

## “DeHaadi Friendship & Beyond: Collapsing Our World and Theirs”

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### Abstract

In this age of global inequality, journalists frequently face ethical quandaries about how they report on others different from themselves. For example, the global artistic and intellectual class can achieve professional and monetary gain in writing about the lives of the global poor. In order to write a compelling story, on one level, a writer might need to befriend the subject of his work, and however the relationship is established, the question of exploitation and of betrayal potentially hangs over the social justice story that is being told. One such journalist, Aman Sethi, reports on the working poor in Delhi in his book *A Free Man*. This essay argues that Sethi, seems unaware of the ways in which he betrays his friendship with the day worker Ashraf, who the journalist befriends in order to write his book. By looking at how both men define their friendship with one another, as well as how Sethi reads his own “desire for freedom” onto the working poor, this article addresses general issues of how we can forge authentic relationships across difference.]

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“How close can the nexus between freedom and friendship be? There cannot be friendship without freedom. Freedom has no sense without friendship.”

From Volga’s “Friendship”

We all quickly can conceive of external constraints placed upon an individual that restrict the types and number of friendships he or she can have. Several examples come to mind: an individual who spends most of her time in the domestic space due to societal norms, cut off from the world. Or, an individual who must spend all his time working so that friendships become a luxury. But there are, as well, obviously ways in which an individual can restrict the types of friendships one has -- even if he has all the external freedom at his disposal. An internal or

hidden sense of who it is appropriate to have as friends and to what degree such friendships are allowed to deepen and mature, are due, in part, to the biases and prejudice that an individual has -- either consciously realized or partly unarticulated. In our daily lives, we encounter what appear to be a whole host of examples of such internal limitations. For instance, a young twenty something white upper middle class couple who would never think of being friends with anyone except those who are the same age, race, economic status, etc. These biases come across as invisible walls almost -- that block anyone other than the target group from entering into the realm of friendship.

In 2012, Katherine Boo and Aman Sethi wrote separate books about the Indian underclass, part of the “growing fascination with the poetics and practices of the metropolises of the Global South” (Sandhu) . In Boo’s non-fiction work, she focused on a few specific men and women who lived in a slum next to the Mumbai airport, and Sethi followed the lives of mostly working poor men in Delhi. In comparing these works, we find that not only did these two writers make different decisions in how to interact with their subjects, but also in how they depicted their journalist-subject relationships. At first, the differences between how Sethi and Boo approach their subjects seem fairly obvious. There are many examples in his book where Sethi attempts to forge a friendship with the day laborers, particularly one man named Ashraf, going beyond the call of a western journalist who has a rigid sense of when and how he interacts in the lives of his journalistic subjects. In a much talked about example, Aman’s sister visits one of the laborers in the local Tuberculosis hospital to help the sick Ashraf. Later in the narrative, Sethi himself journeys with the day laborer to Calcutta when his friend can presumably no longer stomach the isolation of Delhi. (178) And throughout the book, the journalist answers early morning phone calls from a drunk Ashraf. In contrast, Boo notes in an interview that she doesn’t ‘fit in’ with the slum-dwellers, presumably because she’s a white western journalist, and thus she “had to” approach her task from a different angle. It is worthwhile perhaps to note that Boo doesn’t admit to internal restrictions that keep her from forging friendships -- but chalks it up to external differences that she cannot do anything about, namely her race and home country.

Both Boo and Sethi face questions about the ethics of writing about the indigent. In an interview with the two writers, the writer Mitu Sengupta asks the question of Boo, “Aren’t the lives of the poor already an open story? When does a work that scrutinizes the lives of the poor so unsparingly become exploitative?” Elsewhere, Sethi will face the very same questions. One example of Sethi facing the difficult question of the ethics in writing about the poor can be found

in a *Just Books* interview, where Sunil Sethi asked “Did you really befriend them?”

Our journalist answers, “I think I did ...”

The biting Sunil continues with, “Of course there is a big ethical, some would say moral problem, between the journalist and the subject in the context of a relationship developing between the two. Is it a friendship? How deep of a friendship? Will you take their lives and ultimately betray them?” Certainly, there are a myriad ways to betray a friendship, and given the power inequalities involved between the two parties in this case, one way for Sethi to abandon Ashraf is to pretend that he is more invested in the relationship than he actually is, up until he no longer needs his subject to complete his book ... and perhaps more seriously, since perhaps at times we all pretend to be more connected in relationships than we actually are, does he think more highly of himself and his journalistic strategy than he should? Or, to put in another way, is his attempt to forge such a friendship between himself and a day laborer, a way to resist or to perpetuate exploitation?

By the book’s own account, Ashraf has with Sethi what was a “middle friendship”, a transactional one. In a *Brick* interview, Sethi explains this term, “So Ashraf comes up with this medium-type friendship, which is based on the idea that we respect each other, we respect each other’s boundaries, and, ... we don’t make fools out of each other.” On the surface, Ashraf defines the relationship as one in which Sethi pays for more than his share of cigarettes, alcohol and other expenses, and in return, Ashraf willingly answers the journalist’s inquiries. Yet, clearly under the surface, their friendship is something more than just this transactional friendship, at least for Ashraf. In *The Brick* interview, Sethi gives us an indication of the deeper potential of their tie when he describes that when Ashraf “was in Calcutta and ill, he sort of broke down and said, ‘You’re like my younger brother.’” Here there is a distinct gap between what Ashraf says the friendship is for him, and what his feelings reveal. To some degree Sethi is aware of these discrepancies, although he doesn’t dwell too much on what it might mean as far as his own betrayal and exploitation. Sethi continues with, “I didn’t know what to say because I couldn’t bring myself to say, ‘You’re like my elder brother,’ because it wasn’t that kind of a relationship for me.” The question that begs to be answered is what prevents Aman in his own mind from being like an elder brother to Ashraf? Is this one of those invisible internally constructed walls that I spoke about in my introduction and the very place of betrayal that Sunil in the “Just Books” hints at in his questioning?

