

SHORT STORY

Old Men*

ASADULLAH GHAZANFAR
(translated from Pashto by Gulabai Ahad)

The doctor had advised Haji Usman to stay clear of sweets, give up smoking, watch his fat intake and walk regularly. Haji had faithfully followed these orders for eight months and was now feeling much better than the previous year.

Some days he would even walk for half an hour straight. Now that winter was nearly over and the air was becoming warmer, Haji was also trying to increase his walking distance. Mamoor Latif had told him, "You are acting like a young man; I refuse to accompany you any longer." Like Haji, Mamoor was also eighty-four years old. Their health problems, however, were very different. Mamoor had heart trouble while Haji suffered from diabetes.

One spring evening, as he set out on his daily walk, Haji was feeling pretty courageous and free. The weather was so beautiful that he was prompted to take off his jumper, fold up his sleeves and unbutton the top of his shirt. The light spring breeze

encouraged him to take a different route, and explore the streets of the city. His wanderings eventually led him to the park situated in the centre of the city. For a great number of years Haji had only visited the park in the morning.

Mamoor Latif had once told him that in the morning parks belonged to the old and in the evenings to the young. Haji had been amused by this comment and had always managed to abide by this unwritten rule.

Today, however, it has somehow slipped his mind. At the entrance of the park, Haji's eyes fell upon a young woman sitting alone on a concrete bench. He began to study her face; she had a wide forehead, a small nose, thin lips and big eyes. Above all, Haji was fascinated with the soft look of her skin—a blessing of tender age. As Haji passed her, he said to himself, "Why shouldn't I look at a flower in bloom? I am not looking at her with bad intentions." He smiled to himself, beaming at the poor excuse.

As soon as he had come a little distance away from her, Haji stopped. He took a moment to analyse what he was feeling. For some odd reason he could not



artwork by amina

get her out of his mind; his long walk had increased his blood pressure and left his brain overly active.

Suddenly he thought of a trick to get her attention. He turned around and found her looking back at him. Her eyes appeared

even larger and brighter than before. Unfazed, he casually asked, "What is the time?" While she lifted her hand, he focused on her wrist. She glanced at her watch and Haji was taken in by the raising of her eyebrow. When she looked at him again, Haji

longed for the same movement in her brow.

She responded, "Quarter to six." As she spoke, he could feel her breath and caught the scent of her perfume. Haji began to thank her when, to his horror, he suddenly realized that the young

woman must have noticed his watch.

Haji quickly turned away and walked towards the centre of the park. He sat down on a bench and moments later dozed off. After ten or fifteen minutes of peaceful rest, Haji opened his eyes once again and remembered the young woman. He walked quickly to the entrance of the park, but she was nowhere to be found. His heart yearned to see her again, as if it would be his last chance.

He wandered around the park, looking at each bench and behind every tree. He searched the narrow paths between the rose bushes. The fragrance of the flowers and grass was prevalent, yet the scent of her perfume was missing. With a great sense of disappointment, Haji left the park. On his way home he realized where he had gone wrong; he should have searched for the girl at the other entrance to the park. He remembered now that the park had two entrances, one at the north end and one at the south end. Overcome with fatigue and already halfway home, he allowed his desire to see her slowly slip from his mind.

For his evening prayers, Haji went to the local mosque. "How come you are so happy? What's going on?" Mamoor Latif asked him. "Don't ask, I am so tired," he replied. Mamoor stared at him with questioning eyes. "Come with me tomorrow and I'll definitely tell you why," Haji added. Mamoor's eyes seemed to smile as he nodded his head. "Don't worry, I won't take you for a walk; I will show you something which will take you back to your youth," said Haji reassuringly. That night Haji listened to the news, as he usually did. Chinese scholars in northern China had found a herb, which if dried, boiled and taken, was considered the best treatment for diabetes. He sat up and listened carefully. This piece of information had aroused his interest greatly. Early the next morning, well before breakfast, he put on his glasses and began reading the newspaper. The story had been covered in the papers as well. Haji read the story twice, taking in every bit of information.

Later on in the day Mamoor Latif came to visit his friend. Haji immediately told him of the Chinese scholar's discovery.

Mamoor then asked him about the other news. "What news?" Haji responded. "The one you were mentioning in the mosque last night," Mamoor reminded him. Haji couldn't remember. In an effort to jog his friend's memory, Mamoor added, "You were saying it was something which would remind me of my youth."

Haji became silent, trying desperately to recall the previous day's events. Yet nothing came to mind. Mamoor once again murmured, "You were saying it was a way to freshen the heart." Haji could not remember a thing. The young woman had fled his mind just as youth had said farewell to his life. After a few moments Haji enquired "Don't you think China has progressed a lot?"

Asadullah Ghazanfar was born in Afghanistan and migrated to Pakistan during the war in the wake of the Soviet invasion. He is regarded as one of the foremost writers in Pashto language.

*reprinted from *A Letter from India: contemporary short stories from Pakistan*, ed. M. Sheikh, Penguin India, (reviewed earlier in the literature page).

