

SHORT STORY

S h e l t e r

RASHIDA SULTANA
(translated by Farhad Ahmed)

THE moment I go to cuddle the baby I think how I didn't want it to be born. Of course I also try to banish the thought as swiftly as possible. Chase away the guilt. When I had first conceived, I didn't know what to think. I had felt a kind of tension—perhaps it would become yet another problem for me. And my lover too didn't want the baby. He said 'You already have two, why do you need another one?' All that uncertainty—a bad situation all round. I couldn't make up my mind whether I should keep it or discard it. Finally I decided to have it. But then I spun into a depression. Felt fear, too. After all, it was no small matter to raise a child, to take care of it. Hard work. Anyway, my lover kept my spirits up, 'Now that you've decided to have it, why worry about it?'

I remained so involved, so preoccupied with my lover that I tended to be forgetful of everything else (even the baby inside me). To be in this state of surrender kept me happy and healthy. To feel good by foregoing reality. However, at that time I did not meet with him often. Morally, it pricked me. At the end, I stopped worrying about it, fearing that it would affect the baby.

A few days before the baby was born, I had a dream where I had a pair of twins. All very beautiful. But one of them died immediately after birth. I sat with the dead baby in my lap, my insides burnt to cinder, fruitlessly trying to bring it back to life. I was desperately stuffing a breast into its mouth, hoping against hope it would start sucking, that it would spring to life. But its head merely lolled to one side. I woke up and felt alive again, alive only because it was a dream, and put my hand on my belly to gauge the baby's heartbeat. It's alive! It's kicking! At that moment I felt that there was nothing more dear to me in this whole wide world than this baby. I began to take care of myself even more than before, placing my feet carefully in front of me while walking so as to not cause it any problems.

Of course I was very irritable during my pregnancy. I would pick quarrels with my lover (poor thing!) all the time. But his patience was boundless. He would not react to my screaming and shouting screaming and shouting that only served to heat the cannons of my mind so as to fire them on others. As if handling a sick, impatient, restless child, he refused to yell back at me. And yet my temper would not cool down.

I would scream abuses at my husband too. And if my temper really flared up, I would hurl and break things. He, an avatar of patience too, tried to reconcile himself to me, but sometimes lost his patience and got into fights with me. One day it got physical. I hit him, he hit me back, our two children shrank back in fear and began to

cry. It felt as if I would self-abort right there, as if I would faint. When I hit him, he hit back at me harder; I scratched him, pulled at his hair. We shouted obscenities at each other—at one stage he stormed out of the house. I contemplated suicide, but then thought of the baby, that I could die, but how could I put to death the baby I had carried to almost full term? I put a hand over my belly and saw that its heart rate had risen, was pulsing irregularly. I called my lover. Wept tearfully, my anguish softening like molten wax. He comforted me, said don't be insane. The crying and the comfort went on for a long time—afterwards, till the baby was born I stopped the quarrelling and the fighting.

It was a girl, brought to me by the nurse on a steel tray, her whole body covered with what seemed to be dried moss. A little later she was brought all fresh and clean swaddled in a towel—a tiny slice of the moon! I felt like the wind, weightless, as if I could fly if I wanted to. She would blink up at me, when hungry open her mouth like *shalik* fledglings in a nest, and go to sleep when I put a breast in her mouth. I thought nobody on this earth could ever have given birth to a more beautiful baby than this.

I had hoped that my lover would come once to see the baby. But he didn't. Enquired over the phone. Though of course one could not really expect him to come visit us since this had further complicated matters for him. My husband, though, was ecstatic, and became a different man overnight. If he could, he would have purchased the whole world for me.

I met my lover again almost a month-and-a-half after my daughter's birth. I wanted desperately to show him the adorable doll-like baby, but he said no, told me 'the baby will catch cold outdoors, let her grow up a bit. Besides, I am afraid of holding a baby.'

