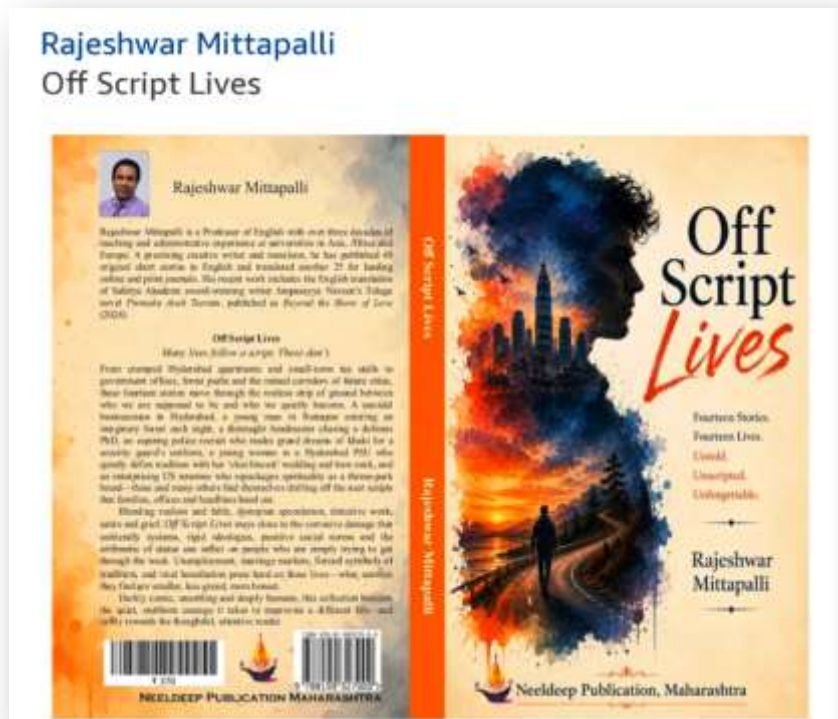


Walking Off the Stage: Precarity, Performance and the Unscripted Self in Prof. Rajeshwar Mittapalli's *Off Script Lives* [A Collection of Fourteen Short Stories]



A CRITICAL REVIEW OF 'OFF SCRIPT LIVES' ***LIVES THAT REFUSE THEIR LINES*** Untold! Unscripted!! Unforgettable!!!

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A review is a lamp held up to a book: it does not change the room,
but it shows the reader where the doors are.

A Note to the Reader: Ten Doors into the Book

A good review is a gift that arrives before the gift itself. It is the friend at the bookshop door who has already read the book and cannot keep it to himself. This review is built as a house of ten rooms, each opening onto a different corner of Prof. Rajeshwar Mittapalli's fourteen stories. Here, briefly, is what waits behind each door.

- **Introduction:** The reader first meets the script: the degree, the secure job, the horoscope, the dowry, the flat and the gold. Anyone who has felt the weight of that unwritten contract will recognise it at once, and will want to know what becomes of those who tear it up.
- **Men Who Stop Performing:** Two middle-aged men, one hiding from his wife's ring light and one stepping back from a balcony railing, show that rebellion can be quiet. This section offers laughter that arrives at the very edge of despair, and a line of resolve worth carrying out of the book.
- **The State, the Market and the Ledger:** This is the review's darkest room. A son kills for a government chair, a future city treats the human body as infrastructure, and a Gulf migrant finds peace only behind prison walls. The reader is warned, and invited, to feel what security costs when it is bought at any price.
- **Dreams, Memes and Borrowed Uniforms:** Five men chase a forest spirit, a bride, a mystery, a doctorate and a khaki shirt. The section moves between pathos and comedy, and leaves each story on an image of small, hard-won dignity.
- **When Ideas Harden into Armour:** Three women carry three convictions into the street, the sickbed and the registrar's office. Readers who enjoy seeing certainties tested will find this the most argumentative section, and perhaps the most rewarding.
- **New Gods for an Anxious Class:** A goddess of English holds *Hamlet* and a visa stamp; a cricket deity wears a floodlight for a halo. Here the review turns to satire, promising the book's biggest laugh along with its sharpest question: what does the new middle class really worship?
- **Craft and Language:** For lovers of sentences, this section opens the author's workshop: Hyderabad streets measured in auto fares, Telugu kitchens where love is cooked rather than spoken, and similes that land with a soft thud of recognition.
- **Reservations:** A review that only praised would be no gift at all. This section weighs the book honestly, naming the stories that persuade and those that preach, and it trusts the reader to argue back.
- **The Cover and Paratext:** For once the reader is encouraged to judge a book by its cover. The section reads the silhouette, the skyline and the lonely road leading out of the head as the book's whole argument in a single image.
- **Conclusion:** The final room gathers the anxieties of a decade and hands them back to the reader, not solved but lit up. It says who should read this book and why its characters, left standing off the script, will stay with them long after the last page.

