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Victimhood, Agency, and Vulnerability: Portraits of Delhi Manual Workers in Aman Sethi's *A Free Man* (2011) and Mridula Koshy's *Bicycle Dreaming* (2016)

ABSTRACT This chapter examines the representation of Delhi manual workers in Aman Sethi's literary reportage *A Free Man* (2011), about homeless daily construction workers in an Old Delhi labour market, and Mridula Koshy's novel *Bicycle Dreaming* (2016), which portrays the children of an itinerant buyer of waste and a scavenger in South Delhi. The two books feature disenfranchized people or characters from the Indian working class, who may be seen as the victims of a social and economic system which feeds on the vulnerability of manual workers in deprived areas. However, I will show that Koshy's novel and Sethi's reportage blur the lines between victimhood and agency, refusing to make their books narratives of either abjectivity or aspiration. I will also question whether empathy is the appropriate response to such books and explore the distribution of vulnerability which may pertain not only to the manual workers but also, partly, to authors and readers.

KEYWORDS agency, contemporary Indian literature, victimhood, vulnerability, working class

In 2009, social anthropologist Gudrun Dahl remarked that contemporary texts in sociology and anthropology, but also in women's studies and some official discourses, often insist on presenting underprivileged groups not as passive victims lacking power, intent, volition, and responsibility but as active social participants endowed with agency and a capacity for initiatives.[1] Dahl calls it the "ANV trope ('Agents Not Victims')" and explains that

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this trope derives from a "wish to write respectfully" (Dahl 2009, 392) about the examined groups, "redress stereotypes" (Dahl 2009, 393), and not essentialize passivity. On the other hand, the recent development of vulnerability and precarity studies, along with the ethics of care, have turned vulnerability into what Jean-Michel Ganteau calls "a paradigm of the contemporary condition and of contemporary culture, and a template for the wounded contemporary subject" (Ganteau 2015, 4). However, theoreticians argue that, although vulnerable persons may be exposed to the possibility of being harmed ('vulnerable' comes from the Latin *vulnus*, meaning 'wound'), they are not inscribed within a binary system of opposition between victims and agents if one considers that vulnerability and the ethics of care entail a relational model of interdependence, premised, as suggested by Ganteau, on "vulnerability to the vulnerable other" (Ganteau 2015, 11).

Such complex issues of positioning and representation are crucial in literary texts which portray underprivileged social groups, as is the case in Aman Sethi's literary reportage *A Free Man* (2011), which focuses on homeless daily construction workers in Sadar Bazaar in Bara Tooti Chowk, an Old Delhi labour market, and Mridula Koshy's novel *Bicycle Dreaming* (2016), which relates a year in the life of Noor, the teenage daughter of a Muslim kabadiwala (an itinerant buyer of waste) in Chirag Dilli, South Delhi. Journalist Aman Sethi (born in Mumbai in 1983) first met the community of workers of Sadar Bazaar in December 2005 when working on an article for *Frontline* magazine about daily-wage construction workers. He recalls that for that journalistic piece, he adopted the stance of a detached and objective observer, while his project for *A Free Man*, started thanks to a six-month grant, was one he called "research" and "consciously a non-journalistic exercise" (in Guignery 2024, 226). His aim was "to understand the mazdoor ki zindagi—the life of the labourer" (Sethi 2011, 7) and to experiment with "narrative techniques to write about labour and work" (in Sarkar 2012, 10). Sethi drew inspiration from non-fictional books by American writers on the working class in the United States, such as Studs Terkel's *Working* (1974), which investigates the meaning of work for a whole range of different people, and Ben Hamper's 1991 memoir *Rivethead*, about his time on the General Motors assembly line (in Sarkar 2012, 10). In Sadar Bazaar in Delhi, Sethi met the homeless daily workers on and off for five years, joining them for tea, drinks, joints, and conversations, helping them with money or taking them to the hospital.[2] *A Free Man* is a record

2 Sethi's method could be compared to that of Rajat Ubhaykar, who spent more than five months hitchhiking with truckers all across India and wrote *Truck de India!* (2019), a travelogue that documents the strenuous working and living

of Sethi's research and conversations with these workers, with a special focus on the most colourful of them, Mohammed Ashraf.