One of the reasons, perhaps, that for Sethi there is always a distance in his friendship with

Ashraf is that on some level, Aman never is able to overcome his own class prejudice against his subject, something I've never heard him admit to in any interview or forum. In his chapter entitled "The Nation and Its Peasants: The Modern State and the Peasantry", Partha Chatterjee argues that the colonial powers and the later Indian nationalist leadership imagine the peasant as simple, ignorant, exploited, and most importantly for this discussion suffering from a "volatility" that "easily lead(s) astray the underclass." And while Sethi in his book certainly avoids depicting Ashraf as "simple" or "ignorant", he frequently depicts the day laborer as "volatile" and "astray". Specifically, we hear about Ashraf's "moody outburst", that he has "confrontations with the police, arguments with a local business owner", and "fights with other mazdoors ..." Near the end of the book, Ashraf decides, according to Sethi's analysis, somewhat arbitrarily to leave Delhi because either he has forgotten his mother's telephone number and/or he heard about a plumber in Bara Tooti who died in his sleep, both motivations that Sethi sees as somewhat absurd reasons for leaving. As well, elsewhere in the narrative, we hear that Ashraf's marriage dissolved because he figured out his wife was taking some of his money and sending it back to pacify her mother. Sethi writes, "... the love, so carefully built on compromise, was irrevocably lost". (192) In fact, Sethi summarizes his bewilderment of his subjects when he says almost off-handedly at one point in the book that, "I am flummoxed by the manner in which Ashraf and his friends make decisions." (54) While Chatterjee would undoubtedly attempt to read resistance from the oppressed in Ashraf's fighting with the shop owner or with the police, there is no such reflection in *A Free Man*. His "erratic" decisions come off as destructive and ill-thought out.

Another reason arguably that prevents Aman from embracing Ashraf as an older brother, as I think the above discussion suggests, is that he doesn't really understand to what extent their lives are different. We see this lack of understanding in his tendency to overlook differences in their lives, or to collapse his middle class world onto his subjects' outlook too easily. In an interview, Sethi critiques the notion that he and Ashraf live in "separate worlds" suggesting that such thinking allows people to ignore those who are impoverished as out of their concern. And yet, it seems there have to be more options than the two binaries: either two separate worlds that foster neglect or one collapsed world that creates another kind of oversimplification. We can still care, it seems, about people who live different lives than ourselves.

We see this collapsing of difference elsewhere in the way the author philosophizes. Specifically, in an ongoing classification that is discussed throughout the book, Ashraf talks how day laborers have to balance their desire for azadi/freedom with their ongoing need for

kamai/income, and subsequently, in a later chapter -- their fear of loneliness with their pursuit of freedom. (In fact, these philosophical categories Sethi uses to organize his book are what supposedly made this book noteworthy with some of his readers.) On one level Sethi would argue that these philosophical issues are Ashraf's and he includes them in the narrative as a way to give voice to the day laborers concerns and ideas. But under closer examination, we find that perhaps these categories are not just Ashraf's, but appropriated for Sethi's own philosophizing. In a February 2012 *Tehelka* Interview, Sethi discusses in a highly intellectual way these philosophical categories. At one point, for example, he states, "All of us are exhausted and worn down by the lives that we lead. And the idea of being for just that one moment or that one year or month to be completely free is something I think is extremely seductive." He seems to imply that the azadi that Ashraf attempts on the streets of Delhi, is something that he himself may lack as a middle class Indian. He goes on to say that those like Ashraf step "away from a predetermined path ... away from a trajectory of the way a life should be" and that this "stepping away" provides him a kind of liberation. Surprisingly, neither Sethi nor the interviewer seem to acknowledge the problems in so quickly conflating their middle class "exhaustion" or "predetermined path" onto his subjects, who most likely never had the choice to be "exhausted" by such a lifestyle. During this *Tehelka* interview, both men, about the same age, relax their physical bodies in such a way that sharply delineate the other more formal or "stiff" interviews that Sethi gives about the book, where he obviously isn't as "comfortable" or "himself" – this difference in posture is exemplified by the tense posture with Sunil Sethi. Arguably their relaxed manner may suggest a certain unguarded discussion where he is able to discuss things that "really matter" to him. A performance, certainly, but one that is closer to his real concerns and values. These philosophical musings are intellectual in nature, and they are far removed from the emotional and intimate relevance that these words have for Ashraf, exemplified by his breakdown and confession mentioned earlier.

In the end, perhaps Katherine Boo's western stance is emotionally cleaner than Sethi's – in that she doesn't make pretense to being friends with the Mumbai slum-dwellers. She doesn't give much, but then again, she also doesn't pretend to. As someone who has always been interested in forming friendship across differences, I find the attempt of friendship that Sethi offers seductive and compelling, even though I find its failures to be depressing. In a recent interview, Sethi asks his interlocutor if he knew Ashraf had since died since the publication of the book. (In fact, all the characters, although all young, have died in a five year period.) When

asked how he feels about Ashraf's death, oddly Aman says that it was "disappointing". Not upsetting nor saddening, but "disappointing", a word choice which seems to reveal again his own emotional distance from the relationship with Ashraf. It is a distance that might signal his own betrayal of his subject and perhaps the actual way that he is imprisoned internally, cut off from an azadi that would make his own life free.

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