

## SHORT STORY

## Spurned Lover

RASHIDA SULTANA  
(translated by Khademul Islam)

MADE up my mind last night that I had to see you. Didn't even get a chance to let you know. Heard from others that you had a fever. I am not feeling good myself; as the night had lengthened my fears had risen. The very thought that I would be going to your place made me feel short of breath. It made me happy, of course, but also filled me with dread. These days, as much I love you, I fear you in equal measure, too. Sometimes the way you scold me, I just can't breathe. Back at the beginning you never did this sort of thing, never berated me. Just loved me. Would murmur, every now and then, 'Where is my little bird? Where will I keep her?' And I would shiver with delight.

In the morning, grimly got on the bus. We pass village after village: ponds, paddy fields, tired farmers stepping over muddy aisles. Wispy clouds in the sky. From time to time, without warning, it was as if my breathing would stop: I hadn't told you that I was coming. Who knows how you upset you'd get, what a scolding I'd receive! Though, on the other hand, it is entirely possible that you'd be overjoyed on seeing me, would clasp me tight to your bosom, and exclaim, 'I can't believe I'm seeing my little bird after such a long time!'

I have to see you. No matter what happens, I must see you. Right now. I must. This is how it goes for me. I couldn't stop myself today. Nothing, except death, could possibly stop me today. On the bus, on the way to meet you, I pray that I would die, that perhaps death would be preferable than what lay at the end of my trip. May be something uglier than getting raped. But come what may, today I have to see you.

It feels like I haven't seen you in a thousand years. I shut my eyes and try to dream you into being. As if in a mist I see your eyes, your lips, your teeth, the six feet of you. But all separately, I can't piece the parts together into a whole. And even if I do, it falls apart after a little while. For the last few days it was as if I would never again see you in this lifetime. I had felt worn out, carrying this cold feeling inside me. I had no choice but to reach for you, to go to you.

I look out the bus window. A woman washing clothes by the bank of a hyacinth-choked pond, just a sari wrapped around her body. No blouse, a breast exposed at the side. The thought of being like her stiffens me; hunger, poverty, the daily grind of life, all these can strip away shame, embarrassment, self-regard.

I feel very tense. I have no idea how you are going to feel about my dropping in on your doorstep without any advance notice. But

what else could I do? I couldn't stand it after getting word that you were ill, couldn't bear being in this world. Now I prepare myself for any eventuality, for any kind of humiliation.

Finally I arrive at my destination. The noontime sun is hungrily swallowing up people around me. I unclip my hair and spread it on my neck. In the rickshaw I take out the small mirror and apply lipstick, blush-on, tidy myself up. I feel myself floating on air. Clouds have now massed in a winter sky, and I see you through a veil of winter mist. I close my eyes and see your white teeth, but am unable to touch you. The rickshaw flies, and I feel as if I am suffocating from time to time.

I have come very near to your house. In the distance, between the rows of trees I can glimpse your darwan. The world comes to a halt. Every tree, each leaf, the lake in front of your house--everything--is deathly still. In a few moments Adam and Eve will meet, and the whole earth will be swept away in a flood of light.

A couple of men are standing in front of your house. On spotting me, your servant boy steps forward. Urgently I ask him 'How is your master?' He informs me that you are now much better, that in fact you have gone to your office. He goes on to add that there is nobody in the house. I feel the inevitable magic pull of your

bedroom. Breathlessly I run upstairs to the first floor, to your bedroom, whose very air is laden with your fragrant breath. Here you had descended from a hole in the ceiling...I enter timelessness. A dream-heavy night. Where Ravi Shankar had played, and I had danced amidst the stars holding your hand. I had swooned. And had asked, 'How am I going to live without seeing you? How will I live?' And you had then scrounged among the scattered stars, and had found the prettiest one, and brought it over and touched it to my lips and had said, 'See, this is the elixir of life.' That star had brushed my lips, glided down my mouth and past my heart, then settled in my stomach. You had said 'One day this elixir will be a heart. You'll put a hand over your bosom and hear it thumping. It shall become a part of your body. Each time you bear a child, it will come to your lap draped in a halo.'

