

SHORT STORY

City Shoes in The Village - Part I

Life Incarnate

ADOITO HAROON

I wonder what happens to
Plum trees in winter.
Do they stop their argument
To take it back up in summer?

Every life has its season...
I count the lives I lived
Within the life I live

I have lived your Mondays,
Your Saturdays and your Sundays
Turned green, yellow and bare
Watched you worry about your weight
And your thinning hair.

And as I became you and you me
We shook old arguments to their core
To be and not to be.

After all, it is no longer an
Age Of Evolution (in its purest sense)
It is the Age of Agendas
Yours, mine and those that linger
In bedrooms, in churches, in schools
And in other instruments of partisan
conception

Can you see?
You were created to seed
Churches, schools, bedrooms
Every nook and every room
That has already been seeded
And bedded and tilled and bled a thousand
times
Before the taking of tea.

Let us return then
To our campfires
To whet our minds
For stick and stone
Are not longer
Allowed to break my bone

Let us return
To our old arguments
But this time
Shoot them up your veins, into
Your children, for I will be mine
And I will pretend that I don't live
The life you do

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MAHMUD RAHMAN

There would be no familiar faces to greet him when he arrived. But Altaf could expect the children to hear his call.

The dub-dub rhythms of the engine spread out and beckoned every boy and girl within earshot. Their short brown legs kicking up a cloud of dust, they flocked to the riverbank. They jumped up and down, their shrill voices piercing the air.

Altaf had encountered this scene a hundred times as he made his way east from Calcutta through the tangled waterways of the delta. This time his motorboat did not rush past the children. It slowed down and headed right toward them. Their jumps turned into stomps and their shouts became screams of delight. When he cut the engine, Altaf heard what they were saying.

Ingreji-sahib! Ingreji-sahib!

From the back of the boat, Shiraj chuckled, "They think you are an Englishman." Altaf smiled. Why not? These children might never have seen the English, but everyone knew they were the masters of this land. He doubted that any other motorboat had ever come into this village. No one would expect a Bengali man to bring one here. Exhausted after three days of travel, Altaf was relieved the journey was over. When he had turned off the Meghna River and entered this smaller channel, he was not sure this was the one that led to his village. He was returning after ten years.

"This is Modhupur village, isn't it?" he shouted at the children.

He speaks-in-Bangla. Not-an-Ingreji-sahib! Our-folk! One-of-us!

He repeated his question.

Yes-this-is-Modhupur. But-who-are-you? Who-do-you-want? Where-did-you-come-from?

"I belong to that house over there," he said, thrusting a finger toward the palmyra trees.

The children swiveled their necks to look. None of them were old enough to remember him. A voice made itself heard over the rest and said, *Masoom's-uncle-who-went-away-to-the-city*. It could have been the certainty in his voice slightly older than the others or they may have run out of possibilities to consider, but the boy's remark settled the debate. The children quieted down and just stared at Altaf, as if searching his face for some sign of familiarity so they could place him as part of their world.

Clutching the mooring rope in his hands, Shiraj jumped into the water and tugged the boat toward the bank. The children craned their necks to look inside the boat and resumed their inquiries. *Where-are-your-sails? How-can-it-move-without-sails? What-is-that-thing-you-call-an-engine?*

Leaning over the bow of the boat, Altaf passed his bedding and leather suitcase to Shiraj. He balanced himself on the edge of the hull, then leaped onto the bank. His eyes scanned the boat: Four years it had taken to build, and it had now brought him home. Painted blue, a sleek fourteen feet in length, the vessel had been fashioned with a few good planks along with many bits and scraps of wood. He built it in country-boat fashion, skin first, frame at the end. A cabin rose above the back of the boat. It was little more than a roof, but it shielded the engine from the rains. Then, armed with only a compass and some maps, he piloted the boat through

the crocodile-infested Shundorbon forests and found his way to Modhupur.

"Stay here," he ordered Shiraj. "Keep a careful eye on the boat."

"Just go on," Shiraj replied. "Everything will be fine. Have I let you down yet?"

Altaf nodded. At thirteen, Shiraj was already a seasoned boat boy. He had been born in a lower delta district known for sending off its young men to work on boats and ships in Bengal and across the oceans. He came to Calcutta on a cargo vessel and jumped at the chance to work for Altaf, who was then building his boat. When they embarked on this trip, Shiraj had been thrilled. His village only half a day's journey from Modhupur, he asked Altaf if they could take a side trip, even for just a day. Altaf had given him a non-committal reply.