Mridula Koshy (born in 1969 in Delhi) shares Sethi's interest in the working class. In the United States, where she lived between the ages of 14 and 34, she lived in deprived neighbourhoods, did menial jobs while studying at college, and then worked as a trade union and community organizer. She returned to India in 2004 and, in the early 2010s, co-founded The Community Library Project (TCLP) in Delhi, which runs free community libraries.[3] Her collection of short stories *If It is Sweet* (2009) features characters from various class backgrounds, while her first novel, *Not Only the Things That Have Happened* (2012), set in Kerala and the United States, explores the theme of inter-country adoption. While both these books are formally innovative, her second novel, *Bicycle Dreaming*, is deliberately characterized by "simple linear storytelling" (Dubey 2016), as the author, who was reading picture books to groups of teenagers after school, wanted to narrate a story "that could be their life and recognizable to them" and "'test the theory that [she] could tell a not-simple story simply'" (Doshi 2016). The book, dedicated to "*the children of Deepalaya Community Library and Reading Project*" (Koshy 2016, v), portrays children of waste pickers—one of them a Muslim girl, the other a Dalit boy—whose fathers, because of their religion or caste, struggle to secure stable work.[4]

Both *A Free Man* and *Bicycle Dreaming* feature disenfranchized people or characters from the Indian working class, who are essential to the capital's functioning but whom the developing city is reluctant to see and acknowledge "as part of its self" (Prakash 2002, 5).[5] The two books highlight the

conditions of truck drivers in India. Ubhaykar said in an interview that his greatest source of inspiration was *A Free Man* (in Varma). New Yorker writer Katherine Boo also conducted an immersive experience when she spent three years with the inhabitants of the Annawadi slum, situated by Mumbai's airport, and depicted their lives in *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* (2012). In his review of Boo's book, Sethi noted: "That she is an American who worked entirely through translators has prompted some reviewers to applaud her even-handed objectivity and others to critique the book for objectifying its subjects and fetishising the poverty of the powerless, dark-skinned 'other'" (Sethi 2012).

3 https://www.thecommunitylibraryproject.org/about-us/.

4 Koshy said that *Bicycle Dreaming* was her "attempt to understand how family life is sustained among the working class": "I wanted to know if there is a level of poverty below which family life—mutual love and sacrifice—is not sustainable" (Koshy 2017).

5 In 2002, Gyan Prakash referred to "the growing number of poor housed in slums and streets, who provide the cheap labour and services without which the official city could not survive. Exploited and disenfranchised, the existence

vulnerability and precariousness of people who belong to the informal sector in India. In *A Free Man,* Sethi documents the economic and infrastructural changes which have affected Delhi and its labourers since the 2000s, such as the banning of factory work within city limits since 2004 (Sethi 2011, 10) and the demolition of working-class settlements.[6] Sethi also mentions the low wages of the daily construction workers, their short life expectancy due to work accidents or health issues (tuberculosis is a recurrent disease), and the fact that some of them, hoping to get a job, were tricked into surgeries to have their organs removed. In *Bicycle Dreaming*, not only do kabadiwalas need to pay bribes to secure their routes but the development of private garbage collecting companies and the onslaught of plastic incinerators have reduced the manual workload (Koshy 2016, 113) and lessened the workers' income so that, in the novel, the protagonist's father loses his job as an itinerant waste buyer and ends up as a scavenger (Koshy 2016, 201).

These groups of people may be said to belong to the category of the subaltern and appear as the victims of a social and economic system which feeds on the vulnerability of manual workers in deprived areas. Their subalternity, subordination, and victimhood may in turn elicit or invite affective and cognitive empathy on the part of the books' authors and readers, in the sense of "sharing the feelings of another as a means of coming to an appreciation of the other" (Weiner and Auster 2007, 123–4). However, a close examination of the representation of such groups in Koshy's novel and Sethi's reportage encourages one to question these categories and their contours. I will first show the ways in which these two books, despite portraying people in a situation of vulnerability and precariousness, blur the lines between victimhood and agency. I will then question whether empathy is the appropriate response to such books and explore the distribution of vulnerability which may pertain not only to the manual workers but also, partly, to authors and readers.

of this other cannot be acknowledged by the official city as part of its self. […] But this 'obsolete' population refuses to 'bow out of history'" (Prakash 2002, 5).

