

## SHORT STORY

## B e a u t y

A. MANNAF  
(translated by Rabindur Biswas from the  
Bangla Sundary)

I got everything in time. I got a job as well as a wife. I did not have to undergo the agony of unemployment like most other young men. I chose my wife somewhat like professionals do. My romanticism never outraced reality, did not fly high. One after another all my ducks lined up in a row, all the pieces fell into place. I loved my wife Kamala.

Kamala was dark-complexioned, her lips did not resemble orange pips. She was not considered a great beauty, but rather was healthy. She was the mother of two children, a bit slow-moving, but in my eyes she was appealing. Kamala had passed her BA in English. I myself had obtained my degree with the help of her notes. She had not been like other women in college who had chased glamour, and whose bodies had not distracted me from Kamala. I had felt then that too much love was a disease. I had never suffered from that problem. In our married life, Kamala's body had been sufficient for me.

After ten years of marriage, however, my long-repressed thirst for beauty and grace sprang up suddenly when I became a private tutor of Trishna. I found myself becoming strongly attracted to other women, specially to Menaka, the mother of Trishna. In fact it was Menaka who rekindled desire in me for other women. She was pretty. She looked different. It was the combination of her body, fair complexion, hair, and sweet voice that had an overpowering effect on me. As a matter of fact, soon in my mind Menaka's beauty began to far overshadow Kamala's I began to feel

guilty: various questions began to prick me. With the appearance of a beautiful woman in one's life, does morality and ethics begin to disappear? Would lust overwhelm my previous lifestyle? The beloved wife at home seemed unappealing! Unwanted! It was derogatory to Kamala, but I also reasoned that it was not always a question of being ethical or unethical, that such incidents were bound to occur occasionally in life. That was only natural, life's warp and woof was woven of these two poles of life: love and lust. Still, I felt low: there had been no dearth of happiness in our ten years of marital life, so what was I doing? My conscience seemed at times unable to tolerate its opposite. Yet, when I came home from Trishna's house, nature would take hold of me. I felt no interest in Kamala.

I started to ignore her. The other day after I had returned home from teaching Kamala exclaimed, 'Look, I have found a girl who will do the work.'

We required extra domestic help. We had been searching hard for such help. We had one daughter in class four while our son was less than a year old. We had told our existing maid to be on the lookout for another one to look after our children. In life all needs cannot be fulfilled all at once. However, the news of having gotten someone to look after our children did not make me happy. Instead, my voice sounded harsh even to my own ears, 'What the hell good will that do?'

Kamala was startled. She stared at me for a long minute. Then recoiled and walked away. I felt ashamed. Repentant. What had I done?

I thought that I should cease

giving tuition lessons to Trishna. But that tuition gave us some much needed money; three hundred rupees for one-and-half-hour. Besides, for me, Menaka was an added bonus. I seemed to have become addicted to giving Trishna lessons.

I knew I should not behave as I did with Kamala. I debated long and hard about being just and unjust, but I felt helpless. It was a fact that Menaka was more beautiful than Kamala. Menaka's husband Manoj Babu was a policeman, the officer-in-charge of a police station. Though he was not a good looking man, his manners were those of a perfect gentleman.

He took tea with me if he was at home when I was also there. I asked him once, 'Manoj Babu, you are a resident of Burdwan. Your wife is from Dinajpur. How come? Here you ever been there?'

He laughed for a long time and then replied, 'Mine is not a love marriage. It was an arranged one. And what about yours?'

I laughed in reply. How could I casually talk about how I got married? Was it a story to be told to everyone, that I had married Kamala after a courtship? I had joined a school as a teacher. The headmaster had asked, 'Rathin, would you like to sit for a Bachelor's degree?'

'I plan on giving it.'  
'How?'  
'As a private student.'  
'So you don't have contact with a regular student?'

With grief in my voice I had replied, 'No, sir. That opportunity is not there for me.'

'Is that so? My sister Kamala will be appearing for her BA. Do come to

my home this evening. You will get somebody to study with.'

That contact led to marriage. Both of us cleared our respective examinations. No doubt Kamala's notes had helped me a lot. We were not unhappy. Our years had passed swiftly. So now it was hard for me to figure out why our love life seemed to have reached the point of no return. While I would teach Trishna, Menaka used to appear and stand before me holding the back of my student's chair. I was not sure whether she used to do that just to make an appearance before me or not, but I would experience a pang of lust every time I looked at her Menaka in fact complained to me the other day, 'Your student couldn't tell the meaning of 'tigress' in English when she was asked by her father.'

