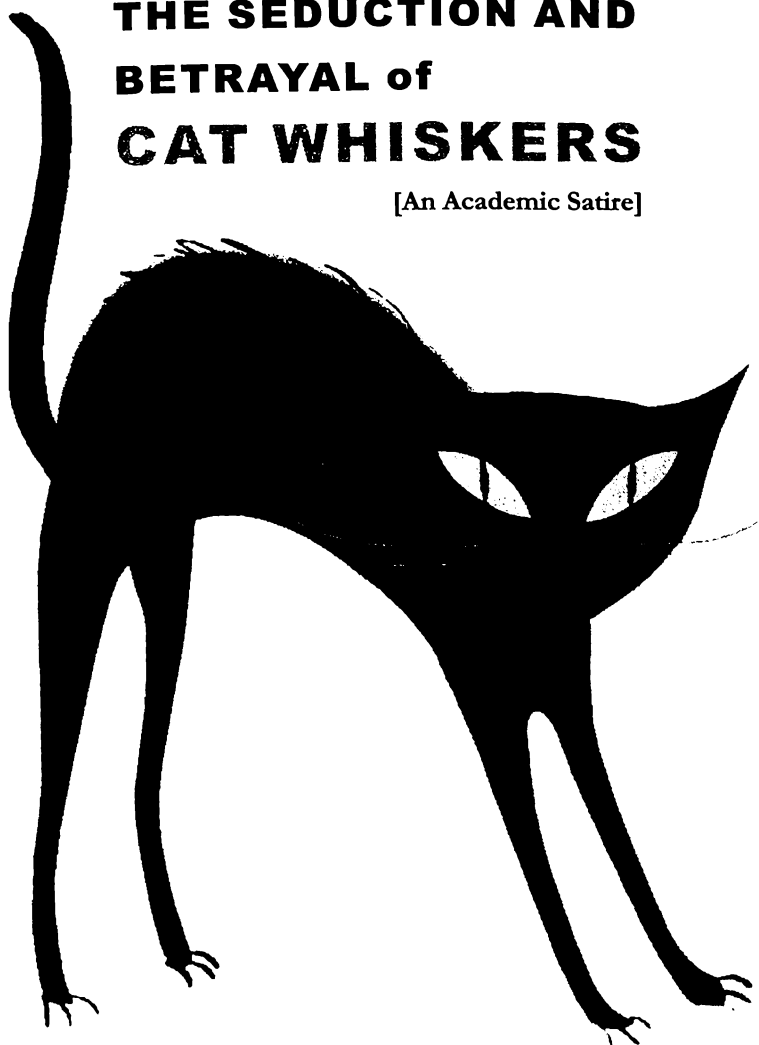




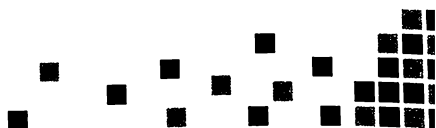
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THE SEDUCTION AND BETRAYAL of CAT WHISKERS

[An Academic Satire]



Manju Jaidka



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DEDICATED

to the fond memory of
my mentor

Professor Isaac Sequeira
(1930 - 2006)

in whose company I spent many mirthful moments
discussing this script

Opinion

“Manju’s Jaidka’s *The Seduction and Betrayal of Cat Whiskers* captures the essence of contemporary academic life, exposing what goes on behind the scenes. Good comedy crosses borders; hers travels well. It will delight audiences in Chandigarh, Chicago, New York, New Delhi, and elsewhere.”

Howard R. Wolf

Emeritus Professor and Senior Fellow

Department of English

The State University of New York at Buffalo (SUNYAB)

THE PLAY

Literary history tells of genial satires that aimed at laughing away the imperfections of the world. Cervantes, for instance, with his *Don Quixote*, is said to have smiled away the follies of Spain. Going back further in time, we know of Horace and Juvenal who used the satiric vein to critique the ills of their times, the former in harsh, biting attacks, and the latter using a mild, genial satire. The object was the same – to present a dystopia in order to explore the possibilities of an alternative.

The Seduction and Betrayal of Cat Whiskers, winding in and out through the corridors of an institution of higher learning, uses the comic lens to look at some of the flaws in the academia. What happens, for instance, behind the scenes in a major university? Who are the power brokers? What are the politics that operate in the system and at what different levels? How are appointments and promotions made? Is there any fair-play or justice? These are some of the questions raised in this play. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the problems highlighted here are found on almost all campuses, in India and abroad.

The aim is not to target all academics, universities and colleges as corrupt but to take a peek at their not-so-pleasant side which, with a little effort and commitment, may be cured if we have the will to do so.

*This is a work of the imagination.
All characters and events in this play are fictitious.
Any resemblance to incidents or individuals from
real life is purely coincidental.*

About the Author

Manju Jaidka is a Professor of English at Panjab University, Chandigarh. She has been teaching for more than three decades, greatly enjoys her job and travels widely, frequently visiting the USA and UK for lectures and conferences. She loves her institution, her students and colleagues.

THE SEDUCTION AND BETRAYAL OF CAT WHISKERS

Cast of Characters

CAT WHISKERS: Nick-name of Dr Joglekar, Chair of the Languages Department.

ARTI DAS, BISHAKHA MITRA, CHITRA RAO, DURGADAS MITTAL: Faculty members of the Languages Department.

CHERRY PINK: Charanjeet Kaur, a research student who has spent a term at Yale University.

SANDEEP, KUNAL & ANKUR: Research Students, boys living in the hostel, working towards their Ph.D.

DURYODHANA, BHEEMA, DRAUPADI: Members of an Amateur theatre group on the campus, rehearsing a play.

STUDENT LEADER and a few (5 or 6) supporters on strike against the authorities.

GHOST of Mr Joglekar, Sr.

Voices.

ANNOUNCER of City Radio.

CLERK

The Prologue and the Epilogue take place in a dorm in the Boys' Hostel.

Acts One and Two take place in the Languages Department.

The entire action spans roughly a little over 24 hours, beginning Tuesday afternoon, ending Wednesday evening.

PROLOGUE

[The curtain opens on a room in a dorm of the Boys Hostel. There are three boys, SANDEEP seated at the window with a pair of binoculars, KUNAL lounging on the floor, flipping through a file, ANKUR working at the computer. There are two beds in the room, a mat on the floor, some books on the shelf behind, a tennis racket, driving helmet, gloves and shoes at sixes and sevens.]

SANDEEP: [at the window, looking through binoculars] ...and the long weary hours went by... and the armies fought each other out. By the end of the day all action had died out. Nothing moved on the battlefield ... except the crows and the vultures hovering over mutilated, gory bodies.... And the dogs and wolves who descended from nowhere, howling to the skies, unable to believe their good fortune at having found a whole new world full of fresh, eatable, human meat, so delicious, so delectable, still warm with the blood that had coursed through it not so long ago....

[A pause, then he continues...]

And so the day plodded on wearily. And finally even the dogs and wolves and vultures were tired and lay down their weary heads. And then not a soul moved. Only one man, one lone man stood at his post. Undeterred, unfazed. The boy stood on the burning deck. One diligent, brave, impeccable soldier with a pair of binoculars, looking over the bleak landscape. He did not flinch. He did not waver.

He did not abandon his post. Oh yes, he stood firm and surveyed the scene. Through the storm, through the night...

KUNAL: Shut up, will you!

SANDEEP: Through the storm, through the night, he kept his vigil....

KUNAL: Stop it, yaar! Why don't you grow up? You spend all your time ogling at females in that stupid pool.

SANDEEP: Nahin, yaar. No fun today. Not a single chick in sight. Only that fat Aunty-ji from the History Department and that, too, without daughter! [pretends to call out] Aunty-ji, Aunty-ji, Namaste Aunty-ji. Where's your daughter today, Aunty-ji? [pause] Arre, dekh yaar, dekh. Badi cheez hai!

[silence]

KUNAL: [slams his file shut with a sigh, puts it over his head and leans back against the bed] God, I'll never get this done in time. [pause] Damn that bloke! Why couldn't he give me more time?

SANDEEP: Who? Cat?

KUNAL: Who but Cat Whiskers! Cat-about-town. Cat for all seasons. Cat-o-nine-tails. Why did he have to give me such a short notice for my presentation?

SANDEEP: Chill, man. Ho jayega. Come and look at this one. Wow, what legs. What a dive! [whistles]
[pause]

KUNAL: What is the etymology? [louder] What is the etymology of his name?

ANKUR: Cat Whiskers? God knows. He's been Cat Whiskers for as long as I can remember. Everyone calls him that. [pause] He thinks he's really C-A-T.

SANDEEP: He thinks he's the cat's whiskers!

[Phone rings. ANKUR at computer starts up, climbs on top of bed, reaches for cell phone. Responds standing as the other two watch.]

ANKUR: Yes, Dad, fine Dad.... Okay, Dad. Me? I was studying. [dodges a pillow thrown by KUNAL who hisses 'liar!'] I have my enrollment coming up tomorrow. Yes, it came up suddenly – we were informed this morning – but don't worry, Dad, I'm working on it... working hard.