Taken together, these ten rooms offer what a reviewer can give: a map, a few honest warnings, a handful of the book's finest lines and a fair verdict. The rest belongs to the reader!

Introduction

Every society hands its members a script. In the Telugu middle class, the lines are well rehearsed: a degree, a secure job (preferably a *sarkari* one), a marriage settled through horoscopes and dowry arithmetic, children, a flat, some gold, and a respectable old age. Rajeshwar Mittapalli's new collection is about the people who fumble those lines. Its fourteen stories follow a construction engineer, a twice-divorced businessman, a Gulf aspirant, an unemployed Osmania postgraduate, a failed police recruit, a retired headmaster, a feminist columnist and a laid-off H-1B engineer as they miss their cues, improvise badly, or simply walk off the stage. The result is uneven in places and openly provocative in others, but it is one of the livelier additions to Indian English short fiction from the Deccan in recent years.

Mittapalli comes to fiction after more than three decades of teaching English at universities in Asia, Africa and Europe. According to the back cover, he has published forty original short stories and translated another twenty-five, and his English version of Ampasayya Naveen's Telugu novel *Premaku Avali Teeram* appeared in 2024 as *Beyond the Shore of Love*. That double apprenticeship, as a teacher of literature and as a translator, shows on almost every page. It is there in his ear for register, in his readiness to let Telugu, Hindi, Urdu and Tamil words stand without apology, and in the ease with which the book moves from domestic realism to dystopia, folklore, detective parody and satire. The author's own preface places the stories on the uneasy ground "between who we are supposed to be and who we quietly become" (7). That is a fair description, and the stories largely earn it.

Men Who Stop Performing

The book opens with two middle-aged men who decline, in small and stubborn ways, to keep playing the parts written for them. In "Madhav's Mancave," a construction engineer in Raidurg lives inside his wife's content grid. His reading chair has been replaced by a ring light, his father's print of the Godavari has been banished for clashing with her palette, and he eats dinner standing because the dining chairs are props. A colleague gives him a vocabulary for what is happening; a psychiatrist in Banjara Hills gives him three options, of which only one lies within his control. What follows is not a dramatic escape but a patient withdrawal: a cot carried upstairs, a quiet account at a cooperative bank, letters on school letterhead that his wife cannot argue with. The story's best image is its last photograph, unfiltered, with the mother caught mid-blink and father and daughter looking only at each other. Mittapalli resists making Madhav a hero. The marriage becomes a museum he keeps open because he is not yet brave enough to close it, yet "the museum no longer decided what he had for breakfast" (22). That honesty gives the story its weight, and the daughter's voice note, recorded on her flight to Singapore, supplies a plain definition of love that no content grid could frame: "Third row, aisle side. Thumbs up. That's all" (24).