I just kept on watching Menaka. Her hair was tied in a topknot. She had not changed her sari from last night, which clung to her. I kept on looking at her, not really listening to her, though Menaka kept on talking, 'I had told her father that her tutor teaches her everything. The teacher has been trying, but your daughter is dull.' Menaka laughed, and a ripple coursed through her body. I began to think that Kamala also was dull-headed too: how could she not have noticed a sudden change in my behaviour towards her?

Then it struck me that perhaps she had. Perhaps I was the one who did not understand. Kamala had patience. She was not the type of woman who got angry time and again. She had a BA degree after all, and was not like any other ordinary housewife. Her language too was different. Kamala had told me the other day, 'Please, you must give up your tuition work. You have to work

so hard. It's too much of a strain on your health.' I had noticed that she did not discuss family matters with me like she used to. I could feel the gap between us. There was now a crack in our family life. Let it be, I had thought. I could not even conceive of the thought of stopping the tuition. That meant that I would be prevented from enjoying Menaka's beauty. During lesson time, as I mentioned before, Menaka always appeared in front of me on some pretext or the other. Just the other day she came and shouted, 'Putul! Putul!'

I saw a girl of Trishna's age eating puffed rice and black tea. Putul could not reply immediately as she had a mouthful of puffed rice. A newcomer, I thought.

Menaka said, 'Look at her, sir! Trishna does not like to eat. She only had four sweets in the morning. But look at this girl, how she is gulping down the food.'

'Who is that girl?' I wanted to know.

'A maid. I got her yesterday. A good-for-nothing. She only eats.' Menaka then barked at her, 'Go! Bring the milk for Trishna from the kitchen.'

Putul left her food and brought Trishna a glass of milk. Putul was wearing a torn frock. Her hair was unwashed and uncombed. I asked Menaka, 'Where did you manage to get this girl?'

Menaka replied in the sweet voice she used with me, 'Police personnel have never any problem getting a girl for work. Her father is a culprit.'

A daughter of a culprit! If the wards of culprits are treated in this way, I thought to myself, there is every possibility that the girl we had hired was a culprit, too.



Illustrated by Subayashini Hazra

I returned home to find our new maidservant Pakhi and Kamala sitting together eating tiffin. Kamala was sharing her food with Pakhi. I had not previously enquired about Pakhi. Now I thought God forbid if Pakhi's father turned out to be a culprit. I had a fear of criminals. I enquired of my aunt, who lived with us, 'Aunt, where did we get that girl? Who is her father?' In reply she said, 'Pakhi's father is dead. Her mother works. After sending her to school her mother goes to work. Pakhi has

no interest in school. She plays truant. Her mother prefers her getting engaged as a housemaid.'

The next day Menaka as usual came forward bringing two cups of tea and some biscuits after I had gone to their house. I dipped the biscuit in the tea but the moist, fragile biscuit crumbled on to the floor. Menaka became busy. She yelled for Putul who was busy washing kitchen utensils at the well outside.

She came running. Menaka

directed her to pick up the biscuit from the floor and eat it so as not to waste food. I was startled and said, 'How can you ask her to eat that biscuit from the floor, which is full of dust?' Putul was hesitating. Menaka instead shouted at her, 'Don't just stand there. Eat that up.' With a frightened expression on her face, the girl put the biscuit in her mouth.

That day I returned home with the sad face of Putul rather than that of Menaka's ravishing beauty in my mind. Tired, I sat down in a chair and asked for Pakhi. Kamala appeared smiling, 'What made you call for Pakhi?'

'Where is she? Gone? Just as I thought. Well, I would like a glass of water.'

I did not notice Pakhi standing behind Kamala, who pushed her in front of me. 'Here is Pakhi! I could not recognize the girl. She was wearing my daughter's frock. Her hair was neatly arranged. She was holding a slate and a book, her face beaming with delight.'

Kamala said, 'I got her admitted in the local Shikali school. Two hours of classes and that too only in the morning.'

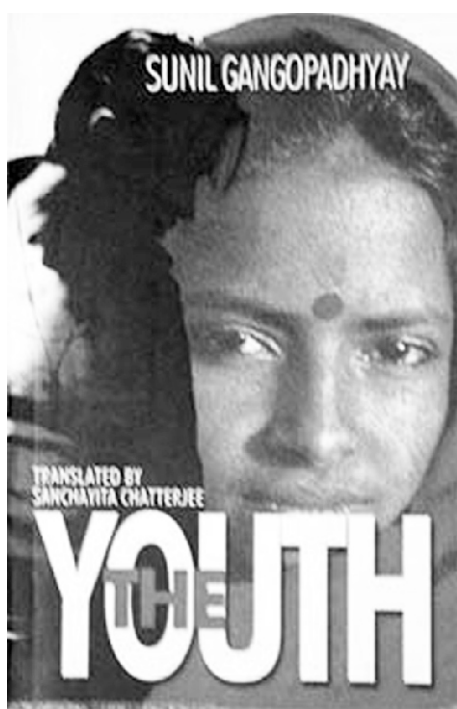
'When is she going to do her work?'