Your room now is a swelling sea. I rise with every wave, take a deep breath, then go under. I am going to call your office right now. Maybe you'll exclaim 'My darling, my little bird! I haven't seen you for so many days. Just wait, I'll be right there. I am going to hug you so tightly you won't be able to breath.' Your phone rings. My heart starts knocking. One second, two seconds, a million seconds pass. Then your voice, 'What's new?



How are you?' I reply, 'I'm in your bedroom. Come home immediately.'

Then suddenly the world darkens, Gabriel sounds his end-of-the-world trumpet--'You shouldn't have come. There are lots of people staying in my house. You should leave right now and catch a bus to Dhaka.' One by one the lights go out in the world. The sky, stars, storms, mountains, the earth--all crash down on top of me. Shattering into tiny pieces I collapse on to your seawave-bed, my heaven of gold blown apart in a

split second. I cry out loud, like a mother at her first childbirth.

But how do I break this vicious circle?

I rise from the rubble, and call you again. I say 'I have to see you once, even if for a second. Nothing can keep me away, not even death.'

'Come to my office.'

But cast-off being, the spurned lover, that I am now, how do I drag this lifeless, broken body all the way to your office?

I enter your room in the office building. A sparkling lake of a

room in which you are working surrounded by a smoky fog. On seeing me you shout, 'Have you gone mad? Where's your self-respect?'

Head lowered, I think that when Eve's secrets have been bared, Adam begins to think highly of himself. The office is crowded with people, some with files to be signed, some to plead their case. I want to cry out aloud. One by one, the cells in my body start to wink out, I feel myself dying.

You dismiss the people around you. Then say, 'I've been very sick the last few days. came to the office today for the first time in four days. Why did you come down here without telling me?'

I look silently at your face. I feel very cold. Through an icy fog I see that your lips are flame-red. Your face keeps disappearing in the fog. Why is this room so cold? Why do you look so thin?

As if from the other side of death I hear you say, 'You are weeping in my office, in front of all these people. Where's your self-respect?' Then more softly, pitiingly, 'Shall I send you by car?'

Gathering the shreds of my remaining strength I manage to reply, 'No.'

Again, a bolt of lightning strikes my head. I am reduced to ashes.

Your behaviour is getting more and more outrageous with each passing day. You love me, yet you

behave like this. Love me, but why to the point of distraction? My father, my uncle and brother, you know the whole house is humming with people. Thank God they have gone to visit the Meghna bridge today. How dare you enter my bedroom without my permission? You are going to be the death of me. Do you know to what extent you are demeaning yourself?'

I turn to stone. Somewhere far-off orchards wither and die. I think to myself: What can I do? On every full-moon night, every time I thrill with pleasure, during each rainfall, your eyes, your lips, your teeth, your breath, your bedroom, the mug from which you drink water, the bedside table lamp, the leaves of your money-plant, the orchids dancing in your verandah, the grass on your front lawn--all call out to me, irresistibly. Reason, dignity, intelligence, individuality--all vanish! Then it is as if nothing short of death can stop me from going to you.

I feel as if I have no strength left in me with which to get up and leave your room. Through the cloud of fog all I see are your fever-burnt lips.

Then silently, after some time, I do get up. Just before I open the door I turn my head to look at you. You raise your hand and wave good-bye.

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## Shakespeare in South Asia: to thine own self be true?

MOHIT UL ALAM

WILLIAM Shakespeare, who was born on April 23, 1564, and died the same day in 1616, is perhaps the world's most discussed author. He, as critic Hugh Grady says, embodies high culture and is subject to universal as well as localized interpretations (The Modernist Shakespeare 1991). Even though in the wake of the Iraq War, an event in which many can see the re-emergence of imperialism in its most flagrant colonial form, a discussion of Shakespeare in Bangladesh may raise a few eyebrows, because Shakespeare was used in the nineteenth century by the British Empire as one of its prime exports, a policy which the Anglo-American axis may yet find fruitful, yet Shakespeare is undeniably a humanist and his writings are a testimony to what Ben Jonson said about him: "He was not of an age, but for all time." Dr. Johnson said emphatically that Shakespeare may have used kings and queens, but it is always man he is writing about. Though the present global situation has made a mockery of the word 'humanism', the best defense of it is still provided by Shakespeare, as is exemplified through Lear's profound realization when he in the raging storm asks Fool to go inside the hovel first for shelter:



"In, boy; go first."

