

The Great Weaver from Kashmir by Halldór Laxness: sleepless nights in the Valley of Roses

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SUMMARY

The novels of the Icelandic Nobel laureate Halldór Laxness depict individuals who are confronted by personal, familial and societal challenges in an isolated, sparsely populated and unpredictable but sublime and almost magical land. Novels which are currently available in English translation carefully illustrate the potentially damaging consequences of parentlessness, childhood abuse, physical illness, unexpected bereavement and marital desertion; the often corrosive effects of social and economic inequality; and the undermining of the lives and aspirations of women by patriarchal institutions. *The Great Weaver from Kashmir* is probably his least well-known novel but addresses many of these themes: most of its characters fall by the wayside and only a few thrive on adversity.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

None

contends that the principal achievement of Laxness was the creation of fictional characters that became symbolic of the Icelandic nation and marked its long path towards independence from colonialist Denmark (Guðmundsson 2008).

Between hedonism and monasticism

The Great Weaver from Kashmir (Laxness 1927, translation 2008) is a modernist road *Bildungsroman*, in which a young egotistical philosopher–poet dandy moves from selfish hedonism to bleak monasticism. Explaining the title, Laxness noted enigmatically that Kashmir means ‘valley of roses’ and the ‘weaver’ was born in this valley, his weaving being ‘crafted with the view of life of the fashionable man as the warp, and the one true faith as the weft’ (Guðmundsson 2008). The hundred chapters are spread across eight books and first appeared in seven instalments, either dispatched to subscribers or sold on the street. Writing to his Jesuit mentor and fellow writer Jón Sveinsson (‘Nonni’) in May 1925, Laxness described it as ‘a Catholic novel [...] about sacrifice, asceticism and the soul’s peace, [...] about the glory of self-denial’ (Guðmundsson 2008). That month, he left Iceland, travelling via Brighton and Paris, visiting Rome and the Vatican before arriving penniless in the Sicilian resort of Taormina. En route he became intrigued by Dadaist and surrealist French writers, including Apollinaire, Aragon and Breton. Despite the unaccustomed heat, he was enchanted by the glamorous antics of the Taormina international community, although he often relied on its marginalised sections for financial support; he started the novel there but completed it in the Benedictine Abbey at Clervaux in Luxembourg.

The novel draws heavily on the varied experience of the previously insular northern Laxness as he travelled through the frenzied atmosphere of more southerly countries in post-war Europe. Some passages are replete with philosophical speculations which mingle Roman Catholicism, French surrealism and Eastern mysticism, whereas

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Laxness was born in Reykjavík in April 1902 and named Halldór Guðjónsson (he changed his name to Halldór Kiljan Laxness in 1923); he lived through almost the whole 20th century, dying in February 1998. He wrote more than 60 books – including novels, short stories, essays, poems, plays and memoirs – and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1955. Although raised in an isolated and traditional society, Laxness travelled continents and embraced cosmopolitan modernity, while retaining an essentially Icelandic identity. In early life Laxness adopted a staunch revivalist Catholicism, a rather subversive stance against the prevailing state Lutheranism. He then embraced socialism for 30 years and, although never a member of the Communist Party, was feted by the former Soviet Union. He became disenchanted with ideological socialism following Soviet military action in Hungary in 1956. In later life he espoused pacifist and ecological causes and addressed philosophical questions reflecting his interest in humanism and Taoism. In the definitive account of Laxness and his work, the biographer

others glance towards the contemporaneous political ideologies of Bolshevism and Futurist-influenced fascism. Its style is intermittently expressionistic and modernist; the locations are disjointed, with action in Iceland, England, France, Belgium and Italy; and the narrative threads back and forth between late 1921 and early 1927. The principal theme is the struggle between the need for spiritual enlightenment and the temptation of worldly pleasures, the latter usually mediated through the sexual attractiveness of young women. Its main characters are Steinn Elliði, a headstrong and gifted but emotionally fragile young man; and Diljá Thorsteinsdóttir, his confidante cousin orphaned in her mid-teenage years then raised by their shared grandmother Valgerdur Ylfingamoðir. Others include Jófríður (Jófi), the comely but inconstant mother of Steinn who is married to his ineffectual father Grímúlfur; and Örnólfur, the unmarried younger brother of Grímúlfur and uncle to Steinn, with a long-standing devotion to Diljá and business acumen which has secured worldwide prominence for the Ylfingur fishing company.