'After school. It is time she attended school. But she has to work for her living, too. Poor girl.'

Something like an earthquake shook my body. Menaka's body, which had created a veil before my eyes, fell away before Kamala. My little aberration regarding Menaka was rectified. Kamala again began to look very beautiful to me, yes, much more than Menaka.

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## Book Review



that this book was a kind of journal, documenting the lives and times of his friends and by extension, the youth around him. In fact, the novel has an interesting format. It delineates the lives of a group of people who interact with each other at a particular level but have their own concerns and conflicts, confusions and turmoil to deal with. Each chapter deals with a different character who becomes central and the others, peripheral. The reader thus sees other characters through the eyes of the central character. Thus, the significance of the roles of all the characters keeps changing from being paramount to being negligible.

The novel does not have any formal plot but only small vignettes of the lives and motivations of 'the youth' as they are held up to the scrutiny of the novelist one by one. So if the reader is looking for a book with a 'beginning, middle, an end', this is not for him. But if he is ready to be slightly disturbed by a group of disparate young men with their own codes of morality and individualistic attitudes towards life, then, surely, this is the book for him.

Aninash, for instance, is haunted by what he did the previous winter although his attitude has always been "I have never tried to bind passions; to me unfulfilled passion has always been worse than death. I cannot be friends with any woman. That is why most women in my acquaintance know me as a very shy person or as a rather bold, ungentlemanly one". This leads him to deceive his trusting friend, Animesh, whose hospitality he enjoys and yet "I had no gain to make from what happened that afternoon. There was actually nothing else involved in it. It was just an afternoon's accident. There was nothing to do in the afternoon still Animesh, I ask your forgiveness."

Then there is Chaya didi with the white patches on her skin, an ugly cancer eating up her innards while

she yearns for tender moments of love. All the young poets and writers love to gather in her house for tea, pakoras and discussions, which she willingly provides, but all of them would rather pay romantic attentions to Maya, her willful younger sister. Chaya is a sad character as she lies dying of the cancer and of unrequited love, all the while churning out bad poetry.

In fact, none of the characters are particularly happy ones. Neither Avinash, nor Bimalendu nor Tanya, Tapas, Hemkanti, Parikshit or Shekhar. They all have their own traumas to face: Joblessness, ugliness, genius, guilt, loneliness, loss. They have different motives to write and createto be successful, to earn money or to find an outlet for their creativity. The only two people who seem to be in tune with life and at ease with themselves to some extent are Birmalendu, the sympathetic yet pragmatic young poet, fairly successful, who declares to his group of friends, 'Do you know what sort of love you people have? Your heat cries out for a dead ant, but you are not bothered if your mother at home even gets to eat.' The other is Animesh who declares, when he learns of his wife's pregnancy, 'I've finally become a complete man. I am a family man, I am a working man, I am a father.'

The others are haunted by demons. Tapas is unemployed and swindles and sponges off his friends and doesn't know where his next meal is coming from but is a gifted poet. Hemkanti is in quest of 'coming alive' because he once tried to commit suicide and now has to worry about his present 'second life' because 'man gets one life to spend as he wills it. I had got two, one which I had tried to destroy myself.' Parikshit is the most fascinating character. The bohemian, larger than life, gifted genius who doesn't know if his near death was an accident, a failed suicide or an attempted murder.

Sunil Gangopadhyay has thus captured the true spirit of the youth of Kolkata--a breed apart from the youth of any other metro of the country. Their concerns and ethos are typical of the city--the City of Joy where everyone is a poet or, at the very least, a writer and a thinker.