Lover, husband, baby, all these kept me in a trance the whole time. I disliked not being in such a trance-like state. The spell would lift only when the baby was sick. Then, like the Ganges, I would fall from



heaven to earth. The earth, to be roped to her bosom like Gulliver by tears, sweat, blood, anguish, fear and doubt. When the baby would recover from the fever, I would slip into my tranced existence again.

Almost a month before my maternity leave expired, my boss informed me that there was an offer of a training course in America, asked me whether I wanted to go. I was in a swirl of confusion. My eldest daughter was in class four, the boy in one; who would look after them the six months I would be gone, help with their homework, see them off to school? The biggest issue was that the youngest was still being breast-fed, how was she to be weaned off it? But this was my first chance to go to America, and who knew, perhaps my last too. Surely my mother-in-law could look after the eldest two for six months.

At first my husband, my mother-in-law all made noises about having to wean the baby off my milk. But in the end it was my mother-in-law who said, 'It's not every day you will get a chance to see a new country. Besides, your baby can be bottle-fed. No problem, I can raise it.' To her, my going to America was a huge leap in status. Going to America is always a status thing. Plus some money could be shaved off from the training package. And the baby really did pull on the bottle quite well. Ah, I felt like I was back-and-fro on a swing!

Yet something would tear inside me when I would look at her. A vast empty space inside of me. Would my daughter blame me when she grew up? Well, I reasoned, let her. What we sacrifice for children they do not return a fraction of it to us. Do not. There are many couples who have grown distant from each other yet live under the same roof only for the children's sake. Yet her face, her laughter were obstacles on my path. I feared that at the end I'd think of her and stop. But at last, everything packed and sorted, when I was ready to go I did not feel any particular sorrow. All feelings were trampled underfoot in the excitement of going. Besides, at that time my lover had already supplied me with the necessary resolve.

On the plane, when under pressure of milk my breasts swelled up like a boil about to burst, the pain, the baby's mouth, guilt, all drove me nearly insane. I would slip into the bathroom every once in a while and relieve myself of the milk, then cry. I hadn't brought a

breast pump with me. Oh, to waste my baby's bounty like this!

The first thing I do in New York is buy one such pump, but whenever I use it I turn blue with repentance. I call home and find out that the baby is doing fine. Feeding well. Even then I find everything intolerable, shut myself up in my room and wail. When I am doing classes, I manage to remain peaceful. But the moment I return to my room, I close the door and scream and cry. I call my lover, confess to him that I am in extreme distress over the baby. He makes me understand, comforts me greatly, gives me courage. Not everybody gets a crack at such a prestigious training program, but you got it. You're very lucky!

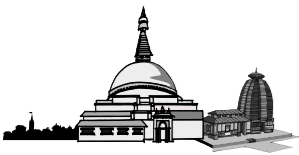
He calls me regularly. Little by little his love makes me forget the baby. Slowly I adjust to my new environment, even if at every turn I feel as if I am an uninvited guest.

Paper presentations, excursions, sightseeing, I keep myself busy with these things. The biggest balm is my lover's telephone call; without those calls I couldn't have managed to shut myself off and keep up with the training. The pressure of continuous study, the fatigue—in all this the one ray of light is that telephone. That phone surrounds me with music, prevents melancholy and depression from brushing up against me.

One day I learn that the baby got hurt after falling from its cot. A cut beneath its chin that required four stitches. A lot of bleeding. Again, I am beset by restlessness and guilt. Again, I begin to burn inside. Did she cry out for her mother when she got hurt? Wouldn't my girl blame me when she grew older? I had read that if infants were not fed mother's milk their minds got dull. Would she be slow in her studies? If it did happen, how would I live with myself? My lover offers me solace, 'What idiotic thoughts you entertain! So many babies who are not fed mothers' milk grow up fine. And she's a baby, little accidents are bound to happen.'

