

LABOUR OF LOVE

*IncogRito**

I met my niece when she was less than a day old. Swaddled in a striped pink-and-blue blanket that is peculiar to American hospitals, she was the picture of sweet contentment—a delicate flower that had just bloomed and was waiting to enjoy the attention and wonders of the wider world.

Different cultures have different ways to express the axiom that there is no pleasure without pain. This truth, universal and eternal, is probably more prejudiced against women. The excruciating pain that a mother has to undergo before, during and after childbirth is only matched by the ecstatic delight in setting her eyes on the newborn. Evolution has ensured that mothers forget most of their agony when they see their healthy baby for the first time, a phenomenon that is referred to as labour amnesia.

The closest that a man comes to “suffering” is in certain tribes where the male member practices couvade to sympathise with his wife, although cynics rightfully see this exercise as a get-out-of-jail-free card to avoid the daily responsibilities of work. It is surprising that Nature should not have devised a more equitable way to democratise pain, especially for an age where women are increasingly joining the workforce and contributing to the homefront. Of course, given that evolution (like the mills of the gods) grind exceedingly slow yet exceedingly fine, it may not be

necessary for the male aborigines of Guiana to fake labour in a few thousand years.

What babies think is a question that has been much disputed, without a definite conclusion. The sense of wonderment in a child’s eyes (accentuated by their dominating pupils) is not surprising since they are experiencing new unfiltered sensations for the first time in their lives. What astonishes me (and helps me regain faith in the mystery of life), however, is a newborn smiling in her sleep at some happy memory from her prenatal days. Our elders call it communicating with the gods, and indeed, when she wakes up to the present with a startle, her wise eyes appear to have glimpsed some ancient secrets of the unknown.

AFTERTHOUGHT

*The smile that flickers on baby’s lips when he sleeps—
does anybody know where it was born? Yes, there is a
rumour that a young pale beam of a crescent moon
touched the edge of a vanishing autumn cloud, and
there the smile was first born in the dreams of a dew-
washed morning— the smile that flickers on baby’s lips
when he sleeps.*

Rabindranath Tagore, *The Crescent Moon*

* *‘IncogRito’ prefers to remain incognito and we are committed to honouring the request. An engineer by profession IncogRito’s writings have occasionally been published in various periodicals.*