

SHORT STORY

Changes

FARAH AMEEN

“Why do you want to have a career?” Lamia’s father asked, his words muffled by the blue golf shirt he was pulling over his head. He placed it on the green bedspread to air out and turned to his daughter.

“Are you joking, Abbu?” Lamia’s nostrils flared. “You encouraged me to get my master’s, think about a career, do the things that you and Amma didn’t do. Now you want me to marry someone I don’t know, because khala told Amma that he’s a ‘good boy from a good family!’ That’s ridiculous.” Taking off her flip-flops, she paced the cool mosaic floor. “You and Amma had an arranged marriage, but it was understood that I wouldn’t. Haven’t you noticed women are choosing their husbands these days?”

She looked out the window of her parents’ bedroom. When they’d moved onto the 10th floor of the building, Kazi Nazrul Avenue had been quiet, but the city had grown since then. The midday traffic was slow and loud: honking cars, bus drivers shouting at zig-zagging pedestrians, rickshawallahs trying to weave in and out of the crowd, almost dislodging their customers. As usual, motorists were ignoring the traffic police, who were trying their best to prevent accidents. Everything was normal outside, but Lamia’s world had changed in a few minutes.

Although the fan was on full speed, Lamia’s cotton T-shirt was damp. Her father had moved to his favorite chair by the open door to the balcony and was fanning himself with The Daily Star. A cooling cup of tea sat on a tray by his feet, with a soggy Nice biscuit on the matching saucer with the green trim. Dipping another biscuit in the lukewarm tea, he ignored Lamia’s angry eyes. If only he hadn’t refused Obaid’s offer to drink a few beers after their game.

“Yes, I want you to have the advantages we didn’t,” he sighed. “But I also want you to settle down with a man who’ll be good to you. Why are you so opposed to meeting someone and maybe marrying him if you like him?”

Lamia frowned at him. To her, he seemed older and more tired since they’d moved to Bangladesh from India two years before, although he’d retired and had a relaxed schedule: golf three days a week, followed by beer-drinking sessions; Friday afternoon bridge at a friend’s house; a few rounds of rummy on week nights. But there was something about Dhaka life—family obligations, nonstop dinners, weddings and funerals—that had this negative effect on him.

“That’s not the point, Abbu. Times have changed. Look at my cousins on your side—they all chose their husbands. Why can’t I?”

“Yes, but you left out one important detail: Not all of them are happy. What about your cousins on Amma’s side? They had arranged marriages. Are they complaining?”

“But do they have careers? If anything happens to their husbands tomorrow, will they be able to support their kids? I’m sure they’re relatively content, but that’s their dream. You weren’t like this in India. What happened to you?”

Now his nostrils flared. She had inherited his biting tongue and hot temper, but she was soft, too, like her mother. Which was why he’d agreed to the matchmaking efforts. He’d even whittled down the list to the least objectionable candidate. But Lamia had hit a nerve—he’d started worrying about how others perceived his ‘wild, spinster’ daughter. “Yes, I feel compelled to conform to an extent.” He continued, “You don’t, and you have opinions that, much to your mother’s dismay, you’re not afraid to voice. People talk about you. It upsets your Amma.”

“I should marry someone just so people stop gossiping?” Lamia’s brown eyes started tearing. “By the way, you can be sure that this guy’s parents control him if he’s letting them pick his wife. If I were married now, I’d lose a part of myself. I want to make something of my life, Abbu. You let bhैया go to the U.S. Why not me?”

“That’s it,” he said. “You’ll come with us to meet him. Aar torko



artwork by L. H. Isha

chai na.” With that he headed to the bathroom, the only place he could read his paper in peace.

“I hate you,” Lamia muttered. Flouncing out of the room, she almost mowed down her mother who was walking in through the front door carrying a watermelon that matched the color of her sari. Their driver, Diwakar, followed, laden with bags, a bunch of tiny yellow bananas almost falling out of his left hand. Wet yellow stains were spreading under the arms of his white shirt. “Lamia, who are you shouting at?”

“He’s gone crazy Amma,” Lamia said, waiting for Diwakar to leave.

“Oh, Abbu’s back? Diwakar, you don’t have to pick up shaheb. Get the other bags from the car, then ask Khushi to give you lunch. We’re not going anywhere. Unless you have plans, Lamia?”

“I don’t know. I may have to leave this place forever.” Turning to Diwakar, who had a curious, almost amused expression on his dark little face, Lamia said, “Diwakar, I’m not going anywhere now.”