In fact, the worldwide reception of Shakespeare is so much acknowledged a fact that one has only to turn to books such as *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare* to see what a large number to countries is entered therefrom Argentina to Zambia where Shakespeare studies are pursued, performed his plays, formed Shakespeare associations, and translated, adapted, and filmed Shakespeare plays.

The situation in neighbouring countries may be viewed first.

At an international conference on Shakespeare held at Delhi University early this year it was revealed that about 300 degree colleges under Delhi University offer English honours courses of which Shakespeare constitutes 60 percent of the syllabus (Harish Trivedi, *Colonial Transactions: English Literature in India*, 1993).

The conference was held for three days, and in each session there were papers read on Shakespeare by scholars from Bangladesh and other countries and from all over India, giving a feeling that in the Indian universities a vibrant kind of dialogue and negotiations on Shakespeare was taking place. One of the prominent participants was Professor

Coppelia Kahn from Brown university who in her speech went out of her way to emphasize that it was very invigorating for her to have come all the way from America and have so substantial a feedback on Shakespeare. Among the Indian Shakespeare scholars, there was R.W.Desai of the English department of Delhi University, and also president of the Shakespeare Society of India, who had been editing and publishing a yearly volume of just a single play by Shakespeare, Hamlet, for the last twenty-five years. Incidentally, the year 2003 happened to be the year of retirement for Professor Desai, and so he published the latest volume of the series with an appropriate quote from Hamlet: "The rest is silence."

Dr. Vikram Chopra, founder secretary of the Shakespeare Society of India, was also present. He has edited a book called *Shakespeare: Varied Perspectives* (1996) and this nearly 500-page volume has a fitting foreword from Kenneth Muir, the distinguished British Shakespeare scholar, who expresses his satisfaction that the volume is an index to judge how Shakespeare has been faring in post-colonial India.

One book that discusses substantially the interaction between English Literature and India is Trivedi's above-mentioned *Colonial Transactions*, (Trivedi is also a professor of English at Delhi University). Trivedi devotes the entire first chapter of his book, in addition to a discussion of Shakespeare's influence on the curriculum of English departments in Indian universities, to making a preliminary survey of translations done of Shakespeare's works in Indian languages as well as piecing together the evidences testifying to the reconciling efforts put in by the British between ruling India on the one hand and teaching Shakespeare in India on the other. Though Carlyle commented that if a choice had to be made between the two glories of England--India and Shakespeare--the first one could be sacrificed but the second not, Professor Trivedi asserts the

fact that colonial rule was strengthened through the popularization of Shakespeare.

Such colonial hangover regarding teaching Shakespeare in a postcolonial subcontinent also became an issue in many of the papers read in another international conference on Shakespeare held in Karachi, Pakistan in 1997. There Stanley Wells, joint editor of the *Oxford Shakespeare* very sensibly spoke that Shakespeare could be colonized by having editions of his plays annotated in the various languages of the sub-continent. He also suggested that if a colonial reading of Shakespeare was one way of understanding him, then a refusal to do so should also constitute a proper approach for studying him.

Worried that Shakespeare might be thought as becoming an essential part of the neo-imperial pedagogy, Professor Stephen Greenblatt begins his general Introduction, which in itself is a superb example of comprehensive scholarship, to the *Norton Shakespeare* 1997 edition with the line quoted earlier, that Shakespeare "was not of an age, but for all time." Positioning Shakespeare as a universal phenomenon, Greenblatt writes: "indeed, so absolute is Shakespeare's achievement that he has himself come to seem like great creating nature: the common bond of humankind, the principle of hope, the symbol of the imagination's power to transcend time-bound beliefs and assumptions, peculiar historical circumstances, and specific artistic conventions."

The Shakespeare legacy in pre-1947 India is quite strong. Calcutta, Mumbai, Madras and Delhi were the centres where Shakespeare flourished. The Hindu Theatre of Calcutta, established in 1831, performed some scenes from Julius Caesar, while in 1848, Bainsab Charan Addy, a young Bengali actor, became famous by playing Othello against an Englishwoman, Mrs Anderson, playing Desdemona. Girishchandra Ghosh started the famous National Theatre in 1872, and he became famous by playing the stellar roles--such as Macbeth. *Bhanumatir Chittavilasa*, an adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*, is regarded as one of the earliest adaptations of any foreign play in India.

