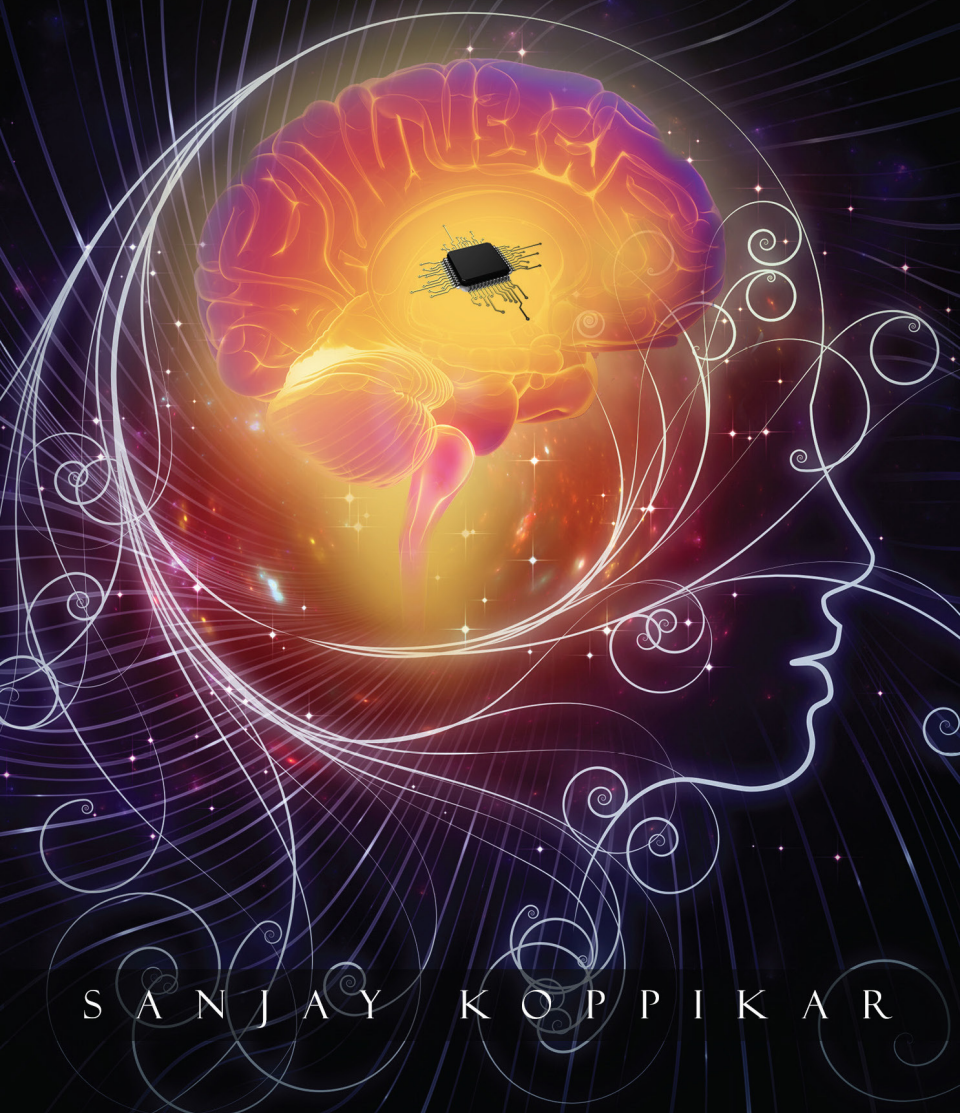


DIVIDED MINDS

WAR OF THE WORLDS WITHIN



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Published by Sapna Group

eBooks: Notion Press

Print: Sapna Ink.

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN: 978-93-86116-37-6

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Chapter 1

We were late.

Gautam and I entered the auditorium, holding hands and I was desperately hoping that no one would notice our tardiness when just then, the speaker on the dais threw a question to the audience.

‘What is love?’

We looked at each other amused. Did we come to the right auditorium? We were doctors, particularly post graduate students in various specializations, so what did love have to do with us?