6 This was the case of Yamuna Pushta, which included Sanjay Amar Colony (demolished in 2004) and Nangla Machi (demolished in 2006). These settlements were destroyed "to make way for broader roads, bigger power stations," and the Commonwealth Games which took place in 2010 (Sethi 2011, 39). Sethi devoted an article to the demolitions in *Frontline* magazine in July 2005 (Sethi 2005a).

Blurring the Lines between Victimhood and Agency

When the historians of the Subaltern Studies Group released the suppressed histories of the Indian peasantry in the 1980s, they insisted that the subaltern classes were autonomous subjects in the making of their own history (despite the difficulty, or impossibility according to Gayatri Spivak, of retrieving their voices). Similarly, in the books examined here, most of the people and characters do not present themselves as passive victims and, instead, display forms of agency, asserting the strength of their freedom (as encapsulated in the first paratext of *A Free Man*, its title) and wishing for independence, as symbolized by bicycle riding in Koshy's novel. Although their agency has limitations, the books challenge the strict dichotomy between active agents and passive victims and subvert what Ines Detmers has called "the topos of subaltern victimization" in her analysis of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), in which "[t]he novel's 'underdog-hero' […] operates to satirically question the almost habitual designation of the subaltern as the victim" (Detmers 2011, 540). By refusing the status of victims, the workers in Sethi's and Koshy's books resist what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have called the "lines of articulation or segmentarity" through which their lives and identities have been socially and economically "stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 4, 10).

In *A Free Man*, which Sethi described as "a philosophical chat on how to find pockets of freedom in an oppressive world" (in Guignery 2024, 224), Ashraf "refuses to be a victim of his fate": he "has chosen a life of making do with poverty, which allows him a certain world of freedom" (in Sandhu 2013). He exercises this freedom by deciding not to work when he has just enough money to go through the day or by leaving the confines of Bara Tooti Chowk when he feels the urge to move around. In *Bicycle Dreaming*, Noor, the Muslim kabadiwala's daughter whose family lives in a one-room home, takes pride in wanting to ride a bike like her father and become India's first kabadiwali (a female itinerant buyer), thereby challenging the frontiers of gender and thwarting social expectations (Koshy 2016, 39). Her schoolfriend Ajith, the son of a Dalit rag picker, aspires to become an engineer and is the one teaching Noor how to ride a bike; by transgressing caste barriers, he is subverting the trope of victimization and displaying agency. Through the means of reportage and fiction, the two books thus point to the complexity of the social situations they depict and expose the limits of the concept of victimhood. This does not mean that the socially underprivileged characters are not struggling, but the authors shirk away from portraying them as mere victims and do not appeal for our empathy or compassion by deploying forms of voyeurism.

A Free Man: Turning Away from Narratives of Abjectivity or Aspiration

Aman Sethi remarked in an interview that in *A Free Man*, he did not want to write a book that would evoke a "sense of pity for people—the working class, the victims," "the kind of book which is focused on the horror of poverty [... and] presents poverty as a kind of trap, which people have no way of getting out of" (in Sandhu 2013). The interesting aspect to him "is to always write about people as active beings, rather than passive recipients" and to "try and capture the struggle to be free" (in Guignery 2024, 223). Sethi thus breaks away from "abjectivity," which he defines as "the tendency for narratives about the working class to deliberately and thoughtlessly describe entire ways of life as abject" (in Lau 2018, 378). He regrets that "our narratives only produce heavy dreams of stability and voicelessness" when labour actually "aspires to a fluid mobility of its own" (in Mishra and Sethi 2015). This mobility is evidenced in *A Free Man*, where the itinerant workers are continually moving from one place to another; in a *Frontline* article, Sethi remarked that "[t]he absence of fixed spaces of work and residences, seen as a 'problem' by state narratives, is often seen as 'liberating' by workers" (2005b). In 2005, Sethi referred to the failure of the Delhi government to formalize the labourers' work through a welfare board because of the workers' refusal to be locked "into the logic of the state via tools like registration, police verification and membership of organisations" (Sethi 2005b). He quoted a carpenter who told him: "I come and go as I please. I work when I want to, I go home when I feel like it" (2005b), and he pointed to the discrepancy between the way the state views the workers and the way they see themselves. In *A Free Man*, rather than dwell on "the 'abject' condition of the construction worker" (2005b), Sethi depicts their everyday life from morning to night, providing details about their status as mazdoor (the lowest worker in the chain), beldaar (the understudy) or mistry (the expert or supervisor) and giving information about their manual activities and the way they spend their time off. Sethi also lets the reader hear their voices through dialogue (the reporter's conversations with the workers were recorded), which is his way of "letting the material breathe" (in Guignery 2024, 224).[7]