With the children leading the way and the mid-afternoon sun shining down on them, Altaf felt like he was part of a festive procession. It was nothing like the darkness of night in which he had slipped away as a young man of eighteen. That other night he had left along this same path, but only his kid brother accompanied him then. Kamal had insisted on coming to say goodbye. They stole out of the house together after Altaf tiptoed over to their father's cashbox and lifted a hundred rupees. At the water's edge the brothers parted. Altaf boarded the boat that would carry him to the nearby riverport on the Meghna. From there he would catch the steamer to Calcutta. The last image he remembered from his village was Kamal on the riverbank, sobbing.

He asked the children when it had last rained. A week ago, they said. He looked up at the sky. Not a rain cloud in sight. A good sign. He hoped it would remain this way. Altaf surveyed the landscape around him. Everything looked as it had ten years earlier. Flat and motionless, the village slumbered. A few cows lazied in the shade of roadside trees, chewing their cud. In the distance some men labored in the fields, their faces hidden by their large bamboo hats. Altaf suddenly felt the emptiness in his belly. He had not eaten since daybreak and now his mouth watered for his mother's cooking.

Altaf was surprised by how quickly they reached the family compound. He remembered a longer distance. When he stepped inside the courtyard, he was shocked at how small it was. The house was new to him. The three-room brick house had been finished two years earlier with money he had sent home. He was disappointed to find it looking so shabby. The whitewash on the walls had grayed, streaked by rainwater stains. Some of the plaster had fallen off, leaving holes through which the brickwork gaped.

An old woman, dressed in a frayed white sari, emerged on the small verandah from inside, rubbing her eyes and complaining of the noise that had woken her up from her nap. Her eyes focused on Altaf and she bounded forward, shouting, "Altaf, you've come!" He steadied her, bent down, and touched her feet. She pulled him up and wrapped him close to her. Tears rolled down her face.

"We got your letter that you were coming, but you didn't tell us when. Your brother is off on some errand. He has so much on his hands. Here, let me take a look at you." She held him away from her and took a long gaze at her son.

"Ma," he swallowed, hard. Water rose in his eyes. "Are



artwork by th.lisa

you ill?"

"I am just tired. I get tired easily these days. But now that you're back, I shall be fine." Her face beamed as she wiped off her eyes with the end of her sari. She asked him what he wanted to eat, but he replied that he would be fine with whatever she had cooked for the day.

"Of course you would say that. You haven't changed one bit." She ordered a young girl standing nearby to start preparing a new meal for the evening. They sat on low stools on the verandah, facing each other. He gulped down the coconut water, then surprised her with the news that he had come on his own motorboat.

"Your motorboat? You own it?"

"I don't just own it, I built it." He grinned. "You must come see it."

"There will be time enough for that later." She waved her hand, her palm fluttering in that gesture that made him feel like he was twelve years old again and his mother had ignored his plea to come see one of his playthings. Perhaps she saw the cloud falling over his face, because she continued, "You were always good with your hands. I remember those toy boats and carts you would build with leaves and pieces of bamboo."

His face lit up. "That was nothing. This took a long time to put together."

"How much did it cost you?"

Altaf nearly blurted out how much money he had spent on it, but he stopped when he realized that the boat had cost almost as much as the money he had sent home to build the brick house. He quickly made up a figure. It was still a large sum, he could not conceal that.

She frowned. "What do you plan to do with the boat? Is it for business?"

"No. Not right now anyway. I go on trips on my day off from the job."

"So much money on something just for fun?" She sighed, tilting her head to one side. "Aren't you too old to be playing with boats? Shouldn't you be starting a family by now?"

Altaf remained silent. He grabbed a machete lying

near him and split open the coconut. Slicing a sliver off the green skin, he used it as a spoon to eat the soft meat. "This is delicious. They don't taste the same in Calcutta."

"Of course not. How many days are you staying?"

"I can only stay for two weeks. My vacation is three weeks long, but the journey back and forth takes a week."

"You don't come for all these years, and you only give us two weeks? You could have asked for a full month's vacation." She, with some effort, rose to her feet.

Altaf wished she had asked him to stay longer. He did not remember her to be so accepting of his

ways. Had she given up on him as lost for good? The truth was, he did have a month's vacation, but he had already used up a couple of days before the trip and he wanted to keep a few days in reserve in case something went wrong. There was also Shiraj's request to consider. He would probably stay an extra day or two, but he wanted to make sure he felt comfortable before he offered those days to his family.