As we tried to make our way in as discreetly as possible, I spotted Archana, my room-mate from the hostel, sitting near the dais, and she turned around at the same moment to glance at the door, probably wondering where we were. She’d reserved a couple of seats for us. Since it was right up in front of the dais, it was rather impossible not to come under the attention of the speaker, who looked at the two of us, and continued with his question, that no one had ventured to answer.

‘What *is* love? Is it holding hands?’ People behind us, sniggered and I quickly let go of Gautam’s hand although everyone in college knew that he’d been my boyfriend for years now. I wasn’t amused at coming under the spotlight for romantic reasons.

Somewhere around the last year of our MBBS we had grown really close. Close enough to be branded the 'cutest couple' in our class and while Gautam certainly enjoyed the attention, I didn't.

I slid into my seat, my head down and watched Gautam do the same, from the corner of my eye. He winked at me swiftly and I glared at him before focusing my attention to the speaker on the dais.

The speaker, Dr. Amit Deshpande was a well-known personality who visited our hospital a couple of times every year to give lectures on fields that he was researching. I had been waiting for him to return to our hospital for a lecture because I'd only heard and read about him and I was quite keen to see all the fuss about him firsthand.

'What is love? Is it the sweat that pops up on your forehead when you see your sweetheart in front of you? Is it when your heart starts beating faster? What is it?', he continued, eyes passing over everyone.

Everyone seemed a little wary of replying to what was certainly a trick question. Sensing that no one was keen to answer Dr. Amit smiled and shrugged.

'Okay, I'm surprised at the lack of response. I thought Doctors would have come up with one answer at least! If you look at it from a biological perspective, love is like a mammalian drive, similar to hunger or thirst. However, psychology sees love as more of a social and cultural phenomenon. But we're all doctors here although I am the only one without any patients!' Some people tittered nervously as he continued.

'Certainly love is influenced by hormones, neurotrophins, and pheromones. For example, passionate love is intense

longing, and is often accompanied by physiological arousal.' He paused.

Archana nudged me and whispered, 'Passionate love, hmm?' I nudged her back exasperatedly, although my eyes were trained on Dr. Amit.

'And arousal is a physiological and psychological state of being awake or reactive to stimuli. It involves the activation of the reticular activating system in the brain stem, the autonomic nervous system and the endocrine system, leading to increased heart rate and blood pressure and a condition of sensory alertness, mobility and readiness to respond,' he rattled out, and we listened to him in rapt attention.

Tapping his own head lightly, he continued, 'In other words, we all know that the pinkish-beige thing that resides here, which we inane refer to as grey matter, has neurons. And we know that a neuron is an electrically excitable cell that processes and transmits information through electrical and chemical signals.'

'Now let's revisit our question. Love can be defined as electrical pulses that are sent from the brain to the body and that results in particular reactions such as the heart racing, or sometimes sweating, or the mouth getting dry. All these are reactions that can be explained biologically because it all eventually comes from the brain, right?'

Some of the doctors in the front nodded. I was a little skeptical about this cut and dried explanation of love but then it did make sense in a way. Well, it was logical and so it had to make sense.

‘So,’ he continued, ‘Love is nothing but some random messages sent from the brain to the body to react in certain ways. But the brain is not aware of what it is doing. The brain cannot decipher these messages to tell us in exact words, what we are feeling. But what if your body is able to play a more active role in helping your brain decipher these messages? What if a part of your body that is malfunctioning can tell your brain about the problem so that it can be fixed in time?’

I blinked rapidly trying to understand what he was saying. But before I could formulate my thoughts, he went on.

‘Everyone knows that electronics and medicine are tied up intimately. From monitoring machines to pacemakers to body scans and almost every aspect of health care, electronics have played a vital role so far. There has been so much development in this field that at present, electronics has taken over a really active role when it comes to treatment. But what I’m talking of is the future, because we are standing at the threshold of something big and important.’

He paused and looked around and signaled to a couple of boys standing in the corner. They brought something that looked like equipment on a trolley and placed it at the center of the stage. He, then continued speaking.