"Solo King" shifts to a first-person, present-tense voice. Sushant Reddy, fifty, stands at a balcony railing in Banjara Hills after his son has told him to finish himself off. What pulls him back is not faith or courage but a sudden, absurd recollection of his portfolio: fixed deposits, gold bonds, mutual funds, and an unsold flat, all of which would pass to the son who has just urged him to jump. The laugh that follows is one of the collection's finest moments, bitter and liberating at once. The travelogue that comes next, from a Gachibowli

hotel to Goa, Munnar, Colaba and Udaipur, could have become mere wish fulfilment. It has its own comic grace, as when Sushant declines a stranger's phone number in Goa and learns at last "the difference between a woman and a rescue helicopter" (31). It is rescued by precise observation and by one extraordinary passage at the National Museum, where Sushant stands before a Chola bronze of Ardhanarishvara and finds in that undivided body an answer to his own split life. The anonymous scholarship he endows for thirty girls in Chandrayangutta, named after his grandmother's Karthika lamp, gives the story a moral centre, and his whispered resolve on the aerobridge is among the book's most quotable lines: "For whatever is left, I intend to be the whole page" (37). A careful reader will notice that this freedom is bought with capital most readers do not have. The story half-knows this, and does not pretend otherwise.

The State, the Market and the Ledger

Three stories turn from the family to the systems that stand behind it. "Government Job" is the darkest piece in the book. Jayant pursues a government post for seven years, "the way a moth chases a tube light" (39), buys a leaked Group II paper that is promptly cancelled, and finally enters a Tahsil office on compassionate grounds after his honest father dies on the Patancheru bypass. The late revelation that the "accident" was arranged turns the story from social comedy into something close to tragedy. The closing twist, in which a village Sarpanch uses that secret to force Jayant into marrying his daughter, is almost farcical in its mechanics, yet the irony holds. The security Jayant killed for becomes a leash held by someone else, and as the hired car carries him back to the city, the narrator notes that "every kilometre of it belonged to someone else" (51). The mother, Bhagyamma, who whispers ambition into her son's ear, is drawn with fewer shades than she deserves, but the story's picture of a society in which a *sarkari naukri* outranks conscience is uncomfortably accurate.

"Hydropolis 2084" is the collection's boldest experiment. In a poisoned future city, testosterone has collapsed after nuclear leaks and a rushed vaccine. Shaurya, one of the last virile men, is conscripted into a state breeding programme, fitted with a brain chip, and finally convicted of rape on the unsupported word of a woman he refused. His protest at the police station names the trap exactly: "the very thing that makes me useful is the thing that convicts me" (65). The central idea, that a human body can be classified as infrastructure, is powerful, and the prose finds memorable images for it: an old man's memory that his generation "walked as the pavement owed us something" (53), the officer's matter-of-fact comparison with livestock breeding, the ceiling crack shaped like a river delta, the red-ink file that reopens for the next boy. The story's political argument is another matter, and I return to it below.

"Mukti" is, to my mind, the most affecting story in the volume. Mohan leaves a Telangana village with a forged offer letter, discovers in an Al Quoz labour camp that his visa is a sixty-day visit permit, overstays, and accepts a packet from a stranger to buy his passage home. Arrested at Shamshabad, released on a politician's bail, beaten each time a new smuggler is caught, abandoned by his wife and orphaned in quick succession, he finally confesses to a crime he did not knowingly commit. "The whole world is a jail, Anna," he tells the local politician (76), and prison becomes the one place where nobody will knock at midnight. As the van pulls away, Mohan feels that "the walls behind him had been made of something far worse" (78). The title's irony is devastating precisely because it is not ironic to Mohan. Readers familiar with Gulf migration from the northern districts of Telangana will

recognise the moneylender, the agent and the confiscated passport as types drawn from life rather than from newspaper columns.

Dreams, Memes and Borrowed Uniforms

The middle of the book belongs to young and not-so-young men whose hunger fixes on a single object. In “Distant Dream,” Venkat, thirty-two and jobless in the village of Ratnapur, meets a woman in white on a forest path at night. A friend names her Kamini Pisachi, the spirit of his grandmother’s stories; a visiting doctor calls it stress-induced dissociation. Mittapalli wisely refuses to arbitrate. He is harder on the village than on the spirit, describing Ratnapur as “a marketplace pretending to be a community” (84). The second half, in which the encounters migrate into Venkat’s sleep and he withdraws from his waking life, is written in a lush, sensuous register that some readers will find overripe, but it holds one of the book’s most unsettling perceptions: Venkat’s “unbearable suspicion that the waking world was the lesser of his two lives” (90). Yet the final image of the son sinking into his dream while his father stares at a garlanded portrait of Venkateswara has real pathos.