He excused himself and went to wash. Her response to his boat dismayed him. So much money just for fun, she had asked, appearing to encircle that last word, fun, with scorn. But should he have expected otherwise? Her life was one of duty, her concerns practical, focused on family and household, and her pleasures mostly sensory, and that too, coming in ever tinier portions. He was now asking her to accept a concept of leisure which belonged more to the English colonials or the Bengali aristocracy, people who inhabited the far reaches of her universe. How could she know the pleasure he enjoyed by owning a boat of his own, one that allowed him relief from his paper-shuffling job? How could he explain to her that he needed this boat to feel less lost in the city? His boat transported him out of Calcutta to the vicinity of villages that had the scents and vistas of home. It gave him pleasure to know that these waters and the rivers near Modhupur both originated in the same streams coming down from the Himalayas. If he told her such a story, she would ask him to simply move back home or make more frequent visits.

His brother would surely understand.

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TRAVEL WRITING

"Battuta was here"

SHAHIDUL ALAM

Shams al-Din Abu Abdallah Muhammad ibn Abdallah ibn Muhammad ibn Ibrahim ibn Yusuf al-Lawati al-Tanji Ibn Battuta was more commonly known as Ibn Battuta. Born into a family of Islamic judges in the Moroccan town of Tangier, he developed a thirst for travel after going to Makkah on pilgrimage in 1325 at the age of 21. He travelled extensively, going to Anatolia, East Africa, Central Asia, China, up the Volga, down the Niger, even in the tiny Indian Ocean sultanate of the Maldives. He kept meticulous records of what he saw, what he heard and the people he met. 29 years later, he went back home and wrote about his experiences with the help of Ibn Juzayr, a young scholar. He was little known when he died in 1368 as his *rihlah* was not respected as a scholarly piece of work. The work is now seen to be one of the finest travelogues ever written.

He was the greatest gossip columnist of them all. But Ibn Battuta's stories were not restricted to the salacious titbits of scandal in court. They dealt often with the complexities of governance, the battle strategies of the monarchs and his respect for the strong women rulers he had come across. While this wandering minstrel had traversed the entire Islamic world, it was in India that he set roots, at least as much as a traveller ever does. A fifth of his epic travelogue dealt with Delhi. "On the day of the new moon of the holy month of Muharram, the first day of the year 734, we came to the river of Sind." India was on the other side. In Delhi he was welcomed by the Sultan, who symbolically offered him the city, and at a more tangible level, a salary of 12,000 dinars.

Professor Narayanji Gupta was a Bangali, and after instructing me to help her student Anita get a visa to Bangladesh, she proceeded to drag us both off to lunch. Over bhelpuris she provided a string of names, rang people and gave me insider tips. S. K. Bali was the archaeologist I

was to meet. Ranji was the world expert on Tugluqabad. Roshan would know good vantage points for photography. Having decided I simply did not have the competence to navigate my way round Delhi, let alone discover traces of a man based on a seven-hundred-year-old document, she charged the hapless student with being my chaperon for the rest of the day.

Anita was non-fussy, interested and sensible. She started by making sure we had umbrellas. Then we planned our journey. Having the luxury of a local guide, I decided to try the most difficult to find places first. Finding Qutb Minar would hardly be a problem. The professor had given directions for Vijay Mandal. She knew the back route. It was lucky we had her directions. Though the Vijay Mandal must have been the most imposing structure in the neighbourhood when it had been built, seven hundred years later, the grounds it overlooked had been taken over by developers and it was only when we stumbled on the inevitable cricket pitch that we found the remains of the Octagonal citadel and the vestiges of the hall of the thousand columns.

The cave Battuta had withdrawn into, having left his worldly belongings to become a follower of an ascetic, was going to be much more difficult. Luckily, the professor had arranged for a more knowledgeable person to verify my map. A wall was in a wrong place, the distances were way off, and the position of the railway line had to be changed. Our guide redrew the map and told us where to look, but even he hadn't heard of this unmarked cave where Battuta had spent five months. This was genuine Sherlock Holmes stuff.