7 This is also the expression Sethi used in his review of Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* when referring to the opening sequence in the Annawadi slum: "Boo is content to underplay her hand and let the material breathe, rather than step in with a heavy editorial hand" (Sethi 2012).

If Sethi manages to avoid "exoticizing, essentializing, and commodifying poverty" (Lau 2018, 377), Marianne Hillion points to Sethi's "magnifying of Ashraf's austere way of life as the fruit of his self-determination" (Hillion 2021, 351), while Lisa Lau wonders whether there might not be "a certain romanticization of Ashraf's 'choices'" (Lau 2018, 382) in Sethi's insistence on the worker privileging freedom over security and affluence. Lau asks: "Might this depiction of Ashraf, which is resolutely against depicting him as any kind of victim, have swung round instead to casting a somewhat heroic light on his marginal lifestyle?" and she hypothesizes: "In his anxiety not to abjectivize this community or focus on their exploitation to the negligence of their humanity, Sethi may be accruing to them more agency than they actually have" (Lau 2018, 382). Lau's argument is valid, but Sethi seems to be acutely aware of the limits of this freedom and agency. For example, when Ashraf forgets his mother's address and phone number and finds himself "a complete lawaris without any fixed address, family, or home" (Sethi 2011, 175), the tea shop owner ironically tells him he is now "completely free" (Sethi 2011, 176), because he can benefit from government schemes and get "[f]ree food, free medicines, free everything" (Sethi 2011, 176). However, Ashraf promptly qualifies that supposed freedom: "Lawaris meant he would die on a footpath in Delhi, and no one would even know" (Sethi 2011, 176).

The workers' agency is therefore contained within the limits of their poverty and should not be overstressed. Indeed, as Lau rightly points out, Sethi also "sidestep[s] narratives of 'aspiration,' where 'aspiration' is couched in terms of the neo-liberal pursuit of highly individualistic and consumerist lifestyles" (Lau 2018, 378)—a narrative that may be found in such a rags-to-riches story as Adiga's *The White Tiger*. Contrarily, the agenda of *A Free Man* is not to chart the emancipation of subaltern subjects and their increasing agency or upward mobility, which, as noted by Mike Davis in *Planet of Slums*, is "a myth" (Davis 2006, 179). As Sethi explained, the itinerant workers of Sadar Bazaar have "in a sense opted out of th[e] system," giving up the "hope of eventual upward mobility," and the reporter was specifically interested in this sense of "renunciation from worldly ambition, of stepping out of a certain idea of a rat race and coolly observing it" (in Sarkar 2012, 15). By offering slices of life that are neither abject nor heroic, Sethi is thus avoiding the binarism he identified in labour narratives set in India, with, on the one hand "stories of heroism, happy and triumphant" and on the other "stories of devastating defeat" (in Calabria 2012). As he points out, "people live their lives in the area in between" (in Calabria 2012), and it is this in-between zone that Sethi and Koshy are exploring in their books.

Self-Respect and Dignity in *Bicycle Dreaming*

After reading the prologue of *Bicycle Dreaming* and its "long graphic descriptions of muck and grime" in the landfill from which people retrieve material to sell to recycling factories, Divya Dubey, writing for the *Hindustani Times*, wondered whether Koshy was guilty of "serving India's filth and poverty to a mostly Western readership, on a platter" (Dubey 2016), but she swiftly discarded this initial hypothesis. Indeed, in *Bicycle Dreaming*, Koshy, like Sethi, avoids both narratives of abjectivity and stories of aspiration, a feature that can also be found in her short stories.[8] She said that she aimed to veer away from the "curiosity of revulsion" with which middle-class readers often approach narratives of poverty, a curiosity "which allows us to feel comfortable with our distance" from poor characters (in Guignery 2023, 248). But she also wanted to push back "against the notion of heroism" (in Guignery 2023, 246) and the type of "aspirational literature" (Koshy 2021) which can be found in *The White Tiger*. For that purpose, she portrayed her characters as neither victims nor exceptional people, refusing to "depict their lives as being missing something which can only be completed for example by climbing the hierarchy" (Koshy 2021).

