‘Language is at the core of human beings’

The doctor-author of The Afflictions on the invisible strands between his writing and his medical work

BY SHIKHA KUMAR

I meet Vikram Paralkar in the house he grew up in, an apartment on the first floor of a residential building in a western Mumbai suburb. On the ground floor is a nursing home his doctor-parents run. As a kid, he would watch his parents go downstairs to see patients multiple times a day, and come home during mealtimes. When he was about nine, he would accompany his father to the operation theatre, standing on a table in the corner and watching surgeries being performed.

“If there was a sick patient in the hospital, I would hear my mother telling the nurse what to do. There was all of this medical vocabulary constantly flowing that I was subconsciously absorbing and getting fascinated by,” he recalls.

Blood and bones

Blood was another thing that fascinated him. His father would bring home slides of blood smears to place under a microscope, and Paralkar would look too to see the shapes of the different cells. Medicine, he states, is in his blood. Today, the physician and scientist works in the haematology-oncology department of the University of Pennsylvania.

Paralkar is also an author whose first novel, The Afflictions (2014), was released in India recently; his second work, The Wounds of the Dead, was published here in 2017. The Afflictions is an intriguing look at human diseases, narrated through magical realism. We follow an ageing librarian as he introduces a young apprentice to The Encyclopaedia Medicinae at the Central Library that contains descriptions of 50 mythical human ailments, exploring themes of language, exile, identity and music.

For instance, people affected by Pulchritudo Sclerata, or Accursed Beauty, have a bewitching loveliness about them, and anyone who lays eyes on them suffers migraines, rashes or inflammation of the joints and sinuses. Foetus Perfidus is a pre-natal disease — in the seventh month, the foetus starts shrinking back, and the womb regresses to its original state. Paralkar says that the novel started out as a short story, inspired by the story of the Tower of Babel in the Bible.

“There’s a fable in the Tower of Babel where god, angered by the hubris of humanity, decides to make everyone speak a different language so they can no longer communicate with each other. I wanted to write a short story about a town where everyone wakes up one morning speaking a different language and the town plunges into chaos, because they cannot communicate with each other. As I began to write it, I realised that it actually worked better as a vignette written by a medical expert, who’s trying to understand what happened in the town,” says the Philadelphia-based doctor.

Digging deeper

Paralkar’s biggest influences have been Jorge Luis Borges and Italo Calvino, and The Afflictions is his love letter to them. “I read them when I was 17, and they’ve been so important to me. Their works gave me a sense of what the landscape of world literature was like.” While the afflictions in the book are imaginary, they do draw from real diseases: he cites Prosopagnosia, where the individual cannot recognise faces, but can recognise voices. “This sounds like it could be an affliction from the book, but it’s real. I gave the ones in the book a more surreal, fantastical, imaginative twist.”

Both his novels are at the intersection of medicine and literature: for Paralkar, the two are united in attempting to understand what’s happening with human beings. When a patient comes to a doctor, the latter tries to find out their story, how they ended up this way, and a way to potentially change the future. “I think that’s what authors are doing. They’re trying to take some aspect of human beings that puzzles, disquiets, fascinates them, and digging deeper to find out what they can understand. While my writing is a separate endeavour from my medical work and research, there are certain invisible strands connecting the two,” he says.

The afflictions centred on language are the most intriguing. Sufferers of Dictio Aliena experience a unique reversal — farmers and blacksmiths wake up with the speech inflections of aristocrats. The diction of barons and dukes, on the other hand, degenerates into the coarsespeak of labourers and townsfolk.

Accident of birth

Paralkar says that language is at the core of human beings, it’s what sets us apart from the rest of the animal kingdom. It allows us to formulate complex ideas, have conversations, develop skills and pass them on from generation to generation. “That’s why disorders of language are the most distressing. People can live with an amputated limb much easier than they can with an amputated tongue. It shows how little we understand of how the brain works.”

Another theme he wanted to explore was how the things we achieve in life are, to a large extent, governed by the accident of our birth. In the U.S., he says, there are many people who pretend that everything they have achieved is owing to their own accomplishments. “I’m a doctor and a scientist because I was born in certain circumstances, and exposed to certain influences. What if I had been born to a beggar woman on the street? Where would I have been today?”

Paralkar says that doctors are constantly encountering human beings at their extremes — afraid, distressed, grappling with the big questions — which fuels his desire to dig deeper into the invisible strands connecting the two. “It puts him in a strange position where he knows everything that’s happening in their lives while he’s crafting eyes for them. This leads to certain entanglements that I’m exploring.”

The freelance journalist writes on books, gender, art and culture.