He’d barely left when she started: “Don’t act innocent, Amma. You put Abbu up to this. How dare he ask why I want a career? I expected something like that from you. Why did he encourage me to get into Dhaka University? Was he trying to keep me occupied while you conspired with khala?”

“Lamia, we’re not forcing you to do anything. Yes, Choto Apa knows and likes this boy’s family,” her mother said. “Saurav, the younger son, studied medicine in America—he has a Green Card and wants to take his wife back with him. He’s smart and handsome, and he’s not interested in a traditional girl. That’s why we thought it would be good for you to meet. Why can’t you do this for us?”

“Is my future about you and Abbu? You don’t parade girls in front of your darling sons when they’re home. Why me? Because your narrow-minded family thinks it’s time for some random man to tame me?”

“There’s no need to insult my family. What did they ever do to you? Is it wrong if we want you to be happy?”

“I’m not going to be side-tracked by your drama!” Lamia stormed into her bedroom, slamming the door. Loud music blared for hours, then there was total silence.

“I don’t know what to do, Zarina,” Lamia said. Diwakar had driven her over the next day. Her cousin had just come home for the summer from Bangalore, where she was getting a B.A. in psychology.

“What’s wrong?” Zarina asked, brushing her chin-length bob and yawning. She had just pulled on shorts and an oversized white T-shirt that had “Too Many Men, Too Little Time” emblazoned across in purple.

“How dare Abbu suggest such a barbaric thing?” Lamia kept tying her long hair into a knot, then untying it, interspersing the routine with vigorous nail biting.

“Oh, it’s true? Amma said your khala ‘recommended’ some guy for you,” Zarina giggled, stopping when she saw her cousin’s expression. “Lamia, calm down. You don’t have to agree to anything.” She yawned again. “I’m exhausted. I finished my last exam yesterday and almost missed my plane. It’s good to be home. I’m going to sleep for a month!”

“Sorry I barged in like this, Zarina.” Lamia was sprawled on the ground breadspread, her head propped up by mirrorwork cushions. “I love this room,” she said, staring at the photograph-plastered wall. “I miss coming here when you’re away.”

“Listen, I’m serious. I was dragged to see many ‘eligibles’ last year. I finally had to tell my parents about Nimal. Just go along, don’t really respond to any questions and, most important, don’t be shy—eat and drink to your heart’s content. Do everything we’re told not to do. Don’t worry, Lamia—your parents aren’t going to marry you off in a flash.”

“When we moved here everything changed, Zarina. The pressure of living here had a strange effect on them, especially Abbu. Why do they suddenly want me to become traditional? Why educate me, and then marry me off? What chance do I have of growing, of figuring out who I am, if I’m busy producing some stranger’s brats every year?”

They talked until lunchtime, when Zarina’s mother decided it was time for her to visit her grandparents. They dropped Lamia off on the way. She avoided her parents for the rest of the day, mentally strategizing for the ordeal ahead. Armed with Zarina’s advice, she felt less nervous.

The morning of “the showing” (as she called it), Lamia dressed in a plain white shalwar and pink cotton kurta. When she came home from university, she tortured her mother. “Wait and see what happens this evening,” Lamia said menacingly. Her nervous mother suggested canceling, but it was too late. Feeling a bit guilty, Lamia reassured her: “Don’t worry, Amma, I won’t throw a tantrum or run into the room naked, but what if I’m suddenly cross-eyed? Will they want a deformed bride?”

Her mother sighed. “Lamia, Abbu and I had an arranged marriage—we’ve been together 30 years. You think I was weak to

agree, but those were different times. I trusted my family’s judgment. Abbu is a wonderful man and a great father. You may be just as lucky.” Lamia left the table without eating.

Around 6 p.m. they started out for Choto Khala’s. Refusing to wear a heavy sari or dressy shalwar-kameez, along with gold jewelry, Lamia ironed the outfit she’d worn earlier. However, her vanity got the better of her—she blow-dried her hair and applied light makeup.

When they arrived at the house, Lamia barely spoke to her khala. She also refused to cover her head and help serve the tea. Ignoring her cousins’ discreet requests to “come to the other room,” Lamia strolled into the living area with her parents. She sat in a chair by the door, trying not to fidget as she felt five pairs of eyes on her. They belonged to the Green Card-holding wonder, Saurav; his chubby teenage sister; loud, older brother; and beaming parents. Lamia greeted everyone politely and looked boldly at the “good boy from a good family.” He’d certainly never skipped a meal—the buttons on his off-white silk shirt were straining across his potbelly. To top it off, dark pants were belted high on his waist to camouflage his portly frame, but it had the opposite effect. He had pale skin, dark curly hair and a pleasant enough round face. The adjectives were running wild in Lamia’s head, making her giggle. In turn, her father’s eyes had a very sobering effect.