“Swayamvar on NH-65” handles similar material with a lighter hand. Vikram, a B.Tech graduate stocking shelves in Suryapet, sets up a bride-registration booth beside the highway and becomes a meme within four days; the comments under the viral video, the narrator observes, were “a public stoning conducted in emoji” (98). A weary sub-inspector refers him to a government psychiatrist, who in turn prescribes, between a note on sleep hygiene and a multivitamin, an AI companion app. The story treats this last development with welcome tact. The machine listens without asking his salary or his caste, and its value lies in helping Vikram need it less. His final message to it is a small declaration of recovery: “I want to try not needing you so much” (104). The ending, in which mother and son cut up the old banner to seal jars of *avakaya* and *gongura*, is one of the best closing images in the book: humiliation quietly repurposed as preservation.

“Detective Narsimhan” is a gentle parody of the genre that shaped so many Indian boyhoods, with nods to Doyle, Christie, Bandyopadhyay, Ray and Sujatha. Its young hero trains at a modest agency in Somajiguda, learns from his employer that “Observation is not tourism” (113), and is then beaten senseless on the Outer Ring Road by the very software engineer he was vetting, who mistakes him for a hired killer. His refusal to file an FIR is the story’s quiet moral turn, and its last sentence has the wry economy of the whole piece: “The thing tasted nothing like the paperbacks” (121). “A PhD for Mr Swarup” will make many academic readers wince in recognition. A retired headmaster, widowed and estranged from three daughters, pursues a doctorate less for knowledge than for the honorific, argues with his co-guide over the meaning of *swaraj*, and loses two years of notes when a bag goes missing at Chennai Central. His exasperated co-guide sees that Swarup wants the degree “like some men want God” (126) and is really “chasing the right to be respected” (128). The satire of credential culture is sharp, but the ending is generous: what remains, when the drafts are gone, is the stubborn dignity of having wanted something that badly.

“Right Turn” completes this group. Mahesh fails the police recruitment process four times, buys a khaki shirt from a readymade shop, and begins to impersonate an officer until a constable from his own neighbourhood recognises him and looks away. A retired subedar-major at the local gym tells him, without contempt, that his masquerade was “just hunger dressed in the wrong shirt” (142), and Mahesh takes a security job in the Financial District. He arrives at the interview with an unsmiling photograph, for “A smiling man asks to be

liked. He wanted to be hired” (143). The story is redemptive in an old-fashioned way, and its restraint in the final scene, when he salutes a woman whose bag he once checked under false pretences, is well judged.

When Ideas Harden into Armour

Three later stories centre on women and on the convictions they carry. In “The Dent,” Jhansi Rani, a data professional and social-media commentator known as “Razor,” holds that in any quarrel between husband and wife the man is always the aggressor. Driving carefully through Ameerpet one evening, she is struck by a helmetless motorcyclist who turns across her lane. The crowd that gathers applies a logic she recognises at once: the bigger vehicle is guilty, whatever the tyre marks say. The self-appointed spokesman settles the case in eight words of Hyderabad Hindi: “Bike chhoti hai. Car badi hai. Bas, Case Khatam” (152). She pays three lakh rupees to make the crowd disperse and falls silent for months. Her reply to a worried friend, “I’ve just stopped being sure” (155), is the story’s real subject. The allegory is transparent, but the street scene itself, with its self-appointed spokesman, its lecherous onlooker and its policeman counting down the minutes of his shift, is observed with a novelist’s eye.