‘The research in the field of medical electronics is at a point where there are many exciting possibilities. There are so many more ways in which lives can be changed with what we are learning and developing.’

‘I would like to show something that is going to blow your mind. I need volunteers, though.’ He looked around expectantly.

Gautam, mischievously lifted my arm, as I struggled to let go. It was too late, and he had already seen me. Nodding, he said, 'Yes, please come'. I slowly got up and glared at Gautam and Archana who were now giggling.

'I need one more,' he called out as I made my way to the dais.

Dr. Nitin, one of the doctors from my branch, got up excited and ran on to the dais.

Dr. Amit then connected some electrodes that looked like regular ECG to my forearm. The other end of the wire was connected to the machine on the trolley. He then asked Nitin to come forward and connected similar electrodes to his arm.

Dr. Amit, then moved a white board between Nitin and me so that we couldn't see each other. Then he asked me to rotate or move my hand and palm however I wanted to. I moved my fingers, held the fingers tightly to make a fist and rotated my fist. The audience gasped and then there were murmurs followed by a thunderous applause. I was confused. What was happening?

Dr. Amit's assistants moved the whiteboard away. I noticed that Nitin's arm and fingers were involuntarily moving the way I was moving my hand! I looked at Nitin, who looked back at me shocked.

Dr. Amit thanked us and started speaking as we left the stage.

'Just to recollect what you saw here today. We connected the leads from the lady to our machine which captured the messages coming from her brain and transferred it to the gentleman's hands. So, as she was moving her hands, based

on what her brain instructed, the gentleman on the other side was mirroring her actions. His hands were receiving the exact same signal as his brain would have instructed. Of course, this isn't a new phenomenon. It has always been there under electro physiology.'

I was stunned as I slowly walked back to where Gautam and Archana were sitting. I could see the same amazement in Archana's eyes too.

Being a neurologist, I understood electrical charges and neuroscience. But I had never experienced it firsthand, at least not this dramatically.

He continued speaking for the next thirty minutes as the auditorium listened to an amazing lecture where he told us about the interwoven fields of medicine and electronics. He even showed us a presentation featuring some amazing futuristic gadgets that truly seemed out of the world.

When he wound up his lecture finally, and the floor was open for questions from the audience, we were still trying to digest the magnanimity of the subject we had just heard.

'This Dr. Amit is really popular, isn't he?' I whispered to Archana who pushed her spectacles up on her head and looked at me surprised. Some people had already started asking questions.

'You haven't been to any of his other lectures?' she asked distractedly as her eyes kept moving back to the dais. I shook my head.

'I'm surprised, Payal, considering how good looking he is,' she said with a sly smile.

W'So?' I asked, narrowing my eyes. She shrugged.

‘It’s not just good looks. He also speaks so well. He has the whole audience rapt. But what I really enjoy about his lectures is to see his passion for his subject. It really shines through,’ Archana said, looking away dreamily in the distance. I could clearly see what she meant. Everyone was in awe of him. I looked at Gautam who seemed bored and restless. Typical.

‘He’s just so good Payal. So good at what he does,’ Archana continued and I nodded.

I settled back in my seat, thinking about what I knew of Dr. Amit. I already knew how successful and important he was. He had a PhD in Medical Electronics and he was a successful scientist as well who had written for various science journals. But knowing all that about him hadn’t been quite the same as seeing him in action myself.

Then someone asked him a question and we all fell silent.

‘Are you working on something related to what you spoke today, Doctor?’ he asked.

‘Maybe I am,’ Dr. Amit said with a mysterious smile. When he didn’t elaborate, the man who asked the question persisted.

‘Can you tell us what it’s about?’

Dr. Amit looked a little amused as he shuffled his papers and shook his head.

‘It’s a project for the government,’ he replied after a beat.

‘Is that a secret project?’ the same doctor continued.

‘Well it wouldn’t be much of a secret if I told you, right?’ he asked and there were some titters in the audience. The doctor who had asked the question looked a little shamefaced

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