

THIRD EYE EDITION

Over the moon

“You mean he was still around?” I muttered to myself when I came to know of Neil Armstrong’s passing away recently. Like Jim Reeves and his achingly rich baritone, John Wayne and his mean moves against cattle thieves, Armstrong was a mythical figure of my long-gone childhood, and like them, his very name evokes a range of emotions. But instead of singing hosannas to this all-American hero, I am laying bare in this piece a few unresolved issues. It is a pity he is not around to defend himself, but I would like to assure his fans that there is nothing personal about it. So, here we go. Armstrong, by pottering around the moon for two-and-a-half hours with his mate Buzz Aldrin, blew our childhood illusions to smithereens. Where were the two rabbits and the basil plant that our grandmother had declared was on the moon? The moon was our Never Never Land and could become whatever we wanted it to be – a round-faced maiden, a crescent scythe, a haven for pixies and elves. Hadn’t Lear’s owl and the pussy cat danced under the light of the moon? But no, America had to have the moon. They had to hurtle towards it, ahead of the Soviets... simply because Kennedy had said so. In fact, prior to the voyage, the astronauts were taken to an extinct volcano site in Arizona that was a replica of the lunar landscape. So there they were, reporting of an eerie, dead landscape with craters and lording over it with a command module, a lunar lander, unwieldy spacesuits... They brought back with them ugly rocks and put them up as exhibits to prove they had been there, beating the Soviets hollow. And the mission itself did not seem to have the macho John Wayne kind of daredevilry I admired. Years later, I read Buzz Aldrin recall in *Life* magazine: “We just kind of gazed out the window at the Earth getting smaller and smaller, did housekeeping things, checking the spacecraft”. If you don’t mind my saying so, the late Armstrong was a wily PR man. He is said to have come up with this insta-quote that I spent the rest of my childhood reading: “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.” Mind you, he didn’t say giant leap for America. He sounded noble and generous, sharing the experience with everyone – from an Eskimo to a Hottentot. And the Soviet Yuri Gagarin, poor fellow, in spite of being the first man in space, did not leave behind any handy quote to remember him by. As for Laika, the first space dog, its woofs have woefully gone unheard. So, going by this grouse expressed in print, it is clear that I was not exactly over the moon about Armstrong’s space exploits. The little anarchist in me believed the moon was for everybody and nobody had the right to colonise it, least of all men in clumsy space suits. The moon belonged to children and sighing lovers, to ghosts and fairies with wings.

Science describes things as they are. The arts interpret reality with elements of imagination and belief. My grouse with Armstrong and his *Apollo 11* trip was a tussle between science and art. In a survey conducted in 1988, 13% of Americans surveyed believed that the moon is made of cheese. This finding made me buoy up with hope because it proves that the moon is still the stuff of fantasy and conjecture. A couple of years ago, I was walking along a city street bustling with Durga *Puja* revellers. All on a sudden, I saw a man standing on the kerb, holding his baby son in his arms and pointing up at the sky. I looked up and what do you know, the young dad was acquainting junior with a serene, smiling full moon high above the frenetic cars and glittering stores. Was the man saying it was this dead place with

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craters and ugly rocks? That it was a mere satellite and rotates and has no global magnetic field? Of course not. The moon for that baby is Chandamama, a beloved and genial uncle ready to indulge.

The moon is often a serene and ubiquitous presence in mythology and literature. If Pink Floyd named their album *Dark side of the Moon*, Anton Chekhov remarked, "I promise to be an excellent husband, but give me a wife who, like the moon, will not appear every day in the sky." The great American poet Carl Sandburg described the moon "as a friend for the lonesome to talk to." D.H. Lawrence expressed a sentiment I heartily endorse: "The Moon! Artemis! The great Goddess of the splendid past of men. Are you going to tell me she is a dead lump?" Somerset Maugham based his *Moon and Sixpence* on the life of artist Paul Gauguin. A tenth century Japanese tale describes how the Moon Princess comes to live with a bamboo cutter couple. In the Italian romantic epic *Orlando Furioso*, the moon is depicted as the place where everything lost on Earth is found. JRR Tolkien, trying to console his four-year-old son Michael grieving the death of his dog, wrote *Roverandom*, a story about a dog's adventures on the moon.

India has a glorious lunar connection indeed. In Hinduism, Chandra is a lunar deity and a *graha* or planet. He is young, beautiful, fair, two-armed, carrying a club and a lotus. He rides his chariot across the sky every night and is married to twenty-seven constellations. In one of his verses, Kalidasa requests his patron King Bhojaraja to provide him with a sumptuous meal that includes curds made from buffalo milk resembling moonlight after the monsoon season. The moon has had a long innings in Indian cinema, as a prop in dance sequences, fitted into lovelorn lyrics, used as a vehicle to express loss and despair. Whether it was Raj Kapoor romancing Nargis in *Awara* or Raj Kumar communing with Meena Kumari in *Pakeezah*, the moon was a vital element in celluloid magic. Singer Mukesh has sung a number of songs in which the moon is a pensive presence.

Of course, you cannot evade the dark side of the moon. Perfectly sensible young people are going cuckoo over the *Twilight* series that has much to do with ghostly moonlit nights and crepuscular vampires.

The moon is much more than a movie prop or a colony of the Yanks. It has a great effect on Earth and its denizens. The shifting gravity created by the orbit of the Moon around the Earth is the primary cause of ocean tides. Some claim that the fertility cycle of women is also governed by the moon. Lunar cycles are believed to have effects on the psyche and this very piece may have resulted from it. Neil Armstrong robbed me of two rabbits and a basil planet. My own children never much wondered about the moon, what with cable TV blocking the sky. My father, as excited as a schoolboy over the recent Mars mission, told me on the phone: "Moon landing? That's old hat, my girl."