KUNAL: [mimics ANKUR] yes, Dad, working hard. On the Yahoo Messenger, Dad.

ANKUR: And, Dad... please, the cheque you promised. Yes, Dad I will. Thanks, loveya, Dad. Bye. [collapses on the bed] Phew! [wiping his brow] Tell me, yaar, what do I do? I just have to, have to, have to get enrolled tomorrow. Or else the old man will insist that I pack up and get back

home. And then....

KUNAL: ...and then, so long farewell to Cherry Pink!

ANKUR: No way! Can't do that. I just have to get enrolled for Ph.D. this time. Tell me how. This would be my third attempt. What do I do?

[silence]

Tell me, boys, can't you help? [shouts] Tell me what to do.

KUNAL: [drawls] get off the chatline.

ANKUR: Oops! Forgot. [goes to computer, types some more, switches off and turns back. Meanwhile KUNAL has been flipping pages again. SANDEEP has turned away from window and assumed a thoughtful air. ANKUR paces up and down the room restlessly.] Tell me someone, what do I do?

SANDEEP: why, just tell Cat Whiskers he's the greatest. That's what I did three years ago. As you know, I was rejected three times. And then I took him a bottle of Bacardi, sat with him for an hour telling him he's the greatest cat in town. And, presto, I sailed through my enrollment in the very next meeting! Try it. No harm spending one hour of your life in his company if it suits your purpose. You could repeat my lines from three years ago. I took them from *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.

KUNAL: Yes. The end justifies the means. C'mon man, smarten up. You got twenty-four hours to plan your strategy.

ANKUR: You're right. I have to get cracking. Now, man, now. [goes to the mirror, combs down his hair, is about to pick up his scooter keys...]

KUNAL: Hang on for a while. The drama guys should be here any time.

ANKUR: Drama guys?

KUNAL: Bunch of kids doing a street play. I'm helping them. They want to show me a scene.

ANKUR: You mean they are going to rehearse here? In this room? Where's the space?

KUNAL: Only three of them. And it's a short scene. Won't take too much time. Or space, for that matter. They asked me to help and... and... I couldn't get out of it.

[ANKUR glares at him. And then relents.]

ANKUR: Okay. When do they come?

KUNAL: They should have been here already.

SANDEEP: I can see them. Three altogether. Hey, look who's with them.

[ANKUR moves to the window.]

ANKUR: Hey, Cherry! Cherry!

[He rushes out. ANKUR and CHERRY PINK talk in one corner of the stage with arms around each other. Evidently they are sweethearts.]

CHERRY: Yes, I'm nervous, too. Nervous like hell. You have to find some way of belling the cat.

ANKUR: I'm on my way to the liquor shop to get him a bottle of Bacardi. What will you do?

CHERRY: [with a coy smile] I think I know what I will do.

ANKUR: What? [no reply from CHERRY who simply smiles] What?

CHERRY: I've been working on him. I just have to tell him once again that there's nobody quite like him....

ANKUR: And...?

CHERRY: [archly] ...and... and play upon his weakness.

ANKUR: Weakness?

CHERRY: Yes, I'll tell him how people back at Yale talk about him. How his scholarship is impeccable. How his work on the Marginalized Fiction is groundbreaking. And....

ANKUR: And? And?

CHERRY: "I can o'ersway him; for he loves to hear
That unicorns may be betray'd with trees,
And bears with glasses, elephants with holes,
Lions with toils and men with flatterers;
But when I tell him he hates flatterers,
He says he does, being then most flattered.
Let me work;
For I can give his humour the true bent...."

ANKUR: You memorize passages like a parrot. I wish I could do that.

CHERRY: Parrots don't read Shakespeare. [A pause] So I will just apply some Amul Butter to him and... and a little more....

ANKUR: And? What else do you have up this sleeve of yours, my artful little dodger?

CHERRY: Why, not much really. I'll simply mention his... his... er... SA in passing.

ANKUR: SA?

CHERRY: [teasingly] SA. South Africa. [ANKUR makes a face] Sex appeal, stupid. That's his biggest weakness. Flatter his manhood. Tell him girls still swoon over him and, boy, you got him eating out of your hand! He does think he's the greatest. And he loves being told so. Not for

nothing do they call him Cat Whiskers.

ANKUR: [dejected] You mean to say you will line-marro? That pompous old man?

CHERRY: Umm-m-m. Only temporarily, yaar. What's wrong with you? It's just time-pass. Let my enrollment get done. [pause, smile] There's no other way. Is there?

ANKUR: Oh dear! [with an exaggerated sigh] I shall have to challenge him to a duel. We will fight unto death for your fair hand [kisses her hand].

CHERRY: [laughs] Oh, you're sweet!

[Fade out. Scene moves back to Hostel Room where KUNAL is directing the rehearsal of three youngsters while SANDEEP looks on. ANKUR and CHERRY stand on the side.]

KUNAL: No, no, this will not do. You cannot turn your back on the audience, even if you have to attack this character. So, turn just a little this way.... That's better. Now start again.

DURYODHANA: You have lost the game, Yudhishtar. It is payback time. Hand over Draupadi to me. [pause] Yudhishtar, where's Yudhishtar?

DRAUPADI: Gone for the rally, shouting slogans against the University.... We'll get on without him.

DURYODHANA: Okay. Begin again. You have lost the game, Yudhishtar. It is payback time. Hand over Draupadi. You have forfeited all right to be her husband. Draupadi, come forward and take my hand.

BHEEMA: Never. [stepping forward] I, Bheema, will never allow Draupadi to be yours! [stamps his foot and brandishes a hockey stick.]

DURYODHANA: You have no choice. You have lost the game. Draupadi is no longer yours. Only the brave deserve the fair.

BHEEMA: Duryodhana, you will have to fight me first.

CHERRY: [whispering] What's this?

ANKUR: [whispers] A street play.

CHERRY: [whispers] And why is he brandishing that hockey stick?

ANKUR: [whispers] I guess it is supposed to be a weapon – a gada.

DURYODHANA: Out of my way, Bheema.

BHEEMA: Duryodhana [stamps his foot],
Duryodhana.... Duryodhana.... Heck what are my lines?

DURYODHANA: [prompts him] “For the fear of God
Almighty...”

BHEEMA: Yes, for the fear of God Almighty.
Duryodhana, for the fear of God Almighty, don't press
your claim. The heavens will not forgive you. She is your
bhabhi, like your mother. [brandishes his stick again which
gets caught in a pair of pyjamas hanging on the wall. As the
other actors dodge, he twirls the pyjamas like a flag.]

KUNAL: Cut, cut. This will not do. Begin again.

[pause]

DURYODHANA: You have no choice. You have lost the
game. Draupadi is no longer yours.

BHEEMA: Duryodhana, you will have to fight me first.

DURYODHANA: Out of my way, Bheema.

BHEEMA: Duryodhana [stamps his foot],
Duryodhana.... Duryodhana.... Duryodhana. [His foot
gets entangled in the wire and pulls down a lamp.]

[Darkness.]

ACT ONE

Tuesday afternoon.

[Darkness on the stage. Music. An announcer's voice is heard in the background.]

ANNOUNCER: This is your favorite City Radio bringing you the local news. First the Campus Round-Up. With the present Vice-Chancellor's term coming to an end this June, the rumor mill in the University has been working overtime the past few weeks, wondering whether he will be given another term. The general opinion on campus is divided. His supporters feel that the Vice-Chancellor has been a good administrator who has made a tremendous impact on the functioning of the university, streamlining the examination system, weeding out old and corrupt officials, probing into scams and hidden skeletons in musty cupboards. At the same time, there is an unignorable segment among his detractors who are of the opinion that the continual students' agitations on the campus may be his undoing. In particular, there are two controversies raging at the moment which could seal the Vice-Chancellor's fate one way or the other. One is the agitation of the B.Sc. Honors students that enters its sixth week of dharna today. These agitators have failed the B.Sc. Final Year but are clamoring to be promoted into the next class – i.e., M.Sc. First Year. The university rules specify that they must first clear the qualifying examination but the students persist in their strike. Joining hands with them are the Campus Students' Unions, urging the authorities to give up their

“anti-student stand” and promote the “deserving” candidates. “Deserving”, as a Student leader explains, means that they deserve to be given a chance for higher education and should not be discriminated against simply because they have failed the lower examination.

With the mercury in the region shooting up, affairs on the campus are also hotting up and it remains to be seen whether these unsettling events will cast their shadow on the fate of the man at the helm of university affairs. Only time will tell whether the Vice-Chancellor will relinquish his chair to a new incumbent or be given a fresh lease of life.

This is your favorite City Radio. [music]

[Lights. Scene: the Languages Department. A big table (the Chairman's) on left represents the office of the Chair, some chairs and sofas on right form the Faculty Lounge. At the back, centre, a clerk sits typing at a table. On the walls are some book shelves and some pictures of well-known writers. The front part of the stage represents a verandah outside the department.]