Humayun's Tomb was easy enough to find, but the real journey started afterwards. A seven-hundred-year-old unmarked grotto where an unknown ascetic had lived didn't appear in any tour book and none of the well-versed guides had ever heard of such a place. But we did have a rectified map, and we managed to find the strip

in between the police station and the electricity depot, where our path was to begin. Luckily, we were befriended by the khadem of a nearby mazar. Walking through the bramble, looking for more familiar sites for orientation, we came across two newly whitewashed graves. The dried well at the back was also of great significance, the caretaker assured me. I was more interested in the steps leading down to a chamber beneath the stairs, nearly obliterated by repeated coats of paint, was the same as in the Qutb. The oral history that the caretakers had preserved gave an accurate enough description of the holy



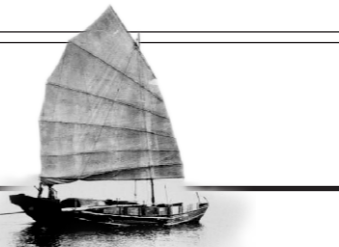
man Battuta had become a follower of. The architecture, even after seven hundred years, was as the traveller had described. We had found the Battuta's lair.

Anita needed to get on with her work. Having made sure I knew enough to get back home, she left me with my new discoveries. I decided to ride my luck. Battuta had described his home as having been near the Palam Gate from where he regularly would go to the mosque. Palam was near the airport, and no one had ever heard of Palam Gate. Perhaps this was the beginning of the road to Palam. We needed something that would make the jigsaw fit. If indeed he had walked into the Qutb from the south entrance, into the Quwwat

al-Islam mosque, then his home must have been somewhere near the Mehroli bus stand. Not quite the beginning of the road to Palam, but near enough to attribute the difference to some historical artefact.

The road to Palam went parallel to the old city wall. I walked past the makeshift tents of the poor and the barren meadow to climb the stony structure. The open landscape was a surprise. I could see Qutb far in the horizon, a lonely blimp against the Delhi outline. I would need to get a better view. Fat Indians with caddies in tow strolled over the gentle dunes. The clubhouse at the edge of the green had large glass walls. From here the tent dwellers could look without touching. Theirs were the green shrubs by the highway. Open to the sky. No walls, no rules. No water, no lights. "A loo with a view."

It was inconsiderate of the traveller not to have provided post codes in his 700-year-old document. While some of the old monuments remained, much of the rest of Delhi had changed beyond recognition. Trying to retrace the steps of this intrepid explorer was not going to be easy. He was an excellent chronicler, though, and the details that he had penned gave the wispy hints I could still use as a clue. The shopkeepers pointed to the dusty staircase at the back of Mehroli bus stand. This dingy pathway in between the sweetmeat shop and the butcher's had obviously not been used for years. My darkroom training hadn't prepared me to for this ascent. I could sense the dust from the soft, furry fluff underneath my footsteps. I could smell the soot swirling up as I stamped on the thick carpet of sediment as I warily climbed up. The dust might not have been 700 years old, but it had certainly collected over a very long time. There was light at the very top, though, and when I did arrive at the rooftop I was dazzled by even the hazy Delhi winter light. Memories of bunking classes to go to the matinee at Balaka cinema hall flashed through my



mind. We would stand blinking for a few minutes before New Market was visible across the road. When my eyes settled here, the sight was somewhat more majestic. Across the rooftops, above the dense patch of trees and the decaying ruins of monuments, rose the splendid Qutb Minar. Delhi on Viagra.

Down below was Mehroli bus stand. The narrow streets of Mehroli, the busy market place, the hawkers on the footpaths uncharacteristically making way for the Tata buses that burst into the main road expecting the traffic and pedestrians to melt away on their arrival. Behind the stands was an old housing estate. I walked past the church with the Arabic inscriptions, past the houses with the sewing machines, and a small outdoor garage. A cybercafe offered Internet connectivity for 15 Rupees an hour. A cow stood in the middle of the road, and people walked round. The narrow path at the back of the church sloped up towards the hillock in the royal park. Well before I reached the rose garden a couple huddled around a fire made out of old cartons. The green spotlights on the Qutb and the warm light of the fire meeting in the foggy darkness of the cold Delhi air. It was through here that Battuta would have made his way to the Quwwat al-Islam mosque. The next day, I sought out the Southern Entrance to the mosque. Light streamed into the portal through the honeycomb-like lattice of stone screens. The stone bench along the perimeter of the portal was pitted but smooth. Burnished by centuries of backsides that must have rested on this bench, it was soft to the touch despite the scarred stone.

As I rested against the cool walls, I could imagine one famous posterior belonging to a traveller who had penned his thoughts seven hundred years ago. Missing was the graffiti, "Battuta was here!"

