

SHORT STORY

Killing The Water -Part I

MAHMUD RAHMAN

When I fly into Dhaka -- if I'm lucky enough to arrive during the day -- I see beneath me the delta landscape of Bangladesh, familiar patches of green fields crisscrossed by a maze of gray-blue rivers. More water than land.

Leaving the airport, I make my way to a neighborhood in the center of the city. Two major roads intersect here, both clogged with cars, buses, and at least three kinds of auto rickshaws. Noxious fumes from gasoline and diesel engines choke the air. Rickshaws pedaled by thin, sinewy legs occupy every inch of space remaining between the motorized vehicles. At least on one of the two roads. On the other, they have been banned. Concrete buildings, four, five and even more stories high, line the streets, with honeycombs of shops selling everything from car parts and building materials to medicine and baked goods.

Standing on the pavement, I cough and rub my eyes. Soon they burn red. Pedestrians around me breathe through handkerchiefs, and a few even wear gas masks.

How did it come to this?

I was born here. But when I was a child, just a few years after the British gave up their Indian Raj, this was a neighborhood where each day the city and village met to arm-wrestle.

Mymensingh Road, the one coming from the airport -- today called Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue -- was already a paved road, but it was in contrast to today's traffic-congested arteries a mere capillary. You would see motor vehicles less often than horse carriages, bullock carts, and men straining at push carts. Even an occasional elephant. Just past where the Sonargaon Hotel sits today, a railway line crossed the road, steam engines chugging freight or passengers past the homes of a community of potters and a cremation ghat. The ashes of the dead were dispersed into the canal that lapped the side of the road. During the months when the water swelled, country boats moored here, laden with firewood or bamboo.

The city had put down its claws here in the form of several palatial residences. Most belonged to families who drew their wealth from huge landed estates around and beyond the city. At least one was occupied by a British shipping company. Such houses hid from our curious eyes behind thick walls, iron gates, and hostile sentries.

Into this terrain came my father. He carried neither zamindari pedigree nor a position in a colonial enterprise. As the Second World War had come to a close, he abandoned his job pushing papers for the bureaucracy in Calcutta and settled in Dhaka. He grabbed up some low-lying land and a used Ford Jeep left behind by American soldiers who closed up shop with the victory over the Japanese.



artwork by sabyasachi hazra

"Water," my mother used to say, "is the source of all life." All life? Wasn't this something of a heresy, since in the tradition into which I was born, Allah was the source of all life and it was out of clay that we humans had been shaped? Where did water come into the picture? Perhaps my mother was given to making such an unorthodox claim because of the two years she had spent in medical college.

"Why only two years?" I asked when I became old enough to wonder about such matters.

"She had to take care of you children," my father replied. By then there were already the four of us.

"Did I ask to bear these children, year after year?" my mother threw back.

Silence from my father.

"Did you give me support? Did I have any time to study?"
"I gave you a ride back and forth each day."
"Yes, you drove to the college. But not for my benefit. You went to flirt with the nurses and show off your Jeep."
"Well, you're the one who finally decided to drop out."
"What choice did I have? How could I even show my face there after the way you were carrying on?"

My mother had been born into a city household and she advocated English-style table manners, an English-medium education, and the wonders of modern medicine. But when we had stomach aches as children, she was just as likely to boil us some nasty-tasting padra pata from a bush in the yard as to fetch a Sulphaguandine tablet from the nearby Azad Pharmacy.

She was fond of quoting to us little nuggets of information she had picked up in college. "Don't forget that four-fifths of our bodies are made of water."

"What about the other fifth?" we asked.
She furrowed her forehead and we could almost see the machinery moving around inside her head, then coming to a complete halt. She sighed and replied, "You'll learn that in school. Make sure you pay attention."

My father had been born in the village. When my mother declared that water was the source of all life, we often heard him mutter something under his breath. It sounded like, "If you really want to know, water is more the source of death than life." His home village had been on the banks of the Jamuna River. When he was growing up there, nearly every year he lost someone among his kinfolk. One time it would be the river overflowing its banks and washing an uncle's entire family away. Another time it was a cousin drowning when a boat capsized in the middle of a ferocious storm.

Alas, he could not escape the dangers of the water even in his new city settlement. On the land he had purchased, he built a little, three-room wooden cottage. Each year during the monsoons, water rose above the cement floor. He would stay up watching for snakes that sought refuge in the dry rafters of the house.

Besides the serpents, my father hated the monkeys that came to raid his fruit trees. In his childhood, a monkey had bitten off the chin of a younger brother. Now a monkey farm moved in next door. They shipped monkeys to Europe and the U.S. for medical research, their signboard carrying the logo of a monkey riding a Sputnik to the moon. The monkey farm kept the animals under huge wire nets, but once in a while some of the monkeys, with their cleverness and determination, found a way out and came straight to our compound.

From his years in Calcutta, my father had brought back a 22-caliber

Remington Model 12, and with this rifle in hand he killed quite a few cobras, squirrels, and an occasional monkey. He fancied himself as the guardian of the urban frontier against the stubbornness of the village and jungle. Even the neighbors sought him out when they found a deadly snake. Killing a predator gave him a rare satisfaction. But the monsoons reminded him each year who held the real power in this land. He craved a more decisive triumph.