[Enter ARTI DAS]

CLERK: Good morning ma'am. I thought you were on leave today.

ARTI DAS: Yes, I am. Just looked in to pick up some papers I had forgotten. I'm on my way to Delhi.

CLERK: Which means you won't be attending the meeting tomorrow morning?

ARTI DAS: Meeting? What meeting? I don't know of any.

CLERK: The Administrative Committee. There's a Ph.D. enrollment coming up, a registration case and a pre-submission presentation.

ARTI DAS: So many cases together? When was the notice circulated?

CLERK: Yesterday after you left. It's there in the file.

ARTI DAS: [puts on her glasses and peers into a file] Good God! How was I expected to know? Why couldn't the Chair give sufficient notice? Where was the rush? [Pause. Puts away her glasses and looks up suspiciously.] Who are the candidates involved?

CLERK: Let me see – the presentation is of his research student, Cherry.

ARTI DAS: Cherry?

Clerk: Yes, Charanjeet Kaur. The one with the Yale background.

ARTI DAS: Okay. [slowly, as if beginning to understand] I see. [pause] And the other two cases?

CLERK: The Enrollment and the Registration are repeat cases which have figured in meetings earlier.

ARTI DAS: [seemingly annoyed] Well....

[CLERK excuses herself, turns and walks off the stage with some papers.]

[BISHAKHA MITRA enters.]

BISHAKHA MITRA: Good morning.

ARTI DAS: Good morning to you. Did you know anything about tomorrow's meeting?

BISHAKHA: No, I just heard of it. In any case, I'm not in the committee. Two others on the panel are on leave. Which leaves just the Chair and the new lecturer. And of course, the temporary hand who will go by anything the Chair suggests.

ARTI: Beautiful, so the quorum will be complete and Dr Joglekar can have his way! He sure knows the tricks of the trade!

BISHAKHA: And Charanjeet's case is coming up too. You bet she'll sail through fine, what with all the visits she has made to his office the last few weeks.

ARTI: Well, we can't do anything at this point. So, let him do what he wants and get away with it again this time. I've

got more things happening in my life. Wouldn't like to waste it fuming over his machinations.

BISHAKHA: Aren't you attending the meeting?

ARTI: No, I'm on my way out. Have to be in Delhi for a meeting this evening.

BISHAKHA: Well, have a safe trip. See you when you get back. [leaves]

ARTI: Bye. [leaves in a different direction, forgetting her purse behind]

[Enter Dr JOGLEKAR, the Chair, popularly known as CAT WHISKERS. Heads for his table. Flicks an imaginary dust particle off his shirt sleeve, sits, adjust his glasses, strokes his graying beard, and looks around. Picks up the phone.]

CAT: Yes, may I speak to the Editor? [pause] Good morning, this is Dr Joglekar. [Laughs heartily] Oh yes, it was good, wasn't it? We must meet again. In fact why not this Sunday? Drop in for a drink. Oh, by the way, you mentioned the review of my book? When is it coming out? Very flattering, is it? Thank you. [Tries hard to suppress his excitement.] And who is the author? [pause] No, I have no idea. I don't know any such person....
Thank you. Thank you so much. But do you think you could bring it out sometime soon? Say Sunday next? You see, my interview for professorship is round the corner and

some published reviews of my work would certainly help. Yes, yes, the book on Marginalized Fictions. Okay. Yes.... Yes.. Right. Bye.

[Puts down the phone. Thinks. Picks it up again. Dials a number.]

Hello. Is that Administrative Block? Give me Secrecy, please. [pause]. May I speak to the Registrar's Secretary? ... Good morning, Mr Chaman Lal. Were you able to find out what I had asked you? Yes, the experts for our interview. How many? Two? Yes, yes. From Patiala? And the other one? Okay. Okay. And who is the VC's nominee? Not the Dean? Yes, yes. Any one else on the committee? [pause] And what date has been fixed for the interview? How many applicants? Yes, I know there are two others from our department, all trying for the professorship. No, no, I don't think I need to worry. I have adequate visibility in this region. Yes. Oh, you read my articles? Thank you. So nice of you. Thank you.

[Disconnects. Thinks for a while and then makes a third call.]

Is that the honorable minister's office? This is the Chair, University Faculty of Languages. [pause] Good morning, sir, this is About the interview – the date has been fixed. The twenty-fifth of this month. Oh, you know about it? The experts – one is from Patiala and the other from Jammu. You know that, too? So, do you think you can ask Mantri-ji to put in a word for me? Thanks. Yes, I

am much obliged. Yes, yes. And did you get the packet I sent to your place yesterday? Not, not at all, it's something so small, sir. I just thought your kids would like it. ... Danish chocolates. I picked them up from the Duty-free on my last trip. No, not at all. Thank you. And please do talk to mantri-ji. Thank you, sir. Thank you.

[Sits back on his chair, staring at the ceiling, in deep thought. Silence. Suddenly he starts up.]

Who's that?

[Silence. Alternating light and shadows on the stage. CAT looks around wildly.]

No, not again, papa, what do you want now?

[Enter GHOST – a tall, stately man in white. Stands there watching him with disapproval.]

What is it, papa? I didn't call you.

[GHOST remains silent, watching.]

What do you want? What have I done now?

GHOST: You know what you have done, my son. You promised me you'd live a straight life. You have not lived up to your word!

CAT: W...w...what are you trying to tell me?

GHOST: You know what you are doing is not right. This is professional dishonesty.

CAT: No, papa, on the contrary, I am doing very well. My book on Marginalized Fictions is out. A review should be appearing this week in the local dailies. It compares me with the greatest of literary critics.

GHOST: And who has written the review? [CAT is silent, breathing heavily.] Who has written the review, my son? [silence] You know you have written it yourself. Every word of it. You know you are cheating. Not being true to the profession.

CAT: But...But...

GHOST: And what about the promotion you are angling for? You are trying to rig that interview, too.

CAT: No, papa, I....I....

GHOST: [sighs] I know you, my son. I know what you are doing. Don't try and fool me. You may outsmart the world but not your father.

CAT: [angrily] But you know, papa, that I deserve to be a professor.

GHOST: So do the others competing with you. But they are not trying to contact the experts. They are not sending gifts to politicians who will put in a word for them. They are

not writing flattering reviews of their own books.

CAT: [in mounting anger] So what? So what if I wrote the review of my own book? Walt Whitman did the same and Whitman was a great poet. In any case, nobody will ever know that I have written it myself.

GHOST: Truth will out one day. And then how will you face the world? [wags a warning finger at him] Every farthing of the cost will be exacted, my son. There'll be no getting away.

CAT: No, no one can touch me. No one will know. There's no evidence.

GHOST: My son, my son.... [shakes his head sadly.]

CAT: [shouting] Go away. You are nothing but a ghost. Like the ghost of Hamlet's father you keep coming to torment me. [Rushes to the bookshelf, takes out a hidden bottle, takes a long swig from it, puts it back. Turns around to face the ghost.] You think you can ruin me? No, I won't let you. You are not real. Go away, go away.

[GHOST fades away. CAT goes to the bookshelf again, takes another swig from the bottle and returns.]

CAT: [laughing loudly] Ha, ha, ha. See, there's nothing here. [rubs his chest vigorously] Now that I have taken heart, all hallucinations disappear. What funny tricks the imagination can play! But I won't let it disturb me. [walks

up and down.] Let me think of something else. “But, look, the morn, in russet mantle clad, / Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastern hill.” Ah, let me think of pleasanter things. Let me think of Cherry. My Cherry. Oh, Cherry, my sweetheart.

[Background music – “O, let me be your teddy bear” as CAT goes pirouetting round the room.]

[Fade out]

[Lights again]

[CAT stands at the window. Enter CHERRY, heading towards him. Stops a few feet away, looking at him intently.]

CHERRY: His hair was pretty plumage, especially when the sun shone on it, highlighting its rich, auburn hues. And his complexion the colour of apple blossom.

CAT: Oh, Cherry Pink, my Sunshine! You look terrific today.

CHERRY: [with a deep breath, making a dramatic gesture] I shall always remember my teddy bear in this pose, silhouetted against the window, with the apple blossom in full bloom in the background.

CAT: That sounds familiar. Where have I heard it before?

CHERRY: Actually this was the first impression Maud Gonne made on W. B. Yeats. But it seems appropriate today as I see you profiled against the window. You look imposing.

CAT: And is there any apple blossom in the background?

CHERRY: Only the Gul Mohur. The Mayflower. But that is in bloom, too, and makes a striking background.

CAT: You have an artist's vision. [kisses her hand] And how absolutely delicious you look today.

CHERRY: Thanks. And you, too. New shirt? [she runs her fingers familiarly over his chest.]

CAT: Yup, got it at Harrod's. Like it?

CHERRY: Cool! [takes off his glasses, perches them on her nose, looks around, then hands them back to CAT WHISKERS.]

[Background music – “Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White”. CAT and CHERRY talk to each other earnestly, CHERRY sitting on his table, facing him. Occasional gestures of intimacy between the two.]