In the midst of this my lover has to travel to Europe on business. He also comes here for a week. I am delirious with joy, swept away into dreamland. Then after he leaves, I dive again into my books. Lover, baby, husband, family, there is really no time to think too deeply about those things. Nowadays I feel quite free, answerable to none, no returning home at a certain hour, no complaints from anybody. I like it very much. I have managed to get admitted to a master's course. I talk to my children, my husband, my lover over the phone, write them emails. In my free time pore over photos of my lover, of the children. It's only when I come across a photo of the baby that my heart tugs at me: oh, to think that once I didn't want her to be born!

Rashida Sultana is one of Bangladesh's younger women writers.



Letter from KATHMANDU

Ajit Baral interviews Manjushree Thapa exclusively for the Daily Star Literature Page.



Manjushree Thapa's second book *The Tutor of History* was the first major novel in English to emerge from Nepal. The first, *Mustang Bhot in Fragments*, was a travelogue published in Nepal in 1992. *The Tutor of History* was the first major novel in English to emerge from Nepal. It is an ambitious social saga, a portrait of contemporary Nepal caught between tradition and modernity that is ultimately a story of idealism, alienation and love. Manjushree also translates Nepali literature into English for her column in *Nepali Times*.

AB: Manjushree, you have published two books so far. One, a novel, published in India by Penguin and the other, a non-fiction, by Himal Books, Nepal. Both the books received critical acclaim. You are working hard on the third

book. When in your life did you decide that you wanted to be a writer?

MT: I decided to write quite late in life—when I was 26, or 27. I had come back to Nepal from the US when I was 21, and had thought that the creative life wasn't useful—or that it wasn't as useful as doing "development" work through NGOs. I still feel this to be true, to a large extent. In a country like Nepal, especially, creative work is about allowing people to have a decent quality of life, whereas sometimes NGO work, or other "development" work, can be about allowing people to have a life at all. So immediately after returning to Nepal I branched out into NGO work. It took me years to find out that I wasn't capable, as some people are, of doing this kind of work. I needed to do some kind of creative work. So after knocking my head against a wall for many years, I finally gave in to my need for creative expression, and began to write seriously around the age of 26 or 27.

AB: You dabbled in painting, photography, did undergraduate BFA degree at the Rhode Island School of Design. And, after returning to Nepal, worked for the Annapurna Conservation Area

Project while writing in between. It's only 7, 8 years after that that you decided to take a creative writing course. What made you do it?

MT: By the time I had decided that NGO work wasn't for me, I had many stories in me, but didn't have the skill to write about them well. Or that is how I felt. I decided to apply for a creative writing program in the US because I wanted to learn the techniques of writing. Of course, writing isn't a purely technical, or mechanical thing; if it is purely technical, or mechanical, it amounts to propaganda. But I lacked the basic confidence to launch a major work, such as a novel. The creative writing programs in the US, and now in Europe, are great for familiarizing you with the basics of creative writing, so that fiction techniques are not a mystery to you. They equip you to look further than the techniques, to your main message, to your main style.

AB: *Mustang Bhot in Fragments* is your account of a place in transition after the arrival of electricity. How did you come to write this book? I have a feeling that this account of a place where you have lived for some years began with journal entries

but later panned out into a book.

MT: I was very new to Nepal when I took the trip to Mustang that became the basis for the travel narrative, *Mustang Bhot in Fragments*. The trip had affected me very deeply, and I wrote the book as part of my query as to why this had been so. I was lucky, of course, that Himal Books would want to publish such an enterprise, because basically I was trying to answer some very personal questions by writing the book. I wrote the book as an exploration about what it means to live in Nepal, or to identify oneself as Nepali.

AB: We know that you wrote the one-third of *The Tutor of History* as part of your dissertation. Why not a full novel?