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Book Review

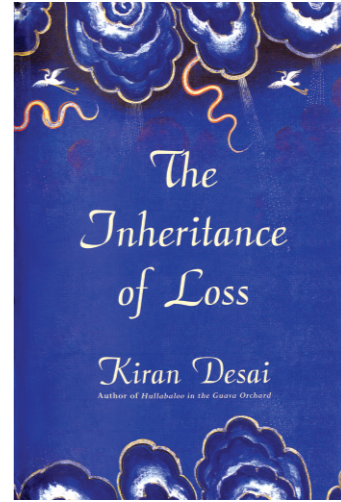
Limiting the sense of self

FARAH AMEEN

The Inheritance of Loss by Kiran Desai; Delhi: Penguin-Viking; 2006; pp. 324; Rs. 495.

Circumstances always seem to shatter those who have the least to lose. *The Inheritance of Loss*, Kiran Desai's second novel, is set in Kalimpong, at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga in the Himalayas. At Cho Oyu, a once-beautiful residence, we meet a Cambridge-educated retired judge, Jemubhai Patel, who only loves his dog. Although he takes in his orphaned granddaughter, Sai, presumably for his own redemption, it's the family cook who looks after her. In turn, the cook faces his demons, worrying about his son, Biju, who's seeking a better life in New York City. In subtle ways, the story draws parallels between Sai and Biju, highlighting the vast chasm in their backgrounds while alluding to the emotional paucity in both their lives.

This is post-colonial India, where, at school, Sai is taught that "cake was better than laddoos, fork spoon knife better than hands, sipping the blood of Christ... was more civilized than garlanding a phallic symbol with marigolds. English was better than Hindi." The British influence is rampant among the upper class—they prefer all things English, especially *angrezi khana*, and often scorn their less-Anglicized countrymen. The judge is a perfect specimen of this breed, even though he never was really respected by the British: as a student in England, "for entire days nobody spoke to him at all, his throat jammed with words unuttered... elderly ladies, even the hapless—blue-haired, spotted, faces like collapsing pumpkins—moved over when he sat next to them in the bus, so he knew that whatever they had, they were secure in their conviction that it wasn't remotely as bad as what he had." Sadly, once he returns home, the judge treats his own wife with equal contempt. Her refusal to learn English and to



stop typical Indian rituals, like oiling her hair, enrage him—he ignores and abuses her, crushing her spirit.

If Sai were solely exposed to her grandfather's prejudices and bitterness as well as the cook's embellishment of his master's past, she wouldn't have much personal growth. But Lola and Noni—old, Anglophile sisters who live in a cottage among their Marks and Spencers underwear and talk of fresh-strawberries-and-cream—provide Sai with a real family. It includes Father Booty, a Swiss priest obsessed with making cheese, and Uncle Potty, who spends his time drinking between drinks. They teach Sai about life, the Beatles, classic books, English food... the world. And for love, there's her tutor, Gyan, a Nepalese student who gradually romances her during lessons.

However, their comfortable existence cannot last in a changing world where people question social and economic disparities. After an Indo-Nepali uprising in the mountain area, the balance shifts and Kalimpong's residents are faced with surrendering to the insurgents or fearing for their lives.

The most empathetic character here is Biju, the quintessential Third World citizen seeking the American opportunity. While the cook continues to exaggerate his son's career, Biju barely survives, bouncing from

one dead-end restaurant job to the next. Along with other illegal immigrants, he lives in the worst possible conditions, first in a run-down basement in Harlem and then in the kitchen of a café run by Indians who thrive on exploiting their cheap South Asian labor. Often, Biju's nighttime companions are rats that thrive in spaces where all health codes are violated.

Only the dream of a Green card—which is actually pink—makes this soul-sapping existence worthwhile for people like him. Miserable and home-sick, Biju begins viewing his life of poverty back home in the village with his grandmother in a different, better light. His suffering is heightened by the biting East Coast winters, which he tries hard to endure: "Biju put a padding of newspapers down his shirt... sometimes he took the scallion pancakes and inserted them below the paper, inspired by the memory of an uncle, who used to go out... in winter with his lunchtime *parathas* down his vest. But even this did not seem to help, and once, on his bicycle, he began to weep from the cold, and the weeping unpicked a deeper vein of grief—such a terrible groan issued from between the whimpers that he was shocked his sadness was so profound." For simple Biju has never had a deep thought.

Desai skillfully weaves her tale, shifting from the present to the past as well as between continents without losing the thread. She explores how colonialism, the caste system, racism and globalism affect all inheritors of loss on so many levels—limiting their dreams, humanity and, most important, their sense of self.

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