By Aradhika Sekhon from The Tribune online

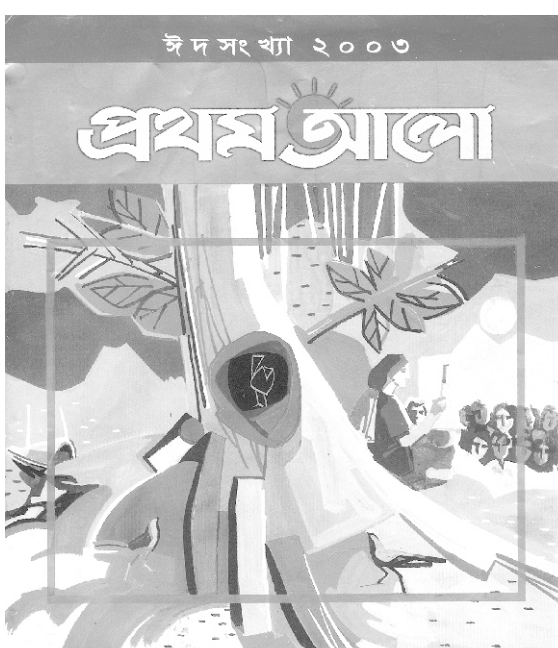
## Dhaka Literary Life: 'shob shalarai aajkaal kobita likhay'

KHADEMUL ISLAM

I am envious of my counterparts in Bangla newspapers, who seem always to be comfortably planted in their office chairs behind huge piles, gargantuan fileboxes, of articles, short stories, poems, whatnot, for their literary pages. Contributors fall over each other in trying to reach their doors, their faxes and phone lines hum, whole series of articles can, and are, planned out in advance, sometimes even photographers are dispatched for accompanying shoots, writers and poets drop by their offices for that time-honoured tradition of literary activity here: the bookish, literate, free-ranging adda. While in contrast, the less said about this aspect of the life of an English-language literary editor in Dhaka, the better. Except to say that it is a dog's life. A Hard Day's Night. I am as one with the beggars on our street, the palm ever out, confronting the immense, barren stretch of badlands that is Dhaka English, the publication of just this single page once a week a strain.

Envy bit me again when I had a preview of *Prothom Alo* newspaper's Eid magazine issue at an Iftar party they gave to launch it. A fat, thick, packed issue, brought out under the able guidance of Sajjad Sharif, the paper's literary editor. 'Here, Khademul Bhai,' he said on seeing me at the party, 'let me introduce you to some local literary talent,' and then proceeded to lead me through a blur of faces and names. Talking heads you read in print and sometimes see on TV. Writers, poets, journalists, columnists, teachers, essayists. All of them ready to write a piece for Sajjad whenever he needs one. D-a-a-a-m-n, I thought, look at these guys, they have to beat away writers with a stick. While it'll take me ten years to even think of the idea of a single Eid issue. And even then, who would actually buy it, without outstanding original fiction written in English here, without poets writing in English who are popularly known, without an English written with flair and individuality? And then, I gotta confess, I am momentarily seized by a pang of self-pity: what fun would I be having if I was somewhere else, say, in Kolkata! Or Karachi!

We sat outdoors at the Bengal gallery at Road Number 27 in Dhanmondi. A balmy afternoon, with a light breeze softly brushing the tops of trees. Sudden spurts of red dust would momentarily float up into the bright air over the boundary wall of the gallery--a powdery red against the powder blue sky--signs of Dhaka's never-ending, futile, wasteful road-digging going on out on the road. I saw Sirajul Islam Chowdhury (a.k.a. 'SIC sir') and went over to say hello--I hadn't seen him since '87. I told him I had spotted him taking his



walks around 5:15-5:30 a.m. in Dhanmondi when setting out for a little jog myself. We then chatted a bit about the joys of 'doing one's constitutional' (as the old-time phrase went) without being harried by crowds till I saw a beaming Shamsur Rahman coming forward with his hand outstretched. I cut out then, thinking it best to leave them to their own devices. At my table Mohammed Rafique and I exchanged startled glances of delayed recognition, his hair now a flowing white. I hadn't seen him since the mid-'80s when he and I were side by side in a procession of university teachers protesting army rule. At that time he had just been released after being picked up by the DGIF hardboys and taken to the cantonment for questioning because he had published a poem, the beginning line of which ran something like:

*Shob shalarai aajkaal kobita likhay*

--here readers should remember that at that time we were under the darting-eyed rule of army man (and self-proclaimed poet!) H. M. Ershad and draw their own conclusions! It had been a hot day, the banner I was holding had been unwieldy, the whole issue we were marching for (or against) seemed lost in the dust, and Rafique had regaled us with floridly-recounted tales of his interrogation, which had made the march bearable: 'Why did you write that poem?' the security hats had growled. 'I am a poet, what else do you think I should do?' 'Why did you write that line?' 'Because it is true, everybody is a poet nowadays, I write poems, my neighbour's wife writes poems, you probably write poems, too, heh heh...' and then it would start all over again, 'So why did you write that poem?' 'I told you...' till they muttered bad, very bad, words under their breaths and let him go.