CAT: So, are you nervous about your presentation?

CHERRY: How can I be? With you, my teddy bear, around. You are so good! Such a support!

CAT: And why not? Deserving candidates need to be supported. And you [standing up tall, looking down at her, traces his index finger down her nose] certainly are.

CHERRY: The credit goes to you. I'm so lucky to be working under your supervision. You really are a cut above the rest. How can I ever thank you?

CAT: Hm-m-m.... May be you could... dine with me after the meeting. To celebrate your successful presentation.

CHERRY: Sure, that would be great. I'd love that. But tell me, er...er... what about the job you mentioned yesterday? Do you think I have a chance?

CAT: Why not? We'll try to have the right people on the selection committee. Meanwhile you could work on your CV.

CHERRY: And my article that you promised would come out in the department journal?

CAT: Yes, it is in the press. Should be here any day.

CHERRY: Oh, you are so good. [hugs him quickly with a forced smile.]

[Commotion outside. Apparently a noisy group of students chanting slogans.]

Students [from off stage]: We want justice. Students Union Zindabad. We want Re-evaluation.

CAT: What now? What's the problem?

CHERRY: It's last year's students. They are agitating against the results. They say they deserve better marks. Most of them have Compartments or Reappears. Several have failed.

CAT: Good God! A students' agitation at this juncture would create trouble for me.

CHERRY: For you? Why?

CAT: Er...er... well, nobody wants trouble on the campus. And as the Chair I would certainly like to avoid it. [goes to the window and looks out] Do me a favour. Go find out more. Find out what the trouble is. What do they want?

CHERRY: Sure will.

[Exit CHERRY. CAT goes to the window to look out. Fade out.]

[Spotlight off-stage on the three students who were rehearsing the play in the Prologue. One of them takes on the role of Director while the others rehearse the same scene as before.]

DURYODHANA: You have lost the game, Yudhishtar. It is payback time. Send for Draupadi.

BHEEMA: Never shall that happen. I, Bheema, will never

allow Draupadi to be yours! [stamps his foot and brandishes his gada.]

DURYODHANA: You have no choice. You have lost the game. Draupadi is no longer yours.

BHEEMA: Duryodhana, you will have to fight me first.

DURYODHANA: Out of my way, Bheema.

BHEEMA: Duryodhana [stamps his foot], Duryodhana.... Duryodhana, for the fear of God Almighty, don't press your claim. The heavens themselves will not forgive you. She is your bhabhi, like your mother.

DURYODHANA: Out of my way, Bheema.

BHEEMA: Duryodhana, Duryodhana.....

[Spotlight fades. Stage lights up. Same scene as before. Rehearsing students stand aside and watch as the following scene takes place.]

[Enter ARTI DAS, looking for her purse.]

ARTI DAS: My bag. What did I do with my bag.... Oh, here it is.

[Picks up bag from one of the chairs, is about to move off the stage when she spots CAT at the window. Pauses as if

to say something. Changes her mind and moves on. CAT, meanwhile, turns back and calls out to her.]

CAT: Good morning, ma'am.

ARTI DAS: [shortly] Good morning. [turns to go.]

CAT: We have an important meeting coming up tomorrow.

ARTI DAS: Good for you.

CAT: Aren't you going to attend it?

ARTI DAS: You know I'm on leave. I'm on my way to the station.

CAT: [with feigned concern] Ah, what a pity. I wish I had known.

ARTI DAS: [bristling] You did know, you saw my leave application.

CAT: Did I really?

ARTI DAS: Yes, you did. [with mounting anger] And that is why you fixed the meeting for tomorrow. So that you could have your way this time, too, without any opposition from me. Or from the others who happen to be on leave.

CAT: Believe me, that was not the intention.

ARTI DAS: Come on, you have been doing it all along. Why couldn't you schedule the meeting for next week? You know most of us are on leave these two days. So you deliberately fix it for today. And what about the three-day notice you are supposed to give? [pause].... But it's okay, one expects such wily tricks from you. Do what you like. Carry on with your little games. I've got more things to worry about.

CAT: [angrily] Excuse me, you are making allegations.

ARTI DAS: Yes. Allegations that are based on facts. You have not been following the correct procedure.

CAT: You are ruining a perfectly good day. You are picking a fight.

ARTI DAS: Excuse me, you are the one who began it. I didn't even wish to talk to you.

CAT: [waving his finger at her] You are behaving in an unpleasant manner.

ARTI DAS: By telling you to follow the right procedure?

CAT: [angrily] You... you....

ARTI DAS: Yes, I, I.

[CAT walks up and down angrily. Turns to her again, pointing his finger at the ceiling.]

CAT: I believe in transparency. In complete objectivity. That is why I am holding the meeting tomorrow.

ARTI DAS: Yes, when you have your pet student's case coming up. And when most of your colleagues won't be around to question your decisions.

CAT: [Sputters. Points his finger at her.] You are making insinuations.

ARTI DAS: You started it. I didn't.

CAT: You... you... You are... [grotes for a word] subversive. Yes, subversive. [turns away in a huff, turns back again] And... and confused.

ARTI DAS: [coolly] May be I am. So what are you going to do about it?

[CAT seems to walk off the stage. Changes his mind and walks back to her again. Leans forward threateningly, pointing an index finger at her.]

CAT: You are spoiling my mood.

[ARTI DAS looks him up and down witheringly without answering. CAT waits for an answer. Then continues...]

CAT: you... you ... you are....

[ARTI DAS continues to look at him witheringly. CAT

turns away. 'Then changes his mind and walks back.]

CAT: Let me tell you something. You are are...
confused.... Yes, confused....

[Turns to go. Walks a few paces away, then turns back.
Repeats his words....]

CAT: Let me tell you something more [leaning forward as
if taking off for a race]. You are [fumbles for a word] ...
confused. CONFUSED.

[ARTI DAS looks on with a smirk. Picks up her purse,
tosses her hair and walks off the stage, leaving CAT
fumbling.]

[Fade out. Spotlight on the rehearsing students again.]

BHEEMA: [his gestures mimic those of CAT in the
preceding scene, leaning forward, pointing his finger,
stamping his foot] Duryodhana... Duryodhana....

DURYODHANA: [mimics actions of ARTI DAS, with
smirk on the face] It is pay-back time. Draupadi is mine!

BHEEMA: Duryodhana... Duryodhana....

[Darkness]

ANNOUNCER'S VOICE: This is your favorite City Radio bringing you another edition of Campus Round-Up. [music] A controversy now gaining momentum on the campus is focused around the Languages Department where the students of MA First Year are unhappy with their results. They allege that their papers have not been evaluated properly and are on hunger strike with the demand that their scripts be sent for evaluation to examiners from Jhumri Talia University which is reputed to be “a student-friendly institution of higher learning”. Leading this agitation is a group of thirteen young men and women who were in the news earlier this year for not having attended the minimum number of lectures. Instead of the requisite 75% most of them had attended only 15%. Their agitation earlier was supported by the Students' Union which is lending its support to them in the current protest, too.

As in the case of the B.Sc. Honors students, it may be noted, that the authorities – who insist on adhering to rules – are being condemned as “anti-student”. The demand of the agitating students is that university rules should be framed in consultation with students, attendance in classes should not be mandatory, there should be no limit on reappear chances given to students who have failed, and examiners should be appointed only if they are “pro-student”. They have offered to give the university a list of “student-friendly” examiners they have faith in.

This is your favorite City Radio. [Music]

[The incessant ringing of a phone. Then the following dialogue is heard in the dark]

FIRST VOICE: Is that the Dean? This is the Vice-Chancellor.

DEAN: Good morning, Sir, I have copies of the news reports that you may wish to see. Should I send it to your office now?

VICE-CHANCELLOR: Do that. But first I'd like to know what is the latest position regarding the students' agitation.

DEAN: Sir, the Honors Students are still adamant that they want promotion without examination. Two of them are on hunger strike. The Languages students are on gherao outside. They want their papers re-checked by faculty from Jhumri Talia University.

VICE-CHANCELLOR: What are you doing about it? The agitation has to end. Please see to it.

DEAN: I await your instructions, Sir?

VICE-CHANCELLOR: Tell them their demands will be met. They will be promoted.

DEAN: But, Sir, what about the university regulations? The stipulated qualifying examination? How do we bypass that?

VICE-CHANCELLOR: Never mind that. We will form a committee to look into the matter. Put two senior professors on the committee and an outside expert. Let them give their report in two weeks' time.

DEAN: Sir, what if they give an adverse report?

VICE-CHANCELLOR: Even better. We will set up another committee and ask for another report. A third committee if necessary. That will give us more time. Do this as early as possible and diffuse the situation.

DEAN: Yes, Sir. And the Languages students?

VICE-CHANCELLOR: Look into the demands of the Languages students. We cannot, repeat, cannot afford to have disturbance on the campus. But wait, try and negotiate with them. Tell them I will appoint a committee to look into their complaints. This will give us some time to fortify our position.