“The Unwritten Chapter” is gentler and more searching. Vasuda Devi, a celebrated feminist novelist whose banned book was vindicated in the High Court, has built her life around chosen solitude. Arthritis, which has settled into her knuckles “like a tenant who knew its rights” (156), asthma and a succession of unreliable maids erode that choice, and on a smoke-filled *Diwali* night her nephew Kiran carries her down the stairs and drives her to hospital with her oxygen saturation at seventy-one. The story does not ask her to recant anything. It asks her to add something: an account of what care actually requires when the arguments run out. What moves her in Kiran is “the efficiency without theatre, the dedication without invoice” (165). That is a subtle move, although the heroine’s reasoning that a nephew is more dependable than a daughter, who would marry away or “fall to pieces” in a crisis, rests on assumptions about gender that the story does not fully examine.

“Parallel Lives” deliberately reverses the pattern. Spoorti and Dhanush, an inter-caste couple, marry under the Special Marriage Act despite a sub-registrar who invents one obstacle after another, from exact change to inauspicious days, and who greets their first visit with a sneer: “what business do you have getting married?” (169). When no one else in the corridor will sign as a witness, three labourers on the last bench step forward, one of them wearing an Ambedkar pin. The small *festivity* that follows, with *samosas* in newspaper and old Lata Mangeshkar songs, has warmth that the grander celebrations elsewhere in the book lack. The story ends with Spoorti’s Women’s Day speech, in which, speaking of a superior who keeps prescribing *sutram*, toe rings and vermilion for her body, she offers a solution with perfect composure: “He should wear them himself” (180). The speech is witty and quotable, though at nearly four pages it reads more as an essay than as fiction. Placed after “The Dent” and “The Unwritten Chapter,” the story works as a counterweight, and the ordering seems designed to keep the collection from reading Mittapalli’s as a single argument.

New Gods for an Anxious Class

The collection closes with its broadest satire. In “Civitas Spiritualis,” Eeshwar, a village boy from Govulapalli who made it to Austin, is declared redundant after his company adopts AI pipeline tools. The HR manager offers him a “transition,” a word that makes him feel like “a caterpillar being encouraged to become soup” (186). His girlfriend, an American-born filmmaker who has never had to think about visa dates, leaves him when uncertainty arrives. Back in Hyderabad, staring at a newspaper report on a profitable spiritual resort, he remembers a corporate seminar on Maslow’s hierarchy and has his idea: the new middle class has food and broadband and now wants meaning, so why not give it new gods?

The deities he designs are the funniest invention in the book: Anglo Thea, eight-armed goddess of English, holding a dictionary, a copy of *Hamlet* and a visa stamp; Cricket Kyrios, with his floodlight halo and a rhyming English chant that calls the game “dharma dressed in sporting flame” (193); Chip Theos, god of artificial intelligence, whose worshippers pray for protection from the very automation that cost Eeshwar his job; and Diktyo Thea, whose sari is woven from notification icons. The Greek and Latin names are a quiet joke about aspiration dressed in borrowed prestige. The story never quite decides whether Civitas Spiritualis is a temple, a theme park or a school disguised as both, and that indecision is its point. Eeshwar himself admits that the line between service and exploitation is “no wider than a batting crease” (200). As a finale, the story gathers the book’s recurring anxieties, English, unemployment, marriage, technology and status, into a single commercial shrine.

Craft and Language

Hyderabad is the collection’s most consistent character. Raidurg, Ameerpet, Lakdi-ka-Pul, Chanchalguda, Necklace Road and the Old City are not backdrops but lived places, measured in auto fares, Irani chai and Osmania biscuits. Food carries much of the emotional work: a mother’s *pesarattu* batter, a father’s empty tiffin box, curd rice without grated carrot, a plate of cold rice and *dal* left outside a closed door. Mittapalli knows that in Telugu households love is frequently cooked rather than spoken.

The language is equally rooted. Words such as *garu*, *bidda*, *rachabanda*, *appagintalu* and *muggu* are left unglossed, and speech moves between English, Telugu, Deccani Hindi and Tamil as it does in the city itself. Raja Rao, in his foreword to *Kanthapura*, wrote of the difficulty of conveying in a language not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own. Mittapalli’s answer is to trust the reader. Readers outside South India will sometimes stumble, and a short glossary would help an international audience, but the gain in authenticity is considerable.

