


Not just another nobody: Remembering Shikha Chhabra

1990-2015

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2015/04/27/not-just-another-nobody-remembering-shikha-chhabra-1990-2015/

2015-4-27

On 12 April 2015, 24 year-old **Shikha Chhabra**, an Indian alumna from LSE, passed away after a 3 year battle with cancer. During her illness she wrote a [blog](#), documenting her experience as a young person with cancer and sharing her passion for literature. Here, a poignant reflection from her blog is reposted with an introduction by her friend and current LSE student **Ankita Mukhopadhyay**.

I knew Shikha from my college days. Shikha wasn't any ordinary girl – she was an extraordinary writer, a beautiful person and the most articulate human I ever knew. It is said that God gives justice to all of us in our lifetime. But my mind cannot accept the fact that Shikha had to leave us so early, at such a young age, when life is just beginning.

I remember being an awkward first year, trying to navigate through college, with no clue of what I was doing there. That was the first time I met Shikha. Shikha was the kind of a senior who sent you in awe the moment she passed by you in the corridor – you wanted to be like her, but you knew you still had a lifetime to go to reach the level of understanding she had about life. Shikha believed in the power of reading, and in the power of questioning. Very few people can develop that quality at such a young age.

When she went off to LSE in 2011, I remember motivating myself to do something as big as her. Shikha's memory helped me cross my final two years in college, and when I landed at LSE, exactly as she had done, I knew I could see her again and this time I could tell her that I have read, and questioned, and now I want to travel on this long journey of understanding life with her.

But that was not to be. Unknown to me, Shikha di (as I fondly call her) was diagnosed with bone cancer in 2012 while she was studying for her Masters at LSE. She left her degree midway to receive treatment and came back to LSE in 2013 to finish, but her health deteriorated. The first round of chemotherapy seemed to be successful, but her cancer resurfaced in a few months.

In the last two years of her life, Shikha took to writing a blog, to motivate those suffering from cancer, but to show all of us who have the luxury of our health and a future that life is meant to be lived to the fullest.

I would like to introduce Shikha's writing to readers of India at LSE. This is her article, and she should take forth the mantle now. I am sure Shikha is standing beside me and asking me to stop talking about her so much, and cut to the point. And I will Shikha.

Shikha's memory will live on in the hearts of her friends and everyone else who has known the incredible person she is and was. To those who don't know her – I hope you discover the mighty pen Shikha wielded in her blog, and help keep her memory alive.

[The diary of another nobody](#)

Posted 20 September 2014 on oblomovssofa.wordpress.com

It's the nature of autumn, perhaps- those barred clouds blooming in the soft-dying days (not mine, Keats), days which die noticeably earlier with every sunset now- that has got me thinking more than usual about how long I have left to live. It could also be that whatever hoped-for progress seems to have plateaued at the moment. I am not getting worse, but also not much better; and I just had a birthday, an event that inevitably prompts legitimate speculation about whether there will be another one; and then there was an annihilating Clive James poem on his impending death [published in *The New Yorker*](#) this week which I read the day it came out, was moved enough to

tuck away on my computer, and subsequently discovered that all of the internet had the same reaction I did and it has been doing the rounds on social media and in other publications since, not allowing me to forget it. It even wormed its way into my print newspaper.

...My daughter's choice, the maple tree is new.

Come autumn and its leaves will turn to flame

What I must do

Is live to see that. That will end the game

For me, though life continues all the same

Filling the double doors to bathe my eyes,

A final flood of colours will live on

As my mind dies

Burned by my vision of a world that shone

So brightly at last, and then it was gone.

The response to such stirring lines is universal, but specific to me is the envy I feel reading them, which I'm certain is not an emotion the majority of other readers felt. Who envies a man in his seventies dying of cancer? I do, as a woman in her twenties dying of cancer- I note with jealousy that he has lived long enough to produce a body of work that will be cherished, long enough to have a daughter who planted a tree which will live on.

I wonder if I will ever gaze at something solid and lasting that has sprung around my own existence, or rather *because of it*, and I doubt it- my life is centred around consuming ephemeral things: medication that needs constant touching up, people's affection that needs to be constantly tested and renewed, new experiences which will live and die in my memories alone, rather than producing anything of value to anyone else. We all think about our legacy from time to time, and what, in the end, we will have to show for being alive, and I've had to think about this much earlier and at a more accelerated pace than I expected. For myself, the answer so far is nothing of any importance whatsoever. This is what nobody warns you about being a young person with a mortal disease – suddenly nothing is of higher consequence but the fact that you're alive, only the fact that you're alive is not of much consequence any longer, because your life is not going to branch out over time into something bigger than itself, to offer other people shelter and support; it is going to stay small, and stunted, and tended to by others instead. I will have lived a supremely ordinary life, and there is nothing wrong with that, only it will have been ordinary in the most boring, disappointing way, i.e. lived entirely self-involvedly.