In modern Shakespeare productions Habib Tanvir's adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into the Chattisgarhi style of folk theatre has been well praised, while the Kathakoli dance form of the National School of Drama is also mentionable.

II  
After Greenblatt-initiated post-

historical studies took roots, Shakespeare criticism in the post-colonial world has become a practice of finding Shakespeare's relevance in a larger socio-political context, and depending on Shakespeare's great accommodative versatility, thought of every kind, social phenomena both regular and bizarre, manners and behaviour of all patterns can be exemplified from his work either to prove or to reject a point. In this way Shakespeare is a very comfortable referent.

For example, these speeches by Lear seem to be most relevant for a Bangladesh kind of society, where unfed, unsheltered man approaches us at every street corner:

You houseless poverty--  
Nay, get thee in. I'll pray, and then I'll sleep.  
Poor, naked wretches,  
wheres'er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,  
How shall your houseless heads  
and unfed sides,  
Your looped and windowed  
raggedness, defend you  
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en  
Too little care of this. Take,  
physic, pomp,  
Expose thyself to feel what  
wretches feel,  
That thou mayst shake the  
superflux to them  
And show the heavens more  
just. (3.2.26-36)

Lear's resentment of this situation of the unaccommodated man is perfectly in accord with the inward protest we have about the widespread poverty in our country:

"Thou wert better in a grave than to answer with thy uncovered body this extremity of the skies. Is man more than this? Consider him well. Thou owest the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha, here's three on's are sophisticated; thou art the thing itself. Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here." (3.2.95-103)

Lear's comments on how law can be abused with money, and thus how the difference between a thief and a judge is tenuous come up in his "handy-dandy speech":  
"What, art mad? A man may see how this world goes with no eyes; look with thine ears. See how you justice rails upon you simple thief. Hark in thine ear: change places, and handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief?" (4.5.146-51)

And further on, Lear's graphic description of what happens to the law when it is corrupted bespeaks familiar situations:

Plate sin with gold,  
And the strong lance of justice  
hurtless breaks;  
Arm it in rags, a pygmy's straw  
does pierce it. (4.5.161-163)

One disclaimer, however, is that as all Shakespearian plays allow for pluralistic readings, they cannot be readily contextualized as having referred to one dominant theme only. *Othello* may be taken as a case. If it is read as a high-voltage tragedy, which is only just casually racial--a view upheld by Bradley, we see that the questions about race spring up in our minds to undo our reading. And, again, a reading with a racial thrust also undoes us as the play provides very little support to form an ideological interpretation about race. *Othello* is portrayed individually as a Moor, but not as a representative of the Moorish race. This demarcating line is crucial to the understanding of the play.

Yet then, we will continue to read Shakespeare with our own bias, and if Shakespeare has to have any relevance for us it is because we find meanings in his texts that are similar to meanings we give to our life and society, that the critic's and reader's own psyches, environments, societies and cultures do modify and determine their response to Shakespeare. That is, the past is reshaped by the present.

III  
Another aspect of the problem of encouraging Shakespeare studies in Bangladesh is the deterioration of the level of English among our students. In spite of efforts by both government and non-government agencies to improve the students' English, it is surprisingly dipping to an all-time low, so much so that English departments in our universities hardly get students who can cope with a standard syllabus in English, let alone Shakespeare. Except for a handful of students in Dhaka and Chittagong, the majority of students pass their intermediate examination having learnt no English at all. English seems to be a compromised subject, which the students manage to pass not because they pass it, but because they are allowed to pass it with substantial boost given by 'grace marks'. The problem, however, is of a grave nature, and more complicated than the present essay has room to address.