DEAN: Yes, Sir.

[Lights. CAT sitting at the table. Enter CHERRY PINK.]

CAT: So, what was it? What do they want?

CHERRY: Just as I told you, they insist that their papers have not been marked properly. They deserve better marks and now they insist that all their scripts should be sent to Jhumri Talia.

CAT: And who are their leaders?

CHERRY: Those who agitated against their lecture shortage last term.

CAT: Talk to them, can't you? Tell them to call off their agitation.

CHERRY: On what terms?

CAT: Hm.m.m.... Tell them we'll help them improve their score in Final Year. Tell them to take up the option on Marginalized Fictions. I...er... we... will ensure that they get a good score.

CHERRY: [looking at him quizzically] You actually want me to say that?

CAT: Er...er...you see, final year is not as tough as first year, the score is always better. And the option that I teach is new – it has a lot of potential. It comprises the latest in critical approaches. It was introduced in the interest of the students, so that they would move away from obsolete stuff like Shakespeare and Milton, go on the more challenging areas that have contemporary significance. You know, in the age of globalization we have to move beyond old-fashioned boundaries and explore the rest of the world. My paper will help them keep abreast of the latest happenings in academia abroad. The syllabus follows an international standard.

CHERRY: And what about job potential?

CAT: Yes, job potential, too, is taken care of. After all when my students appear for interviews, I, being the Chair, will be asking them questions related to their specializations and – well, if they are interested in my field then they will be at an advantage. Not only in this university but in neighboring universities, too. I happen to be on the selection committees of various colleges in the region.

CHERRY: Yes, I know. [clasps her hands and assumes a grateful look] I am privileged, indeed, to work with you. I'll talk to the students outside.

CAT: Just make them come to an agreement, whatever the cost.

CHERRY: Sure will. [Turns to go, changes her mind and returns....] By the way, about the job you mentioned....

CAT: Yes, yes, it is yours. Just let them announce an interview date. I'll see to the rest.

CHERRY: And my presentation...?

CAT: Don't worry about that either. Just leave it to me, sweetheart.

[CHERRY blows him a flying kiss and exits. Before going off-stage she winks at the audience. CAT looks out of the window, wringing his hands.]

[Darkness. Assorted voices of agitating students are heard. Spotlight on CHERRY. The agitators are in the dark.]

STUDENT LEADER: Is-students' Union...

STUDENTS TOGETHER: Zindabad.

STUDENT LEADER: Langwidge Department...

STUDENTS TOGETHER: Hai Hai.

STUDENT LEADER: We want...

STUDENTS TOGETHER: Re-evaluation.

CHERRY: Your attention... may I have your attention?

STUDENTS: Sh...sh...sh....

STUDENT LEADER: Peace. Shanti. Chup kar, bhai. Let us listen to her.

CHERRY: Friends, I know your cause is just, but you cannot tarnish the fair name of the university by indulging in such slogan-shouting. I offer you an acceptable solution to your problem if you are prepared to listen.

STUDENTS TOGETHER: [in commotion] We want justice. We want revaluation. Down with unfairness. Give us our due. Examination system Hai Hai....

CHERRY: Peace, peace my friends. [silence] Please listen to me. Here is a proposal – your marks will be compensated in your final year if you take up the option paper on Marginalized Fictions. That is a promise from the Chairman.

STUDENT: How is that possible? How can we believe you? This is a trick.... Carrot-and-stick policy. She's the Head's chamchi.

CHERRY: No, I'm not the Head's chamchi. Unlike you all, however, I just happen to know which side my bread is buttered and you would be wise to follow my example. Now just listen to me. Take my word for it... You see, it's like this.... The paper is taught by our respected Chair who also sets the question paper and evaluates it at the end of the year. All you need to do is be good students and call off your agitation. [pause] This is a promise, I repeat.

STUDENTS: [in unison] No, no, no, no. No promises.

CHERRY: Okay, but see [conspiratorially], I am with you and I entreat you to hold your anger for a day – just one day. I will negotiate on your behalf with the Chair and also with the authorities. ... one day, just one day. Tomorrow you can resume your agitation. Believe me, you stand to gain. [Aside] I stand to gain, too. Maan jao, na.

[Loud murmurs of incredulous voices, slowly dying out.]

[Lights. CAT standing at the window. Enter CHERRY.]

CAT: Have they gone?

CHERRY: I talked them into it.

CAT: [visibly relieved] Phew! What exactly happened?

CHERRY: Well, I just got them to disperse. Now you owe me one.

CAT: Do you think they will really call off their agitation?

CHERRY: I did talk them into it. But one never knows. You may have to offer them a stronger bait next time.

CAT: And you will help me again?

CHERRY: Of course. It would be my pleasure. [Comes close to him, looking up adoringly at his face.]

CAT: Oh, you are so good!

CHERRY: Anything for you. You deserve everyone's support.

CAT: [sighs] If only all my colleagues would believe that!

CHERRY: They must be jealous of you. Of your learning, of your reputation, of the fact that you keep going abroad for lectures, of your book....

CAT: [puffing up] Yes, they are jealous. You are right.

CHERRY: You are cool, man. Simply the greatest.

CAT: [puffed up] Yes, I am the greatest....

[They smile at each other and then turn to the audience, as though posing for a picture.]

[Background music – “Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White.”]

[Curtain]

ACT TWO

Wednesday.

[The Scene is the same as in Act One]

[Enter a group of STUDENTS wearing identical masks and holding placards. The one who leads them is their spokesman, the rest follow and nod in agreement from time to time. Evidently, a meeting is in progress to chart out the next plan of action. Lots of commotion.]

LEADER: Dear friends and comrades, I think we all know why we have gathered here. We have spent many days sweating it out in the hot sun but we haven't made any headway so far. We have been given promises, but that is all. Promises that our demands will be looked into. Promises that a committee will be set up to probe the unfairness that we are all victims to. Promises that if we give up our struggle we will all be given lollies. But, dear comrades, these are empty promises. They are not enough. We know what we want. We want action. We want...

STUDENTS: Justice for all.

LEADER: And our demand is...

STUDENTS: Re-evaluation.

LEADER: Yes, we are all agreed on this, and have bided our time, hoping that the promises made to us will

materialize. Today is the last day of our patience. If, by 12 noon no decision is taken by the authorities, we will intensify our struggle. We will begin hunger strike. Yes, dear comrades, there is no other way. The last promise made to us was through a messenger from the Chair who, as you know, offered us conditional remedy that we cannot really be sure of. We are told that if we opt for his course in the final year we will be assured of high marks to compensate for our low percentage in First Year. Do we agree to this offer, my friends?

STUDENTS: No, there is something fishy.... How can we be sure of his word? What if he backs out of his promise. No, we want revaluation and will settle for nothing less.

Nothing less, nothing less....

LEADER: Dear comrades in arms, let us now review the situation....

[Darkness]

[Darkness Still. Voices on the phone. VICE-CHANCELLOR is talking to the Chair, Dr JOGLEKAR.]

CAT: But, sir, you know their demands are unreasonable. They are students who did not attend classes. They were involved in the shoot-out incident at the Campus Corner. Their performance in the class and also in the annual exams

has been very poor. So how can we give in to their demands?

VICE-CHANCELLOR: I understand your point of view, but such unrests taking place on the campus is bad publicity for the university. We have to put an end to it somehow. As they are your students the responsibility is yours. Get your faculty members together, look into it, and arrive at some sort of negotiations. We cannot allow the situation to linger on forever. It reflects poorly on your management, too.

CAT: But, sir....

VICE-CHANCELLOR: I want this taken care of today, if possible. Talk to them and find a solution.

CAT: Yes, sir.

[Lights. Students are still at the meeting with their leader.]

[Enter CAT WHISKERS accompanied by BISHAKHA MITRA, and CHITRA RAO. Students clamour for a while, then fall silent and make room for the teachers.]

CAT: Good morning to all of you. Warm day, huh? [Students snigger.] Would you all like to come into one of the lecture halls to talk? [angry protests] Okay, okay, I guess you are not in the mood for small talk. So let's see how we can best interact. [pause] You have a problem, right?

STUDENTS: [severally] Yes, we have been victimized.... Our marks have been slashed down ruthlessly by our teachers.... They have failed us deliberately.... We want justice.... We want our papers re-evaluated by external examiners.

CAT: One at a time, please. Let me get this clearly.... You say you have deliberately been failed?

LEADER: Yes. Most of us have failed whereas we deserve to pass. This is deliberate vendetta because some of the teachers do not like us.

CAT: Let me assure you that you are mistaken. No one has failed you deliberately. Your papers have been evaluated with great care.

LEADER: [loudly] You mean, sir, that we deserve to fail? No, sir, we want justice.

STUDENTS: Students' Union Zindabad.

CAT: Hold it, hold it. Let's begin again.... You say you are not happy with your results?

LEADER: No, sir, we are not happy. We are angry. We deserve to pass.

CAT: So, if you feel that justice has not been done, then the university has a method to take care of your grievances. You can apply for re-evaluation. Why don't you?

