All that breathes: An exploration of inter-species intimacy

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Review of *All that breathes* (2022)
Director: Shaunak Sen
Length: 1 hour 33 minutes
On HBO Max (https://www.hbo.com/movies/all-that-breathes)

"Time flows differently in this basement. Sometimes I feel that my heart will burst open one day while working here, and kites would fly out of it." Saud's wistful expression is a mixture of grief, love and perseverance as his eyes meet the piercing gaze of a kite with a bandaged wing. For the past twenty years, Mohammad Saud and his brother Nadeem Shehzad have been nursing sick birds, mainly kites, in a makeshift clinic at their home in Delhi (https://www.raptorrescue.org/). The Oscar-nominated documentary *All that breathes* by Indian filmmaker Shaunak Sen is a powerful yet sensitive portrayal of their work, enmeshed as it is within one of the most polluted metropolitan cities in the world.

The film follows the seemingly ordinary activities of the brothers, and their endearing assistant Salik Rehman, as they traverse the choked arteries of a metropolis to rescue a few more birds each day. We see poignant scenes of pigs wading through sewage canals, a tortoise navigating through trash, and monkeys making their way through a maze of cables, wires and construction sites. Cows negotiate a path through flooded streets, rats rummage through garbage, the drone of flies almost constantly fills the background, and the kites hover prominently over the massive piles of waste that the city produces daily. The entanglement of different species is a vivid reminder that no place is apart from Nature, no matter how much cities might try to obfuscate the relationships. However, the precarious lives of the city's marginalised – both human and more-than-human – remind me of Wendell Berry's words, from his poem 'How to be a poet' (2001):

There are no unsacred places;
there are only sacred places
and desecrated places.

While mincing meat for the kites to feed on, Salik asks Saud if the kites will eat him, too, if he pretended to be dead. Saud jokingly asks him to try, while Nadeem pithily comments, "humans forget that they are also a piece of meat…". Elsewhere, as part of a casual conversation, Salik calculates that each kite probably eats ten to fifteen grams each day, and thus the 10,000 or so kites circling the landfill must be consuming roughly 100 to 150 kilograms of waste each day. Saud then compares the city to a stomach and creatures like kites to the "bacteria that help in digestion". However, these manifest forms of interdependence are not the reason for their largely thankless work of treating the birds. Their relentless and restless efforts draw on something much more personal and powerful.

Saud and Nadeem describe how they had grown up watching kites. In the Muslim faith, feeding kites is supposed to ease your worries as the raptors 'devour the anxieties' through the food one offers them. They recall childhood stories told to them by their mother, who lost her life to cancer. The stories prominently featured animals and other creatures as protagonists, interconnections woven into them like a fundamental fact of life. Dedication to a cause does not come easy, however. Satisfaction and pleasure part ways soon; one waits for an ethereal moment to erase the frustrations of the day, accepting the latter as an inevitable part of the journey. At one point, Nadeem compares Saud's relationship with the kites to that of a musician encountering a sublime *rāga*: "It is said that while performing classical music, if one truly sings a *rāga* well, one experiences a kind of fleeting bliss. This bliss can't be possessed or captured. For a brief moment, you just touch it… Saud can touch a similar relief when he is with kites." Nadeem confesses to wanting more from his life and of how their efforts seem like applying a band-aid to the huge gaping wound that is the city. Yet, they continue their work as if pulled by the mysterious forces stretching into the kite-scattered skies.

The documentary unfolds against the backdrop of growing sectarian violence and protests against the blatantly discriminatory stance assumed by the state (Bhatia and Gajjala, 2020). Suppressed dread looms in the background when Nadeem simply muses over the fact that their father's name is probably spelt differently in the government identification certifications. Can any arbitrary criteria make the process of 'othering' so easy? The fires of sectarian violence rage on and the air quality of the city deteriorates to alarming levels, with birds plummeting from the sky.

Saud and Nadeem reminisce over the fact that they started treating injured kites because the first one they had found as teenagers was not admitted into a bird hospital nearby. The reason for rejection was the fact that kites are carnivores. There are no aliens; there are only those who are alienated. Yet, life finds a way, and relationships can thrive in the harshest of circumstances. One can feel the vicarious relief when the brothers get formal approval to seek

foreign funding for their cause, and partake in the deep grief Saud feels when surrounded by the bodies of birds they could not save. Soaring between hopes of expanding their work, and wading through the murky waters of communal violence, pollution and increasing bird mortality, the documentary is not in search of any grand narrative or final judgement. Instead, it simply affirms the truth we can feel in our bones, and our shared breath, water and land: "*Zindagi khud ek rishtadari hai, hum sab hawa ke viradri hain* (life itself is kinship; we belong to the community of air)."

References

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Release poster.