Bicycle Dreaming differs from *A Free Man* in that, in Koshy's novel, agency is centred on children (who are absent from Sethi's book), while the parental figures seem to be viewed through the prism of victimhood and exploitation. This can be seen in passages that throw light on the transformations of the work of itinerant buyers and scavengers in Delhi and point to varying degrees of vulnerability depending on caste and religion. In the acknowledgements to her novel, Koshy refers to Kaveri Gill's interdisciplinary survey *Of Poverty and Plastic: Scavenging and Scrap Trading Entrepreneurs in India's Urban Informal Economy* (2010), in which the author points to the precariousness and very low social status of waste workers, especially Dalits and Muslims. Gill notes that "the lower social ranking of waste worker groups is institutionalized through their caste status" (Gill 2010, 26), confirming that caste, "that ancient iron grid of institutionalized inequality, continues to be the engine that runs modern India" (Roy 2019, xii). Gill adds that Muslims "appear to share and labour under the same caste and castelike norms and low status as S[cheduled] G[group] waste pickers" (Gill

8 Maryam Mirza examines Koshy's short story "Almost Valentine's Day" about an Indian domestic servant employed by an Indian immigrant family in the United States and argues that "it neither subscribes to a rosy image of domestic service nor presents the transnational maid as an essentially helpless victim of class, race and patriarchal power" (Mirza 2019, 115).

2010, 92) even if Koshy notes a difference in *Bicycle Dreaming*, as Dalits, unlike Muslims, are not allowed to ride "from house to house on a bicycle" (Koshy 2016, 142) to collect kabadi—i.e. "dry, segregated, inorganic waste" (Gill 2010, 88). Dalits can only go "through the naala," i.e. the river where people throw their garbage, and look "through the kooradan" (Koshy 2016, 203), i.e. the garbage dump with its "wet, unsegregated mix of organic and inorganic waste" (Gill 2010, 88). In *Bicycle Dreaming*, Ajith's Dalit father loses a source of income when the government burns a landfill in Ghazipur where he used to sort through garbage; similarly, Noor's father loses his job when a private company "take[s] over the colony's waste" (Koshy 2016, 179) and a new incinerator burns the plastic the kabadiwalas used to collect (Koshy 2016, 138). Noor's father is thereafter reduced to "pick[ing] through the ashes" what "kabadi doesn't get burnt in the incinerator" (Koshy 2016, 201), thus being degraded to the status of a scavenger.

Waste pickers therefore seem to have very little agency in *Bicycle Dreaming*, and several passages depict them as the victims of bribers and private companies.[9] However, in *Of Poverty and Plastic*, Gill interrogates the "compelling exploitation label" which some studies on informal waste chains are drawn to, a label which excludes "a discussion of 'choice' and 'freedom'" (Gill 2010, 25). Contrarily, Gill aims to emphasize the relative agency, especially of "subordinate scheduled caste groups […] in negotiating 'a decent life' in today's neoliberal environment" (Gill 2010, blurb), and for that purpose, she deploys not only quantitative but also qualitative methods to explore "more nebulous and loaded elements such as self-respect, dignity, security, inclusion, agency, and freedom" which can contribute to the rag pickers' well-being (Gill 2010, 78).

This perspective is of interest to Koshy, who reveals the qualities of agency, self-respect, and resilience of Ajith's father through the detailed description of his shelter, filled with "boxes and bags of goods, sorted and waiting to be hauled away" (Koshy 2016, 214), "goods that took time to collect," such as the rubber chappals which he gathers over a month. The neat piles of goods viewed through Noor's inner focalization and listed through anaphora testify to the man's proud dedication to his task: "Here was a pile of empty sauce packets, here a pile of ballpoint pens, here razors and wooden toys" (Koshy 2016, 215). A similar sense of satisfaction (rather than a feeling of exploitation