LEADER: Sir, we want re-evaluation free of cost. Why should we pay for being victimized by our teachers?

CAT: Free of cost? That is a university level decision and I do not know what the authorities will say to it. However, I can forward your request and persuade them to look into it sympathetically. What else?

LEADER: Sir, we want a committee of external evaluators to examine our scripts. Here is a list of examiners who can be placed on the committee.

CAT: Let me see.... Um.m... they are all from Jhumri Talia University. Any special reason for this?

LEADER: Yes, sir, that is a very pro-student university. Their results are always excellent.

CAT: I see. Any other demand?

LEADER: Sir, we want that a representative from the Students' Union should also be on the committee.

CAT: What? You want a representative on the evaluation committee?

BISHAKHA MITRA: This is outrageous. Do you think this is your election scene where you can send an observer for the counting of votes. Sorry, this cannot be done.

LEADER: [in anger] Then our struggle continues....

Students' unity....

STUDENTS: Zindabad.

LEADER: We want....

STUDENTS: Justice for all.

CAT: Hush.... Wait, let's see if we can arrive at a middle ground. One, you want free re-evaluation. Two, you want examiners of your choice appointed. Three, you want your representative to be an observer in the evaluation process. Anything else? Or is that it?

LEADER: That's it.

CAT: Now, I suggest that you give up your third demand which is not possible. The first two demands we will recommend to the VC. Not only will we convey your demands to them, we will support them, too. Is that okay?

LEADER: [after some discussion with comrades] Okay, sir. We will postpone the hunger strike meanwhile. But the dharna continues until a university decision is announced.

CAT: Right. Let's see how quickly we can resolve the matter. I have a meeting in a short while but I will first convey your demands to the Vice-Chancellor.

[Exit. Darkness. Music.]

[Lights. A meeting taking place. CAT is seated at his table. CHITRA RAO sits on one side, almost dozing off. Research students SANDEEP, KUNAL and ANKUR on the other. CHERRY stands facing them, talking about her research project.]

CHERRY: ... finally, I would like to define my position once more....

[Enter DURGADAS MITTAL, dressed in a khadi kurta pyjama, who takes his seat at the back and hears Cherry's concluding sentences.]

CHERRY: ...I would like to conclude my presentation on interpreting ideology in literature by examining how culture links social action with fundamental beliefs, a collective identity with the course of history, exploring the margins at which disciplinary discourses break down and enter the world of political agency. This is the project I began at Yale University, inspired by the august faculty there, and I have been working on it for the last two years here at the department. [pause] Thank you for your time and attention, ladies and gentlemen, and please forgive me for exceeding the half hour allotted to me.

[Everyone claps, CHITRA RAO wakes up with a start, CHERRY takes her seat.]

CAT: Well, that was the last item on the agenda today, an outstanding presentation by one of our brilliant research students, Cherry... er... Charanjeet Kaur. Are there any

questions, comments or suggestions? [Silence.] No one?

DURGADAS MITTAL: [in a high pitched voice] I would like to congratulate you on an excellent presentation. I'm sorry I got a bit late [SANDEEP, KUNAL and ANKUR snigger] but I did hear the last portion and was wondering if you are taking into consideration some key issues that are being debated today. For instance, do you think that the lessons of postmodernism, especially its critique of essentialism, have been learned and put into practice or are we slipping back into modernism and its concomitant attitude toward subjectivity? I was also wondering whether or not in your opinion we have forgotten the strategic aspect of Spivak's "strategic essentialism" and returned to an identity politics wedded to essentialist attitudes? Are we ready for the "post-gender (and post-human) world" Haraway called for? Do you think we are ready for a radically political culture "beyond the color line" as Gilroy put it? Or, are you of the opinion that we can finally abandon these categories which have, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, "made us suffer too much"? [pause] These, I think, are some of the issues that need to be tackled.

CHERRY: Thank you, Sir, for your insightful observation. May I point out that my topic is "Literature and Ideology with special reference to Latin American Fiction," and not "Essentialism /Exceptionalism" which, incidentally, is the topic my friend and colleague here [pointing at ANKUR] is working on.

DURGADAS MITTAL: [gapes momentarily, recovers, then says quickly] Yes, yes, I know that, but you can also relate your topic to what I have pointed out. It would add a different dimension to your study.

CHERRY: Certainly, Sir, I will keep it in mind. My main focus, however, is the text as the product of a cultural given, the relationship between a creative work and its context, and the shifting power configurations between the individual and the society, the center and the margins.

[An awkward silence]

CAT: Any more questions?

CHITRA RAO: [clearing her throat] I have no problems with the second candidate or the third, but I do have some reservations regarding the first one. My question... let me see if I can word it in a simple way.... [pause] What, may I ask, is the relevance of your project in today's world? When literary and critical scholarship has progressed far beyond man's imagination, into cyberspace, you are still focused on myth and legend. Do you think it is worthwhile? It is like going back to Shakespeare after having studied Homi Bhabha and Edward Said. It is like travelling back in time, from the SMS days to prehistoric times when messages were sent via pigeons. So what is the justification for working on a topic like yours? Instead, I would like to see you focusing attention on Dalit Writing, on the ideology of the oppressed, on the victimization of the powerless as presented in postcolonial literatures.

Perhaps you could also....

KUNAL: Certainly, the areas you suggest are very interesting, viable field of research, but I would beg to differ in my research interests. In my study I am concerned with the politics behind the empowerment of certain texts, the logic of canon-formation, and the porous boundaries between the elite and the popular, the high and the low. Sure, I use myths and legends but I use them as a via media, a bridge between contemporaneity and antiquity. As such, they are relevant even today, even in the cyberspace we are part of, even in times when everyone seems to be talking about nothing but postcolonial buzzwords....

CHITRA RAO: Excuse me, young man....

CAT: Allow me to sum up the argument. My worthy colleague has a point that you may wish to consider at some other point of time. But, you have put up a good defence of your project and I think it deserves our appreciation. Let us give all these aspiring researchers a big hand and disperse for lunch. Thank you very much, everyone, and congratulations to the three of you [pointing at KUNAL, ANKUR and CHERRY]. Lets give them all a big hand.

[Clapping. CHITRA RAO seems keen on saying something more but does not. Exits with other faculty members.]

STUDENTS: Sir, you are fantastic. You are the greatest. You are terrific.

CHERRY: you are amazing.

CAT: [swelling visibly with pride] I am the greatest. I am amazing! I am terrific!

[SANDEEP, KUNAL, and ANKUR thank him and exit. ANKUR tries to draw CHERRY's attention but she hovers around CAT. CHERRY looks around, ensures they are alone, then sidles up to CAT. The two smile at each other and talk.]

[Music]

[Darkness]

[Announcer's voice is heard.]

ANNOUNCER: This is your favorite City Radio bringing you the local news. Here we are, this Wednesday afternoon, with another session of the Campus Round-Up [music]. The Vice-Chancellor's D-day is here. Excitement on the campus has reached a crescendo. Will he or won't he get another term? Recent events seem to be in his favour. The agitating Honors students yesterday reached an agreement with the authorities and called off their strike. At this point it is not clear what the terms of the agreement are but it is generally believed that a "pro-student" decision will be taken. The Languages Department stir has also being attended to and the grape-vine says that it may be resolved successfully. Again, the compromise arrived at is not spelt out. Interviewing a cross-section of individuals on the

campus, it is apparent that the wind is now blowing in a single direction, i.e., in support of the VC getting an extension. Any time today we should have the final verdict from the Central Government. Watch out for it, folks.
[music]

And now the weather....

[Lights]

[Students rehearsing the street play.]

DURYODHANA: You have lost the game, Yudhishtar. It is payback time. Send for Draupadi. [pauses, looks around] Where's Yudhishtar today?

BHEEMA: Outside the VC's office, on dharna with the Students' Union. Let's get on without him. [stepping forward] Never. I, Bheema, will never allow Draupadi to be yours!

[Stamps his foot and brandishes his stick.]

DURYODHANA: You have no choice. You have lost the game. Draupadi is no longer yours.

BHEEMA: Duryodhana, you will have to fight me first.

DURYODHANA: Out of my way, Bheema.

BHEEMA: Duryodhana [stamps his foot], Duryodhana.... Duryodhana.... for the fear of God

Almighty, don't press your claim. The heavens will not forgive you. She is your bhabhi, like your mother. [looks around] Draupadi, Draupadi, where's Draupadi.

[DRAUPADI covers head with a dupatta and comes forward.]

DRAUPADI: [to audience] These stupid male chauvinists, what do they think they are up to? [takes her place between DURYODHANA and BHEEMA.]

DURYODHANA: Draupadi is mine.

BHEEMA: Never will she be thine. She is mine.

DURYODHANA: Mine.

BHEEMA: Mine.

[Both mime a tug of war, pulling in opposite directions. DRAUPADI stands in between the two, dupatta over the face, pretending to be pulled first one way then the other.]

DURYODHANA: Let me claim my prize.