When the rains came and the water lapped at the floor of his house, my father looked longingly at the road out front. At least two feet above his compound, it remained dry. As did the houses of his wealthy neighbors. His own land would have to be raised, but where was the money for such a project? He ran a small business, transporting and selling firewood with his Jeep, supplementing this income by keeping his own cows and chickens and growing vegetables. There was no surplus to buy new soil.

Development came to his aid. When the government ordered the expansion of Mymensingh Road, it took some of my father's land and gave him cash in compensation. With that money, he hired an army of day laborers who toiled for months, digging a huge pond at the back of our property. The earth they dug up raised the surrounding land above the flood level. The cottage was taken apart and reassembled on the elevated land. All this happened before I was born. The way my father told the story, he made it sound like this undertaking had only been second to the Emperor Shahjahan's campaign to build the Taj Mahal. We believed it.

The pond was stocked with fish, and a new enterprise -- farming and selling fish -- was added to the trading in firewood. Water, if it wasn't the source of life, certainly became a new source of cash. The pond so teemed with fish that you could hold your hand in the water with a bit of dough and puthi mach would flock to your grasp. This I saw with my own eyes.

Once a week, Ali Ashraf dragged the pond with a giant net. At least four or five different kinds and sizes of fish, gleaming silver in the sunlight, would be unlucky enough to get snagged. Most of the catch he sold in the market. The rest we ate at home. My mother was fond of saying, "Fish is brain food. Eat some more, it will make you intelligent. Then you can be an engineer or a doctor."

For some reason unknown to us, my father refused to eat fish. Perhaps he had eaten too much during his childhood. He may have been won over to the taste of beef and chicken during his years in Calcutta. Or maybe he was already too intelligent and didn't need the additional boost. We could believe that.

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Book Review

An overweight plodder

KAZI ANIS AHMED

Weight Loss by Upamanyu Chatterjee: New Delhi: Penguin India.

When Salman Rushdie's landmark *Midnight's Children* first appeared in 1981, no one knew if it marked the beginning of a great new era or a one-hit wonder. Given the unique success of that book, there was also the risk of a copycat epidemic. Instead, one witnessed a number of quiet and distinctive debuts: Amitabh Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry. Each of these writers has since gone on to earn their rightful accolades.

This little history comes to mind, at the prospect of reviewing Upamanyu Chatterjee's latest book, because in the eighties few debuts seemed more promising than his 1988 charmer *English, August: An Indian Story*. It recounted the tale of a disenfranchised, young, urban Indian, entering the Civil Service. Just as Indians had thrilled to *Midnight's Children* for capturing the disappointment of their passions, similarly they were delighted in *English, August* to find an irreverent confirmation of the pettiness of their world, and their times. The task sounds simple enough, but only one who has tried it knows how hard it is to conjure such magic. In *English, August*, it was done marvelously; then its author disappeared.

Chatterjee has hovered on the horizon since then with a family tale, *The Last Burden* (1993), and a return to Agastya, the hero of the first book, with *The Mammaries of the Welfare State* (2000), but sadly, neither

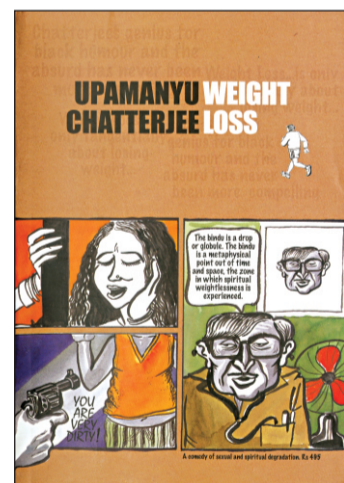
of those books approached the biting freshness of the debut. Unfortunately, Chatterjee's latest novel, *Weight Loss*, is even farther off the mark.

Weight Loss tells the story of a picaresque character, Bhola, in terms of his sexual passages. The novel is organized into ten chapters that correspond roughly to a chronological account of Bhola's eight lovers -- some unconsummated -- both men and women. Bhola dies young, having lived a life that was amoral, not entirely satisfying to himself, nor instructive to others, and worst of all for a fictional life, not entertaining for any readers.

Late in the novel, the narrator remarks that Bhola's bio read as if all the usual things had happened to him "but all at the wrong time." In truth, a great many things that happen to Bhola -- coerced sex with both members of an under-class couple; performing sexual surgery, with no medical degrees, on another man; getting shot in the park by an ex-lover, etc -- are anything but usual. Furthermore, all the things that happen to Bhola, the unusual and usual -- graduation, marriage and child -- happen to him at quite appropriate times. In view of these facts, the narrator's remark must be treated as erroneous, and symptomatic of the lack of attention that is the root cause of this book's failure.