Resigned to the situation, she decided to enjoy herself, especially after observing her relatives’ fake smiles. When her khala attempted to seat her next to Silk Shirt, Lamia demurely refused. Unfortunately, a game of musical chairs took place, and she found herself flanked by Saurav’s female relatives. Out of sheer politeness she had to converse with them, which she did, in monosyllables. All the while, she ate her fill of *firni*, *samosas* and biscuits, making sure she drank plenty of Coke in between bites. But Zarina’s strategy wasn’t having a negative impact. Green Card’s family didn’t seem to mind Lamia’s behavior as much as hers did. At one point, she caught Saurav’s twinkling eyes. He was taking immense pleasure in asking her questions just as she was in the middle of responding to his mother or sister. Lamia kept losing her train of thought, plus she had to shout across the large room—after all, she’d chosen the spot farthest from him.

Around 8 o’clock, the “prospective” family, looking extremely pleased, said their good-byes. Cringing inside, Lamia graciously accepted a hug from the parents and sister. “What did you think of him, Lamia?” her khala asked, trying to ease the tension.

“Am I allowed to have an opinion?” Lamia ignored her mother’s pleading eyes. “Well, he definitely needs to start exercising immediately and eat fewer burgers. And really, what was he thinking, wearing that shirt in 100-degree weather? Did you notice the sweat stains under his arms? No, you were so bowled over by his Green Card and fat family. I will never marry a man like that!” She turned to her parents. “I’m staying at Zarina’s tonight. If you’re not ready to leave, I’ll take a baby taxi.”

“We’ll drop you,” her father said. They exchanged farewells with Choto Khala’s family and climbed into the car. “I liked him, and his family seemed really nice,” Lamia’s mother said after an initial, uncomfortable silence.

“I’m not marrying that man—or his family—and the topic is not up for discussion. There will be no negotiating, no getting others to convince me! I did what you wanted and you promised you weren’t going to force me,” Lamia said angrily, trying to hide the fear she’d felt for days.

“All right, you kept your end of the bargain. We’re not going to force you to do anything.” And her father’s eyes, meeting hers in the mirror, conveyed a lot more—regret, apology, confusion.

Farah Ameen works as copy editor in New York.

Book Reviews

Freight-train sentences

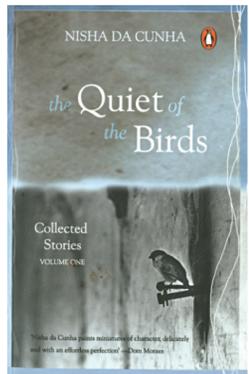
RUMANA SIDDIQUE

The Quiet of Birds by Nisha Da Cunha; Delhi: Penguin Books India; 2005; 383pp; Rs. 295

When I first settled down to read Nisha da Cunha’s collection of short stories I was lulled into a false sense of tranquility by the title *The Quiet of Birds*. Expecting to read peacefully these tales of the fragility of the human condition written with beauty and power, if the dust cover was to be believed, I was to find myself more agitated than tranquil. The first story of the collection of twenty-seven stories was titled ‘Old Cypress’ and had your run-of-the-mill plot of a middle-aged woman who suddenly finds herself abandoned. Her husband of twenty-nine years leaves her for a much younger woman, in fact even a year younger than her son. The emotional tale that ensued was touching through a trifle predictable. However, what bothered me was not the plot but a glaring typo that suddenly popped up, “I fell very hungry—Let’s eat.” (p.40) While I forgave the writer her one oversight, when these oversights became a regular feature and even in the sixteenth and seventeenth stories I found myself expected to forgive sentences like “But she was loth to lose him again...” (p.255) and “...biscuits on the to shelf and the milk is in the fridge” (p.284) I was utterly perturbed. Faced with prose like this any English teacher instinctively switches from casual reader mode to critical examiner of prose style mode and that, alas, is the end of all enjoyment!