BHEEMA: Never.

[The two Actors freeze in mid-action, as though threatening each other. Spotlight on Draupadi who steps forward, holding some pages.]

DRAUPADI: [to audience] Will no one take my opinion? Am I an object to be bartered away from one set of owners to another? From one patriarchal ownership to another? Do I have no voice? Must I always remain the silenced other? No, never. I shall throw aside my purdah and rise in revolt. Rise like the lioness and destroy the oppressor. Rise like Sylvia Plath's queen bee. [Throws off the dupatta with a flourish.] Beware, beware, out of the ash I rise with my red hair, and I eat men like air. [A significant pause] No more, no more shall I suffer the five-fold phallocratic yoke. I am weary. Weary of having not one, not two, not three, not four, but five – five, all of five stupid hunks, five insensitive creatures invading my space, my body, my peace of mind, night after night. Pawing all over me. Trespassing on what is mine and mine alone. Don't I have the right to privacy? The right to be left alone? Lay off, I say, leave me alone, all of you. Just let me be. [Pause] You, holier-than-thou Yudhishtar, you with your big talk and no action, did you ever bother to find out what I want? You, Arjun, the universally acclaimed marksman, did you ever realise that I am not just an inanimate trophy that you won in a competition? I am a human being, too, an individual with hopes and aspirations of my own. You, Bheema, you fitness freak, you brawn and no brain, keep your muscles for the wrestling ring and not for the bedroom. I want none of it. [fumbles with the pages] Hey... page missing... no, here it is.... And as for you, Nakul and Sahdev, believe me [sighs], I am tired of babysitting you. Get off, just get off my back, all of you and leave me alone, alone, alone. I don't want you, I don't need you!

But wait ... [a thoughtful pause] a life without men? Is that what I want? Lonely nights without any human touch? Without a comforting arm around my body when I sink into the abyss of the night? Do I really want that? [pause] What then? I know. I want someone who needs me. Someone who wants me. Someone who will not treat me like a piece of furniture. Someone like... like ... like... yes, Duryodhana. The tall, dark and handsome Duryodhana whom I have secretly fancied all these years. [turns to look at DURYODHANA]

And yet... [looks in the opposite direction] and yet, how can I betray these five men who have been my husbands? Help me, someone, help me. Oh, heavens, here I am, standing at the crossroads. Show me the path. Lord Krishna, where are you? Guide me, today at this critical juncture. [Takes her place between DURYODHANA and BHEEMA.] Make room for me, guys. [DURYODHANA and BHEEMA unfreeze and move apart, making room for DRAUPADI.] Okay, now resume action.

BHEEMA: Draupadi, you are mine.

DRAUPADI: [turning to him] Yes, of course, my dear. You are my lawful husband. I am thine.

DURYODHANA: Draupadi, you are mine. I have long coveted you. And now I have a rightful claim on you. Only the brave deserve the fair. You are mine.

DRAUPADI: [turning to him] Yes, I am thine. I, too, have long fantasized about you. But, sh-sh-sh.... Give me time.

Give me time to free myself of my commitments.

BHEEMA: Mine. You are mine.

DRAUPADI: Yes, thine.

DURYODHANA: Mine.

DRAUPADI: Yes, yes, thine....

[Lights go out briefly and then come on again.]

[The actors are still on stage, in their respective positions. Enter ARTI DAS and BISHAKHA from opposite directions. They stand watching the rest of the rehearsal.]

DURYODHANA: Okay, let's repeat it once more. This time no mistakes, please. [Pauses, takes position.] You have no choice. You have lost the game. Draupadi is no longer yours.

BHEEMA: Duryodhana, you will have to fight me first.

DURYODHANA: Out of my way, Bheema.

BHEEMA: Duryodhana [stamps his foot], Duryodhana.... Duryodhana.... for the fear of God Almighty, don't press your claim. The heavens will not forgive you. She is your bhabhi, like your mother.

DURYODHANA: Out of my way, I said. You are a loser.

BHEEMA: Mind your words, Duryodhana!

DURYODHANA: Loser.

BHEEMA: Duryodhana! Duryodhana! [with a menacing gesture]

[Freeze]

DRAUPADI: [sighs] come on guys, I'm tired. Let's wind up for the day.

[exit BHEEMA, DURYODHANA and DRAUPADI]

[ARTI DAS and BISHAKHA MITRA move towards the centre, talking.]

BISHAKHA MITRA: So, how was your trip? I thought you'd come back tomorrow.

ARTI DAS: No, the meeting got over early so I decided to drive back today itself.

BISHAKHA MITRA: And how was it?

ARTI DAS: So-so. The way all Board of Studies meetings go. A lot of voices, a lot of different interests, some games being played behind the scenes. All universities tell the same story. [pause] And here? What was the scene like here in the department?

BISHAKHA MITRA: Pretty much the same. We got a call from the VC's office telling us to negotiate with the agitating students.

ARTI DAS: Negotiate? You negotiate with trade unions, labour organizations and the like. No one negotiates with students. You just abide by the rules. Besides, our job is simply to teach and carry out related duties like evaluation work. This is an administrative problem and the authorities should tackle it.

BISHAKHA MITRA: [shrugging] Well, whatever! This is what we were told to do and this is what we did. We met the students on hartal.

ARTI DAS: And?

BISHAKHA MITRA: And tried to placate them, conveyed their demands to the VC's office. Now let's await his decision.

ARTI DAS: And what else has been happening in the department?

BISHAKHA MITRA: The Administrative Committee meeting was held. The Chair has been in high spirits, lapping up all the attention his students shower on him. This morning he was on cloud nine. I saw him come out of the meeting with all the interviewed candidates at his heels, telling him he's the greatest.

ARTI DAS: Which means they all sailed through.

BISHAKHA MITRA: Looks like. In any case, there wasn't much opposition. He had the wind blowing his way. All the way.

ARTI DAS: He must have enjoyed that. [Pause] I had a verbal pow-wow with him before I left yesterday.

BISHAKHA MITRA: You did? What happened. [no response from ARTI] Tell me, what happened.

ARTI DAS: [shaking her head] It's all so stupid, I don't really know what happened. But I told him to follow the correct procedure. And I asked him why he was in a hurry to hold the meeting on a day when three of us were on leave.

BISHAKHA MITRA: That must have put him off. He doesn't like his decisions being challenged. What was his response? [ARTI tosses her head in disgust] Tell me, I'm curious.

ARTI DAS: He simply blew his top. Went through the roof. Started shouting. Wanted to call me names but he stuttered and spluttered and became incoherent.

BISHAKHA MITRA: Where was this?

ARTI DAS: Right here, striking a pose under the picture of Salman Rushdie.

BISHAKHA MITRA: And what did he say?

ARTI DAS: Kept telling me repeatedly that I was confused.

BISHAKHA MITRA: Confused? Why confused?

ARTI DAS: Search me! Some people are born confused, others acquire confusion. I had confusion thrust upon me. First he stood there in that Rushdie pose, then he got worked up, stomped up and down, gesticulated wildly, wagged his finger at me and told me 'you're confused, you're confused!' At one point he turned to walk away, then came back, pointed his index finger at me again. I thought he'd say something new. But he again shouted, 'you're confused, confused'.

BISHAKHA MITRA: [laughs loudly] Really! That is very, very interesting.

ARTI DAS: [offended] What makes you laugh? I don't see anything funny about it. In fact I was fuming for the rest of the day!

BISHAKHA MITRA: I'm sorry [still laughing], but I think I have a somewhat wild imagination that does not hesitate to violently yoke together two disparate images.

ARTI DAS: Such as...?

BISHAKHA MITRA: Dr Joglekar shouting 'confused,

confused'. Doesn't it remind you of something?

ARTI DAS: What?

BISHAKHA MITRA: [Stands in Bheema's pose, finger pointed to the sky, stomping her foot, shouts] Confused! Confused! You are confused.

ARTI DAS: Huh?

BISHAKHA MITRA: Don't get me? We saw a similar act just now. 'Duryodhana, Duryodhana....' Not much difference between the two.

ARTI DAS: [laughing] You sure know how to cheer up a person. I was really feeling depressed at being spoken to in such a rude manner.

BISHAKHA MITRA: Forget it. He's not worth a second thought. [pause] I have an idea how you can be one up on him. He is so proud of the picture of Salman Rushdie that he scanned and enlarged from the dustjacket of *Midnight's Children*. Why don't you show him the picture you have with Rushdie? The one taken in New York? In which Rushdie is sitting next to you?

ARTI DAS: Yes, I think I should show off my picture, too. Just to spite him. And mine is better because I had it taken live, with Rushdie right next to me. Actually leaning towards me.

BISHAKHA MITRA: Yes, so you can show him your picture is better than his.

ARTIDAS: Yes.

BISHAKHA MITRA: And that Rushdie is 'leaning' towards you.

[makes an exaggerated pose of leaning against her]

[ARTI and BISHAKHA laugh]

ARTIDAS: Thank you for cheering me up.