9 Noor once witnesses her father being humiliated by greedy contractors, adopting a posture of subordination: "His stoop was one of apology. His hands were in front of him. They were placed, palms together in pleading" (Koshy 2016, 113). The paratactic clauses reflect Noor's shock at this vision of her submissive father reduced, in this description, to mere body parts.

and victimhood) can be found in Katherine Boo's portrayal of Abdul, a Muslim teenage garbage sorter, in *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*: "Where he excelled was in the sorting—the crucial, exacting process of categorizing the purchased waste into more than sixty kinds of paper, plastic, metal, and the like" (Boo 2012, xv).[10] In *Bicycle Dreaming*, Noor's father defends the value of his skills when his job is taken over by private companies, insisting that the kabadiwalas made the work "what it is today" (Koshy 2016, 202), and he is honoured when chosen to speak at a meeting to fight for their profession (Koshy 2016, 198). In her short story "Romancing the *Koodawallah*," Koshy also emphasizes the self-respect of the itinerant buyers when depicting them carrying off plastic bags of rubbish "with such loud laughter as six or eight men may muster to embolden their claim to dignity" (Koshy 2008, 34).

In *Bicycle Dreaming*, however, the characters endowed with greater agency are the waste pickers' children, despite their vulnerability due to their age and poverty. In the prologue, the two unnamed children who sort through the garbage in the landfill and come out with empty bags nevertheless boast of making 2,000 rupees the day before and heading to the city to buy things and see a movie. Agency is also gained through education, as the Dalit boy Ajith aims to become an engineer, while Noor is encouraged to study to become a nurse or a policewoman. However, Noor's innermost longing is to become a kabadiwali (a job not performed by women, as noted in the novel and confirmed in Gill's survey [Gill 2010, 87–8]), and to achieve that goal, she needs to learn to ride a bicycle. She admires her aunt for riding a bike "to gather firewood far from where she lived" (Koshy 2016, 56), which she perceives as a sign of agency. Bicycling riding as a form of empowerment is what is stressed in Palagummi Sainath's piece "Where There Is a Wheel" in *Everyone Loves a Good Drought*: *Stories from India's Poorest Districts* (1996), which was a source of inspiration for Koshy's novel. In this piece, Sainath reports on his visit to the city of Pudukkottai in Tamil Nadu in the mid-1990s, where tens of thousands of Muslim "neo-literate rural women"—among them agricultural workers, quarry labourers, village health nurses, and schoolteachers—took to "bicycling as a symbol of independence, freedom and mobility" (Sainath 1996, 564). In addition to encouraging literacy, a progressive movement in the area fostered cycling as a way for women to gain confidence and reduce their dependence on men.[11] Noor's wish to learn to ride a bike may likewise be inscribed within that dynamic of agency and emancipation.

10 On questions of subaltern agency and voice in *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, see Davies (2019).

11 Cycling also had an economic benefit, as it allowed women to go to several villages more rapidly to sell their products (rather than waiting for a bus).

Sethi's and Koshy's books thus clearly subvert the trope of subaltern victimization and blur the binarism of victimhood and agency, without, however, remaining blind to the underprivileged characters' precariousness or portraying them as having escaped their working-class condition. This nuanced representation of manual workers goes hand in hand with a reflection on the ethical stance of the observer of the working class. Several reviews have stressed the empathetic treatment of the labourers in the two books, but the concept of empathy needs to be addressed with caution, as the author's or the reader's empathy may unwittingly reduce characters to the status of victims or else elevate them to the status of exceptional beings. Beyond empathy, what needs to be explored is the way in which the workers react to the gaze and/or the care of the outsider as journalist or observer (and, later on, as reader) and to what extent this reaction may complicate the distribution of vulnerability.