The prose is dense with simile, and at its best the figure lands with precision: Madhav entering his own home “like a stagehand during a live performance” (14); a ceiling fan in Suryapet that “wobbled on its rod like a drunk man’s promise” (95); a father whose silence is a wall his wife spent decades failing to knock down. In the more heated stories, especially “Distant Dream” and “Hydropolis 2084,” the figures crowd one another and slow the narrative. A second habit is the brief italicised glimpse into the minds of secondary characters, a doctor, a colleague, a former lover. These flickers of omniscience create useful irony, but they occasionally dissolve tension that a single point of view would have held. Endings, on the other hand, are handled with discipline. Almost every story closes on an image rather than a verdict, which suits the preface’s claim that conclusions belong to whoever is paying attention.

Reservations

The most distinctive contribution of the volume is its sustained attention to male precarity: unemployment, devaluation in the marriage market, loneliness, and the shame of failing to provide. Indian English fiction has explored these experiences less than it might. In R. W. Connell's terms, Mittapalli's men are those who cannot, or will not, live up to the hegemonic script of masculinity, and the collection is valuable for taking their inner lives seriously.

The same attention, however, produces the book's most debatable moments. Several antagonists, among them the influencer wife in "Madhav's Mancave," the accuser in "Hydropolis 2084" and the scheming bride in "Government Job," lean towards type.

The preface promises that no one in the book is treated as a lesson in human nature; that promise is not always kept. The collection is at its strongest where ideology and counter-ideology are both put under pressure, as in "The Dent" and "Parallel Lives," rather than where one side is simply indicted.

There are also editorial slips that a second printing should correct. In "Right Turn," a retired *subedar-major* recalls his first day at the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun, which trains commissioned officers rather than the ranks from which junior commissioned officers rise! The name Kiran is used for four different characters across the book, which may be intentional but reads as accidental. None of this seriously damages the stories, but a collection this attentive to detail deserves equally attentive copy-editing.

The Cover and Paratext

Neelam Gaikwad's cover translates the book's central idea into a single image. A watercolour silhouette of a man's head in profile holds a night skyline of towers; below it, the city dissolves into a road that curves towards a pale horizon, where a lone figure walks away. The palette of indigo, rust and saffron suggests both dusk and dawn. The city is inside the head, and the road leads out of it: few covers state their book's argument so economically.

The typography does similar work. "Off Script" is set in a sober black serif, while "Lives" is brushed in loose orange script, so that the formal and the improvised sit side by side on the page, much as they do in the stories. The tagline, "*Fourteen Stories. Fourteen Lives. Untold. Unscripted. Unforgettable,*" is less successful; its final adjective belongs to the language of blurbs, and the book does not need it. One might also note that the solitary male figure reflects the preponderance of male protagonists but slightly undersells Spoorti, Vasuda Devi and Jhansi, who carry some of the collection's most interesting arguments.

The back cover pairs a brief author biography with a blurb that opens on the phrase "Many lives follow a script. These don't." and summarises the collection's range with reasonable accuracy. The saffron spine will stand out on a shelf, and the small lamp motif in the publisher's logo happens to echo the Karthika diya that Sushant carries to Paris.

Conclusion

Off Script Lives is a book of the Deccan's anxieties in the middle of this decade: the job that does not come, the marriage that will not be arranged, the visa that expires, the machine that replaces a trained mind, and the ideology that fails the moment it meets a crowd. Not every story is equally achieved, and some will start arguments in seminar rooms. That is not a small virtue. Mittapalli writes with warmth for his damaged people, with a satirist's eye for the institutions that damage them, and with a translator's respect for the languages they actually speak.

The collection will reward general readers and deserves a place in courses on Indian English fiction, regional literatures of the Telugu states, and the growing field of masculinity studies. It will also interest scholars tracing how globalisation, technology and state bureaucracy reach into the small towns and apartment blocks of contemporary Telangana. Its characters step off the script without always finding solid ground, and the book is honest enough to leave them, and us, standing there.

*When the reviewer sets the lamp down, the doors remain.
Which one to open, and how long to stay, the reader alone must decide!*

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