This is never more clear to me than when I go over how I fill my time – I read (for myself), I write (about myself, and primarily for myself too), I exercise and eat and try to manage my health as far as I can (for myself), and for a few months now have taken to maintaining a record of every day of my life in the form of snippets on the leaves of a tear-out calendar, which I keep stuffed inside museum gift shop bags.



On the one hand, keeping a diary is an act of asserting that one is human and has a story to tell. I'm thinking of [this town in Italy where thousands of citizens' journals are archived](#), in an act designed "to give power to the ordinary people, to give their lives dignity."

So far, so high-minded: I can bask in the fact that my blogging and note-keeping is therefore an empowering gesture of defiance against the march of time, against people's short memories and the indifference of the universe.

On the other hand, there is something about seeing the details of my life accumulate as pixels on a screen and as little stacks of paper attached to ticket stubs and receipts- this is all of me now, which I find comically pathetic. I recently read *The Diary of a Nobody* by the Grossmiths, a Victorian spoof on diary-keeping, whose central character, Mr. Pooter is:

(a) naïve hero at a loss to explain the mundane nature of (his) own tightly defined world.

Mr. Pooter dutifully chronicles the stuff of his daily life, which involves skirmishes with grocers, church visits, and dinner parties that generally go along these lines:

Carrie prepared a little extemporized supper, consisting of the remainder of the cold joint, a small piece of salmon, and a blanc-mange and custards... Mrs. James made us play rather a good game of cards, called "Muggings".

and

Am in for a cold. Spent the whole day at the office, sneezing. In the evening, the cold being intolerable, sent Sarah out for a bottle of Kinahan. Fell asleep in armchair...

Compare this with my own entry for July 27, in which I which I write:

Shattered from the walking around in Hampstead + developing a cold. Sat around.

Although my records indicate that way of medicating myself in this instance was not with cough syrup and an armchair, but by:

| watching a lot of 'Everything Wrong With...' with clips on YouTube.

There is also a day on which I have ranked the two French onion soups I have had in my life.

So I can't escape the feeling that this endeavour to create some tangible evidence of my time on earth, even if only for my own eyes (and a vanishingly small number of other eyes as far as this blog is concerned), is not a philosophical gesture in the face of the cosmic void, but a laughably Pooter-esque mission. Or maybe the two are not mutually exclusive. Whatever it may be, I have to continue to find pleasure and meaning in *something*, however trivial, until- or rather, unless- I discover a way to be more useful to the world; so I thought I'll end this post, in the spirit of Pooter, with three completely inconsequential happenings of no significance to anyone that still made me glad to be alive.

The first is that, perpetually aware of how short life is, I decided to run down my savings on a subscription to the *Times Literary Supplement*, and in the very first issue I received I found nestling a review of a new translation of Goncharov's *Oblomov*. I am not a religious person. I am not even one of those people who are "spiritual, but not religious", for I am not even spiritual. This is the closest I can get to receiving a Signal that I am doing the right thing.

The second is that I finally found a 1988 edition of Larkin's *Collected Poems*, which is now only available second-hand after the inferior, whittled-down 2003 version was released. I'd just popped into a second-hand book-store for some casual browsing, was lifting a stack of books in the poetry section, and lo, it fell into my hands, an edition *without any markings*.

Finally, another second-hand treasure from a different shop: a limited-run art-gallery print compilation of Sylvia Plath's pen-and-ink drawings, signed by her daughter, for the price of a cup of coffee. A book to be delighted in as an object of art all by itself.

At one point, Pooter remarks:

| I find, on looking at my diary, that nothing of any consequence has taken place over the last month.

I could say exactly the same thing- it really doesn't feel like much at all. Still, maybe next month.

This piece is reposted with the permission of Shikha's family. To read more of her writing visit oblomovssofa.wordpress.com

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the India at LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Authors

Shikha Chhabra was an MSc Economics student at LSE. She joined LSE in 2011, but left midway for treatment. She came back in 2013 to complete her degree. Shikha completed her undergraduate degree at Lady Shri Ram College, New Delhi. A driving member of the Lady Shri Ram Economics Department, she was Treasurer and enthusiastically took to organising events. She also zealously pursued her passion for the written word, and took on the mantle of Editor of the LSR Economics Journal and the LSR Model United Nations newsletter *Communiqué*, as well as being a key member of the College Magazine editorial team. For her academic acumen, she was awarded

the Saroj Gupta Memorial Paper Presentation Prize.

Ankita Mukhopadhyay is currently studying for an MSc in History of International Relations at LSE. She completed her undergraduate degree in History (Hons.) from Lady Shri Ram College, New Delhi and tweets [@muk_ankita](#).

- Copyright © 2016 London School of Economics