Empathy and the Distribution of Vulnerability

It is tempting to read Sethi's and Koshy's books through the lens of empathy, and this is how several reviewers approached them. While, for Indian novelist Manju Kapur, *Bicycle Dreaming* "reverberates with empathy" (Koshy 2016, front cover), a reviewer of *A Free Man* noted that "Sethi excels at emphatically depicting what could come across as a miserable existence: he allows Ashraf and the other mazdoors (labourers) to share their stories without either judging them or pretending to be one of them" ("A Free Man" 2012). What is meant by empathy here is not an "emotional self-pitying identification with victims" (Landsberg 1997, 82) but corresponds to what Dominick LaCapra calls "empathic unsettlement," which "involves a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other's position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other's place" (LaCapra 1999, 722), or, in the words of Alison Landsberg, "a way of both feeling for, while feeling different from, the subject of inquiry" (Landsberg 1997, 82). However, several theoreticians have pointed to the limitations of empathy as a "self-regarding emotional response" which tends to erase the subject one supposedly feels for (Keen 2007, xxiv).[12] Koshy herself has qualified the scope of empathy in fiction,

12 On the limits of empathy, see for instance Stephanie Newell's analysis of the 2010 BBC documentary *Welcome to Lagos* about impoverished Lagosians living in slums. She notes in particular how the voiceover of a British actor takes on "the fascinated curiosity of a touristic outsider reinforcing the cultural

arguing that an "individual act of empathy often only affirms to you your own humanity," it "satisfies *your* dignity and *your* humanity" (in Guignery 2023, 248). Koshy also remarked that in novels featuring a poor person, the protagonist might be "exceptionally noble or sensitive or beautiful or even brutal" and "[w]hat we are asked to empathise with, is the exceptional nature of the character and not so much the character's humanity" (in Nandan 2016). What she aimed for instead in *Bicycle Dreaming* was to see "if it would be possible to write a story in which the reader is asked not to empathise with the exceptional characters, but rather with their humanity" (in Nandan 2016). This implies considering them not as victims or agents but simply as human beings. Sethi, for his part, sees *A Free Man* "not as an act of empathy, but as an act of old-fashioned solidarity," for solidarity, unlike empathy, is political: "it acknowledges that when you stand in solidarity with someone, you are not that someone; the act of saying 'I am in solidarity with you' is acknowledging difference, but saying difference can be overcome towards a certain political end" (in Guignery 2024, 225).

In addition to solidarity, the two books could be read through the perspective of care and vulnerability, provided the two notions do not turn the other into a victim deprived of autonomy who needs our compassion or help. In *A Free Man*, Sethi highlights the "irredeemable distance" which separates him from the community of homeless workers he is observing (Hillion 2021, 284): the journalist has a permanent job and a home to go back to and enjoys social and economic agency, which enables him to help the workers by giving them money, taking them to the hospital or accompanying them to places.[13] This unbalanced relationship between Sethi and the workers may bring to mind what several care ethicists have identified as "paternalistic modes of domination" from privileged caregivers (or agents) to victimized care receivers (Robinson 2016, 160–1). However, I would argue that, as in the ethics of care, their relationship is, to a certain extent, what Marcia Morgan calls "an interdependent and mutually constitutive relationship between self and other" (Morgan 2020, 12), one which does not reproduce the victim–agent binarism but draws from different degrees of vulnerability. Indeed, for this kind of project, Sethi had to become a participant in the long term to earn the trust of the people he

otherness of the people portrayed, even in the process of ostensibly forging empathetic connections between Western spectators and the Lagosian poor" (Newell 2019, 116). See also Bloom (2016); Pedwell (2014); Weiner and Auster (2007), among others.

13 "I would look out for him in a material sense," Sethi says about Ashraf (in Sarkar 2012, 14).

talked to and be given access to their circle. As he said in an interview, "you need to make yourself vulnerable and be okay with it" (in Calabria 2012).