Da Cunha undoubtedly weaves very credible tales of female lives, and manages to reveal how often the inner lives and feelings of women are very different from the face they reveal to the world. Her stories are very perceptive of the complex emotional needs of women. The story ‘A Nest of Old Feathers’ is a tale about an

interesting relationship that develops between a middle-aged woman and a rather eccentric, old gentleman based on their common passion for books, the title story narrates the anxiety and inability of a young woman to fit into the compromise of marriage in an urban setting so removed from the idyllic village where she roamed freely with her father, while the story ‘The Permanence of Grief’ weaves a tale about a very thought-provoking relationship between a brother and sister. There is a definite patterning of Cunha’s exposition of womanhood. Her stories explore all the roles of a woman, from the daughter with



an Electra complex to the matriarchal mother of the *Sons and Lovers* category who turns her son into an emotional cripple. But each tale is told from an emotional angle, Cunha tries to articulate the unique set of fears, apprehensions, dreams and disappointments at every stage of womanhood.

However, perhaps the weight of the emotional burden that the writer aspires her prose to carry proves to be disruptive, for her prose wavers between verbosity and disjointedness. I cannot resist giving an example of a freight-train sentence that left me confused and exhausted: “There

was dust on the mirror and cobwebs and powder, and old bills, and a lovely bit of blue and white pottery, somebody must have brought back for the old man, lovingly wrapped in soft underwear, against jolts and knocks and the myriad horrors of travel, and now she thought here is that bit of ceramic which has travelled over land and sea and time for a young man who must have held it warmly and now an old man who can hardly see it anymore lets it lie, if he remembers it at all, wrapped in a thick cobweb of dust on a dressing table between gooey, oozy, cough drops and pink Cremaffin also oozing out of a rusty top, oh, time is awful, time is sad, and we don’t learn anything.” In the other extreme Cunha almost obsessively punctuates both her narrative and dialogues with dashes that are intended, I can only assume, to portray fragmented emotional states but their excessive use often leave the reader hanging too; for example:

“They’d see to it that Safia pulled through—I mean the other time...”

“I wish that those three things had helped her when she—you know—later—”

“Yes, well, but the later time—was quite impossible in every way—the conflict—she was just torn—torn apart...” (p.227)

I have to admit that in the course of reading the book I found myself repeatedly tempted to flip back to the publication details to assure myself that a novel that has so obviously been poorly edited and reviewed before publication was actually published under the hitherto prestigious Penguin Original Books Series. My final statement would be that the slipping of standards that this book is a witness to is disquieting.

Rumana Siddique teaches English at Dhaka University.

Guerilla of Prose Fiction

NUZHAT AMIN MANNAN

The Women in Cages -- Collected Stories by Vilas Sarang; Delhi: Penguin India; 2006; 283 pp.; Rs. 275.

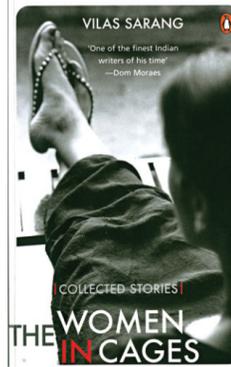
I was home on my summer vacation and the editor of Star Literature generously had given me more time than is usual to finish a review. What could be better! I leisurely went through the first two stories: ‘An Evening at the Beach’ and ‘An Afternoon among the Rocks’ were grouped together as ‘Love in Mumbai I and II’. There was a story about Bajrang who leaves his girlfriend on the beach suddenly to cross over the wall to attend his friend’s mother’s funeral. Bajrang appears again in the next story watching his girlfriend forced to walk away with a voyeur/smuggler who had been previously been watching the pair make out on the rocks. There was a longish story about a man who is a part-time researcher on Kalidas. The man has a day job, which is to oversee beggars his patron keeps. He develops a musk-like but painful umbilical abscess. As if this is not enough, there is a sub-plot of a crow. The scavenger bird brings one of the beggars a piece of human flesh every day to cook and they share the meal together. There is a story of a child who insists on believing she is dead. There is a story of Ganesh, the god who dismounts a cart and leaves town. After making through the first six stories under ‘The City by the Sea,’ which is the first section of the book and make no mistake from the description above, these are not to be dismissed as unsuccessful stories... I stopped reading because— I figured that I had got in essence what I believed the author was offering us: solitary people falling through cracks of a casual but unreal world and good as that was—the narratives were just too hyper for me.