MT: I didn't have the time to complete the full novel for my dissertation. And it wasn't required. The University of Washington—a great writing program—required that MFA candidates working on short fiction submit 100 pages of a manuscript; and those working on a novel submit 150 pages. I did the latter. Shawn Wong and Maya Sonenberg were my advisors, and they were amazing, insightfully—yet at the same time extremely open-minded—guides for my thesis. Their input into the

first 150 pages of the novel helped me complete it, two years later in Nepal.

AB: You have lived outside Nepal most of your life. Yet you have been able to depict a small Nepali-village life in its barest details. Where does this eye for details, do you think, come from?

MT: You forget that I spent my early 20's in Nepal, outside of Kathmandu, in villages. Later in my 20's and 30's, when I began to be noticed as a writer by the Kathmandu elite intelligentsia, I was regarded as someone very new to Nepal. In fact I was only new to Kathmandu's elite intelligentsia circles.

AB: The third book you are working is woven around the royal massacre. Is it a reportage of the accident or what? Would you like to spill the beans?

MT: The book is on the political circumstances that led/are leading to the failure of democracy in the post-1990 period.

AB: How easy has the writing in English been to you? I mean writing about un-English reality in English.

MT: Writing in English about Nepal is like translating Nepali literature into English. There is no other way to do it, since I am not writing about the English-speaking classes of Nepal, and

since there is no vernacular "Nenglish" (like Hinglish) in Nepal. I try to write as though I were writing in Nepali for a Nepali audience. This sometimes makes my writing a little too "local," or too detailed for an audience that doesn't know about Nepal, or care about it. I prefer that than to write "universal" stories that could be set anywhere. I'm interested in Nepal's particularities.

AB: Writers like you and Samrat are being noticed internationally. What will this do to Nepali writing in English?

MT: Because Nepal was never colonized by Britain, we do not have a long tradition of English writing. Now, in the new millennium, Samrat and I and a few others belong to the first generation of Nepali writers for whom English is a first language. We will undoubtedly be followed by many others who will challenge us, expand upon our efforts, break new ground. I am looking forward to the English literature from Nepal that will emerge in about a decade. Things will get exciting then.

Ajit Baral is a frequent contributor to The Daily Star and various Nepalese newspapers. He lives in Kathmandu.



Illustrated by Sabyasachi Hazra

Bad Times

BISHNU DEY
(translated by D.D. Swerthone)

He was walking behind me in the alley.
I see him again at the intersection
where four roads cross,
and plunge into a lane on my left.

Under criss-crossing lights and smoke
the more turns I take, the more I notice
the eager intent greed, like that of a fox,
in the lines of his moustache.

At the end of that lane I turn into
a street on my right, wide and spacious
like turning from a canal into the Ganges,
I think, if we meet here maybe
there will be a confrontation.

But there is not. He keeps pausing
in the dark shadows under streetlights,
sometimes he lights a cigarette,
maybe he buttons his shirt,
he follows my shadow,
I don't know what claim he has on me.

I turn in fast through the west gate
past the posters by the cinema-hall
then through the tea-stall on my right
I walk through to the next street.

He will not leave me alone.
He doesn't stop to eat or drink,
just like me he feels no hunger or thirst.

As soon as I take the paved road along
the east, he follows behind,
like a shadow, but whose?
Wearing rubber shoes
from far-away they fly toward me in groups
like groups of cobras they could be
just harmless grass snakes.

Straining my senses to listen and observe
at the edge of exhaustion,
finally I push in the open door
into the moment when I look into your eyes
and knit my fingers into yours.

The darkness of this morning eases and lightens,
grows in passion,
let the clock tick,
those who pace outside
and wait to pounce,
those who talk in the calendar

life will forget them;
on the wide sandy beach by the ocean
where all alleys end
that endless blue sea of time will
carry them away,
those wily bad times.