If the workers face the epistemic violence of the reporter's "barrage of questions" (Sethi 2011, 31), as an interviewer, Sethi depends on the workers' willingness to take part in the exchange. Thus, what appears at first hand as an asymmetrical relationship or what Hillion calls "the one-sided intrusive nature of the reporter-subject relationship" (Hillion 2021, 310) is maybe more complex than that. On the one hand, Sethi regularly voices his doubts, questions and confusions about his project within the book, thereby acknowledging the ethical limitations of his enterprise. For instance, he quotes Ashraf's accusing words: "For you, all this is research: a boy tries to sell his kidney, you write it down in your notebook. A man goes crazy somewhere between Delhi and Bombay, you store it in your recorder. But for other people, this is life" (Sethi 2011, 114). On the other hand, the workers repeatedly resist Sethi's "demand for narrative" (Derrida 2004, 78) and, by doing so, make him vulnerable, as the success of his work hinges on their inclination to share their stories with him. When Sethi met Ashraf for his *Frontline* piece in 2005, the man "had refused to answer any questions directly," "he had clammed up and refused to offer his opinion" (Sethi 2011, 6). For this new project, Sethi acknowledges that "[w]ith the exception of Ashraf, no one at the chowk makes the effort of talking to [him] more than they have to" (Sethi 2011, 64). The female bar owner, Kalyani, a hard-working woman who manages to bypass police regulations to sell alcohol to pavement dwellers, bluntly refuses to talk to him, while a colourful man, J. P. Singh Pagal, tells tall tales and thereby prevents the journalist from getting "new insights into the condition of labour" (Sethi 2011, 37). Ashraf himself asserts his agency by wilfully retaining the possession of his story, refusing to answer the journalist's questions, embarking on digressions or speaking in onomatopoeias, preventing Sethi from "build[ing] a proper timeline" of his life (Sethi 2011, 93). Although Sethi eventually proposes a two-page chronology of Ashraf's life with rough dates and events in the last chapter of the book, the brutal form of that timeline jars with the rest of the book, in which a more balanced, trusting and interdependent relationship between journalist and subject has been achieved.[14]

14 Sethi recalls that he had "mixed feelings about including the timeline" (in Maqbool 2014), and a friend who read an early draft, in which the book ended with the timeline, considered it "an act of violence"—a way of having "control over Ashraf's narrative" (in Sandhu 2013). However, the epilogue that comes after the chronology partly attenuates the violence and control as it transcribes Ashraf's voice on the phone from the hospital where he was treated for tuberculosis in

In *Bicycle Dreaming*, we may perceive a similar destabilization of the distribution of vulnerability in the prologue, in which the two unnamed children collecting material from a landfill are observed and questioned by an unidentified onlooker, but will not let that person turn them into victims. They not only give the observer an embellished version of their everyday lives but they also "look […] away when asked their names" (Koshy 2016, 2), and as they leave, the boy shouts loudly: "What do you care what our names are?" (Koshy 2016, 4). The workers and scavengers, suspicious of the observer's questions, retain agency by denying the onlooker access to their identity, making them vulnerable by keeping information about themselves. By placing this passage at the beginning of her novel, Koshy is sending a signal to her readers that they will be as vulnerable as the prologue's observer to not knowing everything about her characters. She noted, for instance, that she deliberately avoided the use of irony, as she did not want the adult reader to know more than the child character and, therefore, assume a position of "self-congratulatory" superiority (in Guignery 2023, 249).

Both *A Free Man* as literary reportage and *Bicycle Dreaming* as fiction complicate the 'victim versus agent' binary system while interrogating the authors' positionings and the readers' response to the representation of working-class characters. Rather than portraying the individuals as victims with whom author and reader may empathize from a safe distance, Sethi and Koshy draw the contours of working-class people's agency without exaggerating it or turning them into heroes, and simultaneously expose their own vulnerability as authors and our vulnerability as readers in their and our limited access to the depicted individuals. Sethi's and Koshy's portrayal of working-class people and their acknowledgement of the flaws and pitfalls of their own literary enterprise testify to their ethical concerns about representation. Significantly, to this day, neither Sethi nor Koshy have published any subsequent books after the two examined in this chapter. Although Sethi has engaged with creative practice in different forms, he did not feel he could write "an immersive book about another form of working-class life" (in Guignery 2024, 227). Koshy explained that she stopped writing fiction when she realized that the working class could not "join the conversation" (Mirza 2021, 174) she was trying to engage with

Calcutta before being discharged. Ashraf eventually escapes Sethi's control, as he disappears from the radar, no longer making phone calls and remaining unseen by his friends in Calcutta. Sethi is nevertheless confident that "Ashraf will find us when he wants to" (Sethi 2011, 223), a formulation which stresses Ashraf's agency as a subject.

because they could not afford to buy books or read them in English (in Guignery 2023, 244). She decided instead to fund a free community library in order to give access to literature to the underprivileged children who live in her neighbourhood. Her aim is to "broaden literature, not just by literally bringing people into literature as it exists, but by having people engage with literature in a way in which ultimately literature will have to change" (in Guignery 2023, 252). This change could imply a transformation of the way working-class people are depicted in Indian literature in English.

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