Watershed in Icelandic fiction

The initial reception of the novel was largely critical (Guðmundsson 2008): a review in the newspaper *Morgunblaðið* stated ‘the author has, both in his characters and narrative techniques, overstepped the bounds of what is reasonable’, and Laxness successfully brought libel charges against the newspaper based on its erroneous accusation that the novel was pornographic. After a review by Guðmundur Finnbogason (then National Librarian) in the conservative journal *Vaka*, which described it in the single phrase ‘well-churned imp’s butter’ – that is, an elaborate deception – Laxness left Iceland for the USA.

When viewed with modern sensibilities, the novel is loose and dated, its lengthy monologues reflect abstruse concerns, and some passages describing the motivations of Diljá and Jófríður seem patronising. Although awareness of the universal plight of women and their struggle for emancipation had led Laxness to describe them as ‘readily marketable childbearing machines’ – which had scandalised the more conservative sections of Icelandic society – the novel shows a curious ambivalence when portraying its female characters, and seems affected by misogynistic views similar to those of Strindberg and Weininger. But despite its limitations, the novel has been described as ‘the first modern Icelandic novel’ (Magnússon 1992) and one that ‘marked a watershed in Icelandic fiction’ (Hallmundsson 1995).

Trauma and transgression

Laxness stated that the novel was intended to address ‘everything that might cause a young man to have sleepless nights: politics, the meaning of life, religion and the role of women’ (Guðmundsson 2008). But it also illustrates the emerging contemporaneous view that observable appearance and physiognomy reflect underlying character, including the predisposition to certain transgressive behaviours (Kretschmer 1929); the development of abnormal mental states following life-threatening trauma; the notion that repressed emotions and constrained sexuality lead to physical illness; the vulnerability of parentless children when exposed to unsettling events; and the psychological hazards of pregnancy and childbirth in loveless or thwarted relationships. Many of these concerns were addressed repeatedly by Laxness in subsequent works.

Looks and conduct

The belief that physical appearance could predict moral conduct in women was common among public intellectuals in interwar Iceland (Rastrick 2010) – and still operates in Icelandic tourism literature (Allessio 2011). Depictions of the principal female characters suggest that Laxness may have subscribed to this notion. The ‘miragelike grayness’ of the eyes and slender undeveloped body of 17-year-old Diljá are indicators of her presumed tendency to ‘hysteria’ and vulnerability to adversity: after sequential losses her eyes become like ‘splintered lead’; later her hair is cut short *à la garçonnette*, and her hips and legs are sturdy, demonstrating a preparedness to take the leading role in her intended seduction of Steinn. In *Morgunblaðið* Laxness had written that short hair was ‘a testimony of a new mentality, a new understanding of the status of women and their role in life’ (Laxness 1925). The milky pale face, kelp-red lips and dark eyes of Jófríður reflect her predisposition to uncontained passion, hysteria and consumption, and presage her sexual infidelity, assumption of the sick role and early death from tuberculosis.

But Laxness extends this link between appearance and likely conduct in portraying significant male characters. The business success of Örnólfur is reflected in the combination of hawk-like eyes and winning smile. The deep-set azure jewelled eyes and irregularly shaped mouth of the otherwise finely built Steinn indicate both his privileged access to what lies beyond everyday experience and a shameful disdain for conventionality. They reflect his early manipulative sexual experiences and callous treatment of domestic pets, and predict

his later homosexual relationships, consuming but shallow preoccupations, subsequent use of illicit drugs and attempted suicide.

Integrity and despair

In *The Great Weaver from Kashmir*, Laxness portrays how major psychological disturbance can follow trauma that is life-endangering or potentially overwhelming of psychological integrity. Having entered into a marriage of convenience with Örnólfur and after delivering their son Úlfur, Diljá is consumed with grief following Úlfur's death when aged 10 months. She becomes psychotically depressed, cradles his stiffened corpse for a month, and believes his death to be punishment for the broken vow of chastity in devotion to God that she had sworn with Steinn 4 years before: no doubt recalling that she herself had been born at the expense of the life of her mother.

After receiving news of the death of the mother he had deserted during her terminal illness in Taormina, Steinn is beset by nightmarish visions of her shrouded bloody figure; his unsuccessful efforts to find her grave lead to paroxysmal grief before his subsequent attempted suicide by jumping from a hotel balcony. In an acutely confused state while recovering from his injuries, Steinn is made witness both to visions of necrophilic orgies in Cairo and to countless harlots in Leicester Square, where Christ is crucified on Judgement Day.

Towards the end of the novel, Örnólfur learns of the infidelity of his adored Diljá with Steinn and the miscarriage of the resulting pregnancy, and is found dead with a bullet in his head. At its conclusion Steinn finds some form of peace far

away in quietly ordered Benedictine life; but Diljá, after final rejection by Steinn, is left to wander wretchedly through the streets of Rome at night.

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