BISHAKHA MITRA: Any time, ma'am. At your service.

ARTI DAS: [putting her books away] Aren't you going home?

BISHAKHA MITRA: On my way. You too?

ARTIDAS: To the library. Let me walk down with you.

BISHAKHA MITRA: But first wait.

ARTIDAS: What?

BISHAKHA MITRA: You must get him to do the Duryodhana act once more.

ARTIDAS: You mean.... Sorry, I don't quite get you.

BISHAKHA MITRA: let me explain. You stand there as Dr Joglekar. [ARTI complies] Good. Now, Dr Joglekar, [mimics his stiff style] what exactly do you imagine yourself to be? Ah, I know... the swankiest fella on the campus. Yeah boy! And, Dr. Joglekar, how was your Revive bath this morning? Revive? Don't you know what a Revive bath is? Some people bathe with Cinthol, some with Lux, but you, none of these mundane agents for you. You, dear sir, bathe with Revive and only Revive. That is what I use when I wish to stiffen my cotton dupatta. So after your Revive bath, when you are stiff and starched, what do you do, Dr Joglekar? Why do you change colour, dear sir? [moves to the other side, where ARTI stands] Now I am Dr Joglekar and you are yourself. [pretends to be very angry] You... you... you can't talk to me like that! You don't know what you are saying. You are confused. Confused. And let me tell you more... you are confused. Duryodhana. Duryodhana....

[In the midst of this speech, Dr JOGLEKAR has walked in and looks on astounded. The expressions on his face change from surprise to incredulity. BISHAKHA breaks off, realizing they have an audience. Dead silence for a while. Then ARTI and she exit together, suppressing their laughter. Dr JOGLEKAR looks after them, uncomprehendingly.]

[Darkness]

ANNOUNCER'S VOICE: Good Evening Friends, this is

your favorite City Radio bringing you the five o'clock news. [music] The suspense is now over. The Vice-Chancellor's fate is decided. A special communiqué from the Central Government this afternoon announced that the Vice-Chancellor is being given an extension for another three years. This would be the first time in the last twenty-four years that a second term has been granted to an individual holding this prestigious position. Celebrations are on full swing at the campus. The Vice-Chancellor's supporters are loud in their appreciation of the work done by the university administration over the last three years. Even his detractors are low-key in their criticism against his continuing in this position. The general mood remains ebullient. [music] And here is a special number being played out for the VC, in celebration of his new term. [music – “Congratulations and celebrations....” by Cliff Richards]

[Curtain]

EPILOGUE

[The dorm in the Boys Hostel. SANDEEP seated at the window with a pair of binoculars, KUNAL lounging on the floor, listening to music. The room is still at sixes and sevens.]

[Enter ANKUR, helmet in hand. Throws his keys on the table, kicks off his shoes, sits on the bed, looking at SANDEEP and KUNAL alternately.]

SANDEEP: ...Only one man, one lone man stood at his post. Undeterred, unfazed. The boy stood on the burning deck. One diligent, brave, impeccable soldier with a pair of binoculars, looking over the bleak landscape. He did not flinch. He did not waver. He did not abandon his post. Oh yes, he stood firm and surveyed the scene. Through the storm, through the night...

KUNAL: Shut up, will you!

SANDEEP: Through the storm, through the night, he kept his vigil....

KUNAL: Stop it, yaar! Why don't you grow up?

SANDEEP: Kya karen? I'm bored stiff. Can you suggest another way to while away time?

ANKUR: [Clearing his throat] I have tickets for *Chicago*.

SANDEEP: You do? Catherine Zeta-Jones is sexy, yaar.

KUNAL: I prefer Renee. But what tickets do you have? Which show?

ANKUR: The 6 o'clock.

SANDEEP: You mean now? In 15 minutes? Wow, What are we waiting for? Let's get cracking. [Puts away his binoculars.]

KUNAL: Yeah, let's go. [Rises. Then pauses to look at ANKUR.] But why have you taken off your shoes?

ANKUR: Er... er... you both go. I have only two tickets.

KUNAL: Just two? Oh, well, we'll get a third at the movie-hall. Come let's move. Move!

ANKUR: [makes no sign of getting up] Er... er.. you both go, I'll stay back.

[SANDEEP and KUNAL look at ANKUR suspiciously, sit down again, glaring at him. Long pause.]

SANDEEP: [slowly] I see. You don't want to see the film with us.

KUNAL: You want us to go for the movie without you.

SANDEEP: You want to be left alone here.

KUNAL: In other words.... [with mock anger] You want us to clear out?

ANKUR: No, it is not that....

SANDEEP: Arre, jaan dey, yaar. Don't make up stories. [Thumps him on the back] We'll clear out. Have a good time... by yourself.

KUNAL: I thought you too would need to relax after all that tension we've been through!

ANKUR: Hm.m.m.... but ...

SANDEEP: It's okay, yaar, let him be. Let's go.

[SANDEEP and KUNAL pick up their helmets and leave the room. At the door SANDEEP turns back, winks at ANKUR.]

SANDEEP: Oh, by the way – say hi to Cherry for us. And enjoy your evening.

[ANKUR throws a cushion at him as he slams the door shut, laughing.]

[Music. Enter CHERRY PINK.]

ANKUR: [jumping up to greet her] Cherry, Cherry...

[CHERRY puts down her bag on the table and turns to ANKUR. Music, “Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White”. ANKUR and CHERRY hold hands and pirouette slowly, gazing into each other's eyes.]

[CHERRY's cell-phone rings. Gently she frees herself from ANKUR's arms, takes out the phone from her bag, looks at the number, turns to ANKUR and whispers “Cat Whiskers” miming the name with actions. While the conversation with CAT takes place, she pretends to be pulled in opposite directions, alternately between the caller and ANKUR who mimes a beckoning action.]

CHERRY: [into the phone] Hello.

[Spotlight on CAT WHISKERS off-stage]

CAT: Hi, sweetheart, this is your teddy bear.

CHERRY: Oh, hi there. I was just thinking of you.

CAT: I'll be waiting for you this evening. We are dining together at my place, aren't we?

CHERRY: Oh, I was just going to call you. My... my Dad turned up unexpectedly. So I won't be able to come over today. I'm so sorry.

CAT: No, how can you do that? I was looking forward to it.

CHERRY: So was I, but sorry, another time.

CAT: Can't you get away?

CHERRY: No, honey, not today.

CAT: Well, Cherry, I suppose I must spend my evening alone. [pause] I'm deeply disappointed.

CHERRY: So am I, goochy-goo [ANKUR grimaces], but I can't help it. I'll get back to you.

CAT: Love you, sweetie.

CHERRY: Love you, too, sweetheart. [making a placating gesture towards ANKUR] Bye. I'll call you later.

CAT: Promise?

CHERRY: Yes, promise.

CAT: I'll be waiting.

CHERRY: Ciao, goochy-goo.

[Mimes a pleading action with ANKUR, wins him over. Music. They slow-dance.]

[Spotlight shifts to CAT as he sits at his table, his head resting on his hands, looking at the phone. Background music – “I'm lying along, my head on the phone.... I'm all out of love, I'm so lost without you....” Gets up, walks up and down in the far corner of the stage as the spotlight

moves to CHERRY and ANKUR again.]

[Phone rings again. CHERRY looks back at the cell, doesn't answer it. Persistent ringing, she presses a button to silence the call and turns back to ANKUR.]

CAT: [off-stage] Cherry, Cherry, hi sweetheart, it's your teddy bear again. Cherry, Cherry, can't you hear me?

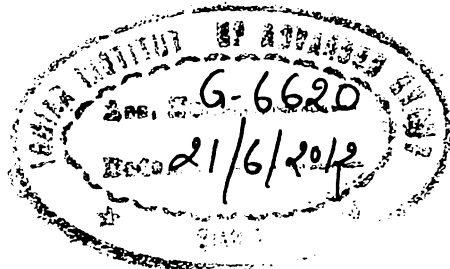
ANKUR: [in disbelief] You rejected his call? He's sure going to be mad!

CHERRY: I can always say the battery was low and I couldn't hear him! [winks wickedly and comes back to ANKUR]

[CHERRY and ANKUR continue to dance. Meanwhile, in the background, DURYODHANA, DRAUPADI and BHEEMA miming the tug-of-war scene.]

[Music – “Will you still love me tomorrow?” becomes louder and louder as Cat's “Hello, Cherry, Cherry, Cherry” fades away.]

[Curtain]





The Seduction and Betrayal of Cat Whiskers is a comic satire that takes a winding course through the corridors of an institution of higher learning using the comic lens to look at some of the flaws in the academia. What happens, for instance, behind the scenes in a major university? Who are the power brokers? What are the politics that operate in the system and at what different levels? How are appointments and promotions made? Is there any fair-play or justice? These are some of the questions raised in this play. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the problems highlighted here are found on almost all campuses, in India and abroad. The aim is not to target all academics, universities and colleges as corrupt but to take a peek at their not-so-pleasant side which, with a little effort and commitment, may be cured if we have the will to do so.

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