Then one muggy midday,

stuck in very slow moving traffic, in the midst of hooting cars, frenzied rickshaw bells and a mammoth four-wheeler playing Hindi songs in deafening decibels—the crow, musk, Ganesh and all began to make sense. I not only read the rest of the book but I concluded I liked ‘The Women in Cages,’ next to ‘Odour of Immortality’... But hang on, wasn’t *The Women in Cages* the title of the collection! The reason why this was news to me was because I had covered Vilas Sarang’s book with thick brown paper, primarily to prevent the cover turning grubby in my hands by the humid summer weather in Dhaka. But also to prevent myself falling in the thrall of the image and the praises studded on the covers. My brown paper had apparently done its job so well that I was able to read the stories knowing little else than that these were written by a Marathi writer who studied at Indiana University and worked in Basra and Kuwait teaching English Literature. By the time I had finished reading about a sailor called Bombli’s love affair with a whale-shark, I was hooked, to use the cliché.

Sarang is widely published. The queer plots must only partly provide the texture his works achieve. He thrives on pursuing intensity and clarity, but also likes to act like a frisky trickster. His stories deliberately show an *Alice in Wonderland* twitch for the uncanny providing a darkly innocent and affably morbid tone to these stories where spiders are crushed in abandon, rabbits are gorged by mosquitoes, lizards are bludgeoned with brooms, vultures cry against discrimination and parrots cry ‘history is on our side.’

The stories of the fourth section ‘The Shadow of the Gulag’ appropriately belong to a *Twilight Zone* cum *X File* genre— one created by dictatorships, censorship, authoritarianism, repressions and so forth. ‘The Return,’ ‘The Terrorist,’ ‘Kalluri’s



Escape’ are finely executed stories which “refract” the author’s ‘Iraqi experience,’ India’s 1975 Emergency, and the “growing realities of what has been called the Third World” (Preface by author). Sarang’s “third world realities” will trouble many. But then often writers write about conditions back home based on artistic rather than contingent realities.

“The Visions of Nirvana,” the last section, uses a ninth-century song as epigram and that really says it all: “So the fair tree of the Void also lacks compassion/Without shoots or flowers or foliage/And whosoever imagines them there, falls down /For branches there are none.” These narratives are testimonies of sickness, the ‘odour of contrition,’ these are a hopeless ‘gesture of benediction’ over a ‘burnt-out city.’

‘Notes by a Working Writer’ appended at the end of the collection were a bonus. Sarang has a thing about categories and titles. This section is also divided into three parts, ‘The Making of the Text,’ ‘The Long and the Short,’ and ‘The Short Story Writer as a Guerilla.’ In ‘The Making of the Text’ he explains how most of the stories were in Marathi and “subsequently done in English.” The ‘stylistic recasting’ he did means that the stories were, as far as he is concerned, written in English rather than translated from Marathi. So the stories are

Indian in spirit but English in diction and rhythm, partly corroborating Sarang’s belief that “English thankfully, has now a more distinct Indian identity, which it did not in the 1970s.”

In the second part of the Notes, Sarang says that the Indian languages have always taken short stories seriously but in English, the form is “scarcely more than marginal.” That awes him since he believes that what cinches the superiority of short fiction against the novel form is its intensity and concentration on a singular vision. It is not hard to figure out that Sarang is partial to the short story form for he says, strange as it sounds, that the “short story writer can legitimately aspire to write the perfect story. No novelist hopes

to write the perfect novel.” Even if one were to differ here, I agree with the point Sarang makes later reminding us of Alain Nadaud’s declaration ‘*La Nouvelle, c’est la guerilla*’. Such guerillas would be masters like Poe and Kafka and Borges who “go beyond the limits, to find chinks in the wall, to discover virgin modes of synopsis.” Even though Sarang means that “the Indian English short story has been unadventurous and that we do not get unitive collections which can serve as primers for budding writers,” *The Women in Cages* does at least reward readers with some very intense guerilla grit.

Nuzhat Amin Mannan teaches English at Dhaka University.

Memory Game

PINAKI THAKUR (translated by Farhad Ahmed)



A dark *Chaitra* day. Boishakh’s rainstorm. Sitting down with snakes and ladders. What, no dice? Very well, then, a memory game! *Chaitra* month. Closed doors. Playing literary games. Win or lose, in the afternoon. “Mondaron?” ‘Bankim!’ “Bhagalpur?” That’s easy, volume one *Srikanth!*

Sixes and sevens, the storm knocking on the door “That’s some nailpolish, blue! Pretty feet, too!” All parts dissolve to next scene. Amazing!

A dark *Chaitra* day. Doors shut in this neighbourhood... A literary memory game. Art wants them both.

Farhad Ahmed is a freelance writer/ translator.

NOTICE

Due to unavoidable reasons the literature page will not be published on the following dates: July 22, 29, and August 5. It will resume publication from August 12.

—Literary Editor