The inattentions that cripple this novel start with the premise. At no point does it become clear why Bhola's life is worth the telling. For all his deviancy, Bhola's character remains as uninteresting as his sexual peccadilloes are pointless. Possibly the author was not

imaginatively engaged to a sufficient degree by the subject of his own choosing. Why then did he persist with it? No broad moral, psychological or social point is illustrated through Bhola's character or sexual obsessions. Even to use sex in the service of some other narrative purpose, establishing character or illuminating their circumstances, would call for more imaginative brio than what we have evidence of here.



If the author's purpose was simply to shock or entertain the reader with sexual deviancies of an otherwise uninteresting and unsympathetic character, it was probably not a purpose worth four hundred pages of labor for either author or reader. Over two centuries after Casanova or Sade, decades after Bataille and Nin -- to name only the French! -- a lot more is expected from an author, if sex is indeed to be his main subject. If the point was to expose the moral degradations of living in a repressive society, then too the job has not been done with any great merits of style or insight. For a contrasting contemporary

example from the region, readers may turn to Akhil Sharma's daring and devastating portraiture of sexual and moral turpitude in *An Obedient Father*.

The lack of imagination, or attention, is evident in the writing, both in substance and style. After all his escapades, Bhola notes that sex was not a "mystical... sacred force," but a "headache," because when "one wasn't getting it, one became irritable and snapped at everybody." Only the most juvenile sense of humor might be entertained by so banal a statement. Noticeably, the writing is least successful when dealing with Bhola's deviant excesses, or attempting a generalization. By contrast, passages treating more ordinary situations come alive, because the moments are imagined minutely. Best examples of such rare successes occur during the episode with Bhola's teen crush, Anin.

During one of their earliest encounters with a possibility of physical intimacy, seated beside a supine Anin, Bhola wonders "if the next move was to be his," since he "couldn't imagine her going any further without some encouragement from him." Later, when Anin favors Bhola's best friend, meeting them made Bhola feel "as if he had been bypassed completely by the warmth of companionship." These lines ring true with adolescent confusion and anguish, and the writing, unforced and simple, is effective.

In further evidence of similar writing, the hill town where Bhola arrives for college is described as a place where "colonial-styled bungalows

speak out like sated royalty amidst terraced field and wooded incline." Sadly, such focused, clean writing comprises the leaner portion of the book. Too much of it is stuffed with sentences that feel forced and clunky. There is an overuse of Latinate words that does not feel like a deliberate or successful choice, but a default setting for the narrator, deriving perhaps from an overexposure to legalistic or bureaucratic language. There is no real sense of a voice or tone, certainly none conducive to the story or the character, nor any purposeful variations of pacing or rhythm, at the level of either the narrative or sentences.

As a reviewer, and especially as a great fan of Chatterjee's first book, one finds absolutely no pleasure in having to criticize his latest effort. This duty is especially frustrating since anyone willing to suffer through the novel will see that with some attention to the basics of fiction, and some hard editing, an entertaining little lark might have been rescued from the folds of this -- pardon the pun, overweight -- plodder. Yet, somehow Chatterjee, who displayed such lightness and deftness of touch in his famed first book -- released just last April as a New York Review of Books classic -- could not be bothered even to do due diligence. Fans can only hope that he will equal or excel his debut before that first book comes to be regarded as the lucky accident in an otherwise unremarkable oeuvre.

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Visitor

MENKA SHIVDASANI

Last night, a poem hovered on the edge of the sofa, uncertain guest, choking a little amidst the cooking smells. We stared at each other silently, and I, who had forgotten the art of small talk, left the room. In the kitchen, with the rattling of raw peanuts in the jar and hissing of mustard in hot oil, I decided to offer myself, crusty, a little charred; so, lying flat on a tray, floated down, and found -- an emptiness.

In the morning, wandering across the vast hall and quiet spaces, I looked for him. Life, like a teakwood sideboard, stared back, images flickering from the television screen upon it. Someone had turned the sound off and the empty lips, glossy and bright, mouthed empty words, across the vacant air.

By noon, uncertainties like dust mites, had gathered on the door, the sofa sagged, and cigarette butts left holes. The smells of cooking had grown a little stronger, perhaps another ghost was hovering by the stove.

though lunch was set, and the forks and knives lay limp upon the table. The rumbling began, not in the stomach, but elsewhere, and the dish lay still and empty through the day.

By four o' clock, the tea leaves told a story, at the bottom of the porcelain cup whose handle broke that day. The lonely witch with the tarot cards stared back from the silver glass, and I knew it was time to find my face again.

There it lay, in jars on the dressing table, in bits and pieces and such a multitude of shades. How could I put it all together? How could I ensure the cracks didn't show?

At eight o' clock, all made up for the grand night out, I waited for the bell to break the silence. But the poem stood me up again, and the make-up began to streak across the face. I did not go looking for him, not that night, or ever again.



artwork by amina

Menka Shivdasani's two books of poems are *Nirvana at Ten Rupaes* and *She lives in Mumbai*.

No one arrived,

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Indulgence

NUZHAT AMIN MANNAN

Perhaps I'll allow myself one of these days an indulgence-- the perfect idiosyncrasy un-rehearsed knowing full well that one of these days I will be sitting on a chair unprimed my mouth hurting wide open so that words can be extracted in one theatrical tweak after another.

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