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## Indian Poetry in English: Daruwalla

Keki Daruwalla (b. 1937), the winner of both the Sahitya Akademi and Commonwealth Poetry award, has published six volumes of poetry as well as a collection of short stories. He gained immediate fame with his first book *Under Orion* in 1970. Sometimes a poet's own words reveal him the best:

On reading poetry, a laughable proposition in many quarters these days: "One shouldn't move away from poetry - for much of our aesthetics come from poetry; religion started with poetry, thought started with poetry; the epics Ramayana, Mahabharata, Iliad. If you believe in the occult, when the Devi descends, she descends on the shaman (who) has also been reciting slokas. I have written essays on science and poetry and religion and poetry. There must have been a time when science or knowledge was all combined in one man or one lady. Poetry is literally god-given. It can't be put aside because people have taken to the TV or computer or magazines."

On the disappearance of poetry as a genre: "Poetry reflects contemporary reality and your internal response to contemporary reality, more intensely than any other genre. Possibly, drama can sometimes do it, but novels certainly can't. For fiction is narrative and a narrative can never be sudden, while in a poem you can say in one page what in fiction you can in thirty, sometimes. I feel surprised that people don't take to poetry and one of the reasons is that possibly students are forced to read poetry. Poetry should always be optional and a pleasure. Poems that touch a chord in the heart should be prescribed. But many do write poetry. But the interest dies out, both in writing and reading. 'That shouldn't happen.'

On social comment in poetry: "Social comment is absolutely necessary. Otherwise you write in your own prostrate world. Comments shouldn't be left only to editors in editorials, and journalists and filmmakers."

### Collage I

Rock'n'rollers around Ravi Shankar  
mods around Maharishi Mahesh  
and Beatles around both  
and we are thrilled.  
They have a lot to learn  
from the ragas still, these bums!  
It is that same sentiment  
that Tagore-euphoria  
after the Nobel prize.

At times we do well  
in dog-shows.

Since Oppenheimer quoted Bhagavad Gita  
after the first A-bomb.  
Since Allen Ginsberg and the psychedelics  
wore dhotis, and with clanging cymbals  
chanted cow and Krishna  
I stand bowled by Indian culture  
and Indian hemp.

Who says we have done nothing?  
We have abolished zamindari  
and liquor and English  
and driven out the whores from the G. B. Road.

What have we forbidden,  
veils in front of eyes  
or eyes behind veils?

We have inaugurated crematoriums  
with an unclaimed corpse.  
A VIP has opened  
the sluice-gates of a drain  
and given it an epithet  
'the drain of hope'.

Some day, here  
the sun will refuse  
to light the path for lepers.  
In India  
the left hand is outcaste  
because it cleans the ass.

Discussing personal destiny  
and collective destiny  
you turn bitter.  
My horoscope is only a half-truth.  
Where are inflation and taxes  
floor-crossing and black gold  
written on it?

If we had plague  
Camus-style  
and doctors searched for the virus  
there would be black-market in rats.

### Collage II Mother

They were quick to notice  
the flame in my spine  
had gone limp.  
'Go to Auden and Sartre' they said  
'for a vocabulary of defeat'.

From a saturnine priesthood  
of parchment faces and plaster voice  
they picked out figures  
like poison-bottles from a secret shelf.  
'For a landscape of meaninglessness  
go along with him  
he has a palette smeared with almost-colours.  
For impotence which is disembodied  
and become a way of life...  
for greater insights into the fear of death  
go here...  
and she's your girl for the abyss  
she knows one tone of darkness from the other.'

My looks turned to yours;  
we were meeting each other outside of ourselves.  
But Mother your face was so fissured.  
I couldn't see my face in it.

In the drought year  
armlets couldn't stay upon the arm,  
the limbs had shrivelled so  
Mother, some men have heard you  
crying to yourself.

Mother, you are a floating foetus  
on a larval bed  
around which we thrash about  
'black colonies of summer fish'.

Corruption is the chemistry of flesh.  
No wonder the senses suppurate, passions putrefy.  
But you survey it all  
with a smile pasted on your lips  
inanities pasted on the smile.  
Somewhere in the dust and drift of history  
you lost your good-luck amulet  
and your face.  
Today you are an empty slogan  
that walks an empty street,  
walls tarred with slogans.

Mother I hope  
something happens to my vision  
the day you  
dragging your feet  
wounds smeared with ants  
crawl towards Benares  
to die.

Then why should I tread the Kafka beat  
or the Waste Land  
when Mother, you are near at hand  
one vast, sprawling defeat?