A fresh translation

KHADEMUL ISLAM

We Bengalis continually attempt to translate Jibanananda Das's *Banalata Sen* into English (very few of them quite good, some okay and the rest unreadable). Like all great poems it defies translation. I came across Sudeep Sen's effort quite by accident, nesting inconspicuously under a window ledge in one of his book of poems. To readers interested in translations of Bengali poems into English, as well as Das aficionados, Sudeep's effort is very much worth a look. Among other things, it is interesting in avoiding altogether the famous sentence of 'raising her bird's nest-like eyes' or 'her eyes like birds' nests', something which almost always in English poses a problem, sounding as it does too much like poetic diction, upsetting the line's harmony and balance. Another thing of note in Sudeep's translation is the prominence of the 's' sounds in the beginning two lines of the third stanza, which mirrors, though a little more sibilantly than one would want but beggars can't be choosers, the predominance of 'sh' sounds in the Bengali, which runs:

*Shomosto deen'er shayshay shishirer shobdayr moto
Shondha ashay;*

And whose effect is to mimic the imagined sound of falling dew (*shishirer shobdo*) in two ways, or rather, through the use of two devices: one, by soft, very soft, 'sh' sounds, which sounds like dew falling, and second, by slowing down the speed of the line since we can't read a line with a succession of 'sh' sounds too fast. These effects didn't simply happen, with Jibanananda sitting down to write and the lines pouring effusively out

of him. These are all conscious poetic devices, and the more a translation can mimic the original's effects the richer it is. And so both the sound and the speed reflect the line's content, falling dew, which in turn reflects death, the closing of life, the onset of the evening of one's life, the fading of the earth's colours. Aside from the sound, Sudeep's succession of 's's' also has the effect of slowing down the line, though the half-line 'evening closes the day's end' is awkward construction. As is the 'by day and night' in the second line of the first stanza. (Please, I didn't say it was the perfect translation, only that it was very much worth a look. You can't get everything, we all know that.)

Yet another point is that Sudeep has not kept to the strict form of the original, which was three stanzas of six lines each, but within which the sounds and words—Bengali being a much 'softer' sounding language than English—convey a sense of drift, of the mystery of historical time, of distance and space. English translations could hardly ever convey this sense, mainly because by sticking to the original form, English sounds, quite hard to the Bengali ear, became that much flatter. And so the pliable matter, the yielding grief, of *Banalata Sen* tended in English translations to become wood and stone, something which tended not to 'give'. Sudeep, by indenting lines and adding many more dashes, by way of parentheses and hyphens, by a general *slant* in the look of the poem on the page, has loosened the form, which to an extent conveys the original's inherent sense of drift, of chancing upon a cinnamon isle, of man wandering in history's outer edges.

There are other things too ('Natore'r Banalata...' for instance), and not always successful, but those I leave for the readers to have fun finding out.



Banalata Sen

(translated by Sudeep Sen)

For thousand years I have walked this earth's passage

by day and night ¾ from Lanka's shores to Malay's vast seas.

I've travelled much ¾ been a guest at Bimbhishar and at Ashok's courts,
stayed in the distant nights, in the town of Bidharba.
I'm long worn-out; around me waters of the sea and life have endlessly swirled.

My only peace ¾ a fleeting moment snatched with her ¾

Natore'r Banalata Sen.

Like the dense ink-night of Bidhisha, her hair ¾ black, deep black;

her face ¾ like the delicate-wave of Shrabasti's filigree-freeze.

Just as a lost boatman, rudderless, tossing in the far seas
chances upon a lush-green Isle of Spice,

I too caught a sight ¾ saw her, a mere glimpse in the dark. Gently, raising
her eyes, she whispered: "Where were you, all this while?"

[And there she stands at my dream's end ¾ my own Banalata Sen].

With soft-settling hiss of dew, evening closes the day's end;

kites erase from their wings, sun-stained smell of flight.
When colours of the earth gently fade, fireflies light up their palette,
and old songs find new lyric, old stories new score.

Birds return home, so do the rivers; as life's trade ¾ its give-and-take ¾ cease.

Only the dark stays. And just as it remains, so does sitting by my side,
face to face, my own Banalata Sen.