

The Malayalam-medium educated writer has four English releases queued up after waiting for more than two decades. Here's an account of his journey

NEW DEALS FOR THE DROPOUT

CHANDRAKANTH VISWANATH | KOCHI

The boy started writing English novels a quarter of a century ago but no one noticed him then. One of his earlier writings was about snow, something he hadn't seen. Sitting amidst classics, the school drop-out had only two choices — to devour books or pour his creativity on to paper. Though he never wanted to be famous, he always dreamt of a day when his words would be widely read. His drafts were rejected and that stopped his writing for a while. But now, perseverance has paid off and Anees Salim, a 42-year-old adman from Kochi, has more than one reason to cheer. Four of his English novels are queuing up for release in the weeks to come.

His debut novel, *Vicks Mango Tree*, will be published this month by HarperCollins while *Tales From a Vending Machine* from the same publisher will hit bookstores soon, along with *Blind Lady's Descendents* from Amaryllis and *Vanity Bagh* from Picador. *Vicks Mango Tree* follows the life of journalist Raj Iyer, who went missing in the days of Emergency, in an imaginary city, Mangobagh. The city boasts of 54 variants of mango trees, including one with the scent and taste of Vicks Vaporub.

"Though I kept sending manuscripts to publishers, I was getting rejection slips on a regular basis till *Tales From a Vending Machine* reached literary agent Kanishka Gupta. Suddenly, the world changed and publishers came to me. I think I was recognised when I started writing things which I knew like the inside of my palm than subjects alien," he said.

Set in the two terminals of an airport, *Tales From a Vending Machine* narrates a young Muslim woman,

Haseena Mansoor's take on aviation industry in a light manner, which was found interesting by many publishing agents. Finally it went to HarperCollins in an auction. *Blind Lady's Descendents* is a suicide note of a young man evolving into a novel which has many personal elements of the author while *Vanity Bagh* tells the rivalry between two streets in Mangobagh, in the back drop of a bomb blast.

His late father, Salim, who was working in Abu Dhabi, had set up a library of great books and it lured the son into the world of letters. "I think he had cherished a secret desire to be a writer and had every other good book on the shelf," says Anees. Growing up in the company of books than friends, the native of Varkala near Thiruvananthapuram was bent on becoming a writer from his early days. Believe it or not, he never went to any English medium school and stopped conventional education after pre-degree (equivalent of 10+2). He passed his SSLC from GHSS, Varkala, and discontinued after spending six months studying commerce in his pre-degree at SN College, Varkala.

He recollects the days when he used to bunk classes to walk through the path shadowed by cashew-nut trees to his favourite place — the home library. "Brilliant writing by masters including George Orwell, Graham Greene, VS Naipaul, William Faulkner, Hemingway and Gabriel Garcia Marquez fascinated me. I have a liking for fiction by Orwell, Greene and Naipaul," says the voracious reader, adding that poetry is still Greek to him.

His travels, mostly on trains, were to experience life in various parts of the country and one of his favourite spots is Hyderabad. After a stint with an ad agency, he joined FCB Ulka Advertising in Kochi and, currently, is its creative head of draft.

"Though my ambition is to become a full-time writer, I may continue with a day job. I think advertising has contributed much to my creative writing in a positive manner," he states. Despite avid travelling, Anees is yet to see snow, the subject of his first piece.

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FRIENDLY COACH

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HOW DO WE BRIDGE DISPARITY?

The cry of Vijay is unheard and echoes, the compelling insecurities of students who move to metros from smaller towns. Vijay has just joined a college in Chennai. He has lots of dreams that require a lot of effort and hard work. He is not familiar about college life in a metropolitan as he hails from a small town. He does not know how to go make friends, or start a conversation. He realises that the crowd is talking a language which seems totally alien to him.

After two weeks, he is walking alone on the campus, paranoid to talk to his classmates or hostel mates because he

feels he is not one among them. Vijay becomes a reserved person; his college experience a nightmare. Feeling miserable and clueless, he loses all his spirit and confidence.

Years pass, his ideas of making it big are squashed. Vijay has no future and his performance has been poor.

This is the fate of many students who are consumed by the ugliness of the city and are not able to enjoy the beautiful elements the city has to offer. Similar experiences have driven many to commit suicide. The response from both college authorities and the public is apathetic.

The point I am trying to drive home is that students like Vijay are just another admission in all colleges. Here's what we need to concentrate on:

ADAPTABILITY

Many students do not know how to equip themselves with certain important life skills. To be adaptable is the most important trait that every student needs to learn — to accept and deal with the changes life is posing.

GUIDANCE AND TRAINING

All students are bestowed with strengths; they just need guidance and training to adapt. My appeal to all students who move to the cities for various goals is that they should be equipped to face many adversities, develop adaptability skills to blend with the cultural ethos of a metro life and move forward to achieve your goals.

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