Now, here with relentless Dhaka mosquitoes beginning to home in on my unshod feet, I thought that never would a poem like that be written in English, purely on the spur of the moment, directly connected with the here and now, not because the poets writing in English (those that do) can't write it, but because the idea would never occur to them. Spontaneity and authenticity of expression is the rarest of things in creative writing English here. English is hermetically sealed within a class, which results in its distance from real life. It is the broad middle class that has to connect with English properly for our stories to

get written, for the hundreds of narratives to unlock. English has to escape from the prison of facile writing it is now locked in, from the hands of the upper class, who are so distanced from everyday Bangladesh life that it seems impossible sorrow will ever seep into their imaginative efforts, and what story of Bangladesh, of Dhaka, of Shiddhirganj, of Teknaf, will work if it ain't got sorrow? Or if the language ain't worth a lick?

'Don't you write in English?' I asked Rafique, who is in the English department at JU. 'No,' he replied. Well, then, there it goes, it is Bangla that flows from the gut.

I flipped through the pages of the magazine: a richness, a *plummy plumpness*, beyond my wildest dreams for my own li'l page here. How Stalin offed the Bengali revolutionary Golam Ambia Khan Lohani, actually a history lesson in Raj-era radical politics, a tour of the times when the Bolshevik Revolution for salvation, by *Prothom Alo* head honcho Motiur Rahman--who even now was chatting with Rafiqunnabi and Qayuum Chowdhury. A biography of Mir Mosharraf Hossain, something on Syed Waliullah by his wife Anne-Marie Waliullah; fiction by Syed Shamsul Huq, Razia Rahman, Humayun Ahmed, to name the few that I recognized; poems by Shamsur Rahman, Rafiq Azad (sitting near me at the table, who once had angered the authorities in 1974 by furiously penning the poem '*Bhat day haramzada*'), Mohammed Rafique, Shahjahan Munni, the talented young poets Subrata Gomes and Bratya Raisu, Mahadev Saha, Ruby Rahman, and more; short stories by Shawkat Ali, Selina Hossain, Ebadur Rahman, Moshitul Alam, Kajol Shah Nawaz, etc.; essays; the series

on art I like in which artists pick out their own favourite artists and paintings (Najli Laila Mansur, for example, writes, in terms utterly different than yours or mine, why Indian painter Gulam Mohammed Sheikh and his *Numance* is one of her own favourites); a longish case-study piece by Shahduzzaman that looked like something hauntingly original on our local culture; a travel article by the ever-lively, ever-provocative Nirmalendu Goon on his jaunt through Japan. Plus a piece on her childhood by Ferdousi Majumdar, which my wife read that night and laughed out loud at Ferdousi's pitch-perfect rendition of her parents' Noakhali-accented Bangla, 'outstanding piece of writing, never knew she was this good' was my better half's soberly measured judgement. Of course, as is only to be expected, some of the stuff--like the article on Satyajit Ray--looked on the surface to be repetitive stock material, while the one on Sheikh Mujib at first glance seemed merely to be the latest installment in the current, 'soft' rehabilitation campaign going on as part of the counter-drive against the distortions and neglect of the military years. But still, I thought, Jaysu Christo, da ya believe the range of this thing compared to the scene in English? I mean, dudes, this thing's a shock, the gap between the two, Bangla is Black Sabbath and Red Hot Chili Peppers, English not even a band yet!

I got depressed thinking about all the above and so I searched out Sajjad and said thanks for the invitation, see you around. It was time for my standard therapy against this kind of an occasional depression: an evening rickshaw ride (with the accompanying halitosis) lost in my favourite fantasy. No, you guys and gals, not the one about watching Aparna Sen crunchily bite into a cucumber slice across the table from me, not that one, though that does work wonders for the flagging spirit, nor the one where, accompanied by thunderous roars I remove, no, make that decapitate, the entire Pakistani batting line-up with some ferocious in-swingers at Bangabandhu Stadium thereby instantly being awarded the Ekushey Padak by a grateful nation, no, not that one either, but the one where I-- grinning maniacally, a cartoon cigar clamped between my teeth, clad in, as Rusdie wrote in *Midnight's Children*, 'white loosekurtapajamas' with my hands laced behind my head--am leaning back in a creaky old armchair surveying a desk piled high, I mean *high*, with articles, essays, short stories, fiction, poems, all sent for the literature page, all in black and white, all waiting to be read, edited and published, all for me me me, all in English English English....

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