Letter from LONDON

DAVID SANDERSON

A friend of mine once departed on a mission to Asia to find his own Shangri La. Like tens of thousands of young Brits before him he departed on an overland journey to India and beyond where he was going to immerse himself in ancient civilisations and discover the secrets of the universe.

My friend, however, came a cropper. After dabbling in a hallucinogenic tincture, the name and composition of which permanently escapes him, he ended up howling at monkeys in jungles and talking to tropical plants before falling off a train. He returned home with two smashed legs and one mashed mind. But although he is scarred for life mentally and physically he still, in rare moments of lucidity, speaks of the joys of his adventure and how he believes it

was the making of him. During the writing of the recently-released *Magic Bus: On the Hippie Trail from Istanbul to India* travel writer Rory MacLean met many people who held the "hash and hepatitis" trip to Asia from Europe to be responsible for their subsequent successes.

Like the Danish member of parliament who tells him: "The hippie trail? I wouldn't be here now if I hadn't hitched to India in 1967."

That year the Indian government estimated there were 10,000 youthful foreigners in the country. Then the Beatles came looking for the Maharishi in Rishikesh and by the end of the decade the same number, in search of enlightenment and cheap drugs, were flowing over the border from Pakistan each week having travelled the trail. It stretched along much of the old silk road from Turkey through Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and into India. Along its length

rocked and rolled a series of weird and untrustworthy buses ferrying the long-haired, bearded hippies reading Carlos Castaneda and *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse and listening to the music of The Grateful Dead and Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, all the time searching for the keys to their own Utopia.

Many were inspired by the works of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg who - following in the footsteps of Byron and Shelley who had inspired the Grand Tourists to visit Rome and Greece, then the meeting point of Classical and Contemporary culture - wanted to push back the frontiers both in the mind and on the road.

While few have returned having actually found Shangri La, many have become better people. Chris Weeks, who drove along the trail with travel company Intertrek, tells MacLean that while many westerners he encountered were

there for cheap thrills, he and countless thousands were awakened to the tribulations they had been sheltered from in their cosy, suburban homes. "I saw that most people in the West have not got a clue about how the Third World lives: the deprivation, the corruption, the lack of medical care and water. Really, what life is about. Doing the trail was possibly the best thing I ever did for myself. I came home better equipped." Or there's John Butt, the Bob Dylan-loving, Muslim chaplain of Cambridge University who converted to Islam while wandering in the Punjab in 1969.

But in his journey along the route, made about three years ago, MacLean also encounters once idealistic travellers who, having originally departed embittered at the ways and means of the modern, western world, are now embittered about the commodification of travelling. Take Desmond, a once-rootless

Englishman who he encounters in Nepal: "Kathmandu is now full of people reading the Lonely Planet guide to Vietnam. I mean, at their age we wanted to get into each other and society, not to live in a meltdown world. We didn't have guidebooks, we didn't even know the name of the next country. 'What's this place called? Bhutan?' Where the hell is Bhutan?" Desmond perhaps epitomises the observation from Chinese writer Lin Yutang that "a good traveller is one who does not know where he is going to and a perfect traveller does not know where he came from."

MacLean concludes that: "Rather than inspirational, the travel market is now aspirational." He writes that now we take drugs that extend mortal life rather than spiritual horizons even as we renew our annual travel insurance policy.

So the travellers have changed, but what about the countries visited?

By far the most interesting portions of the book deal with the effect these travellers had, and are still having, on the countries they venture through, often in a haze of adventure and ignorance. MacLean quotes Bruce Chatwin's observation that western travellers may have hastened Afghanistan's descent into anarchy. Chatwin's theory was that the peace-loving hippies influenced Afghans in their ready embrace of Marxism, hence paving the way for the Soviet invasion. Conversely, MacLean suggests that the casual morality of young westerners enraged traditionalists in Iran, stirring an Islamic reawakening culminating in the 1979 revolution when the Shah was deposed.

MacLean writes: "We know our lives are bound by the acts of armed men, in and out of uniform. But what of the link to the hundreds of thousands of casual young westerner

travellers, initially in flares and open-toed sandals? We tread in their footsteps in swelling numbers and arrogance, turning the world into a commodity, insulting - even enraging traditionalists, stirring in them a zealous Islamic reawakening. Is it coincidence that the Muslim countries that so many travellers breezed through - among them Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan are now political minefields?"

The bikini tops, the alcohol, the drugs, the relative lack of respect for elders and, in many instances, the conspicuous consumption of the western travellers would be anathema and antagonistic to many already reeling from the insidious Disneyfication of the world and the increasing reach of the resource-grasping western corporations. MacLean suggests that the once-unlimited frontier has been reduced to a series of war zones and annexed

mountain states where veteran travellers moan about the absent spirit of adventure, while many locals resent the intrusion of the dollar-wielding outsiders.

So the spirit of the 1960s has probably been lost forever: the true trailblazers are, as MacLean suggests, those who take responsibility for their actions and who appreciate their power, and who travel in a manner that benefits local communities even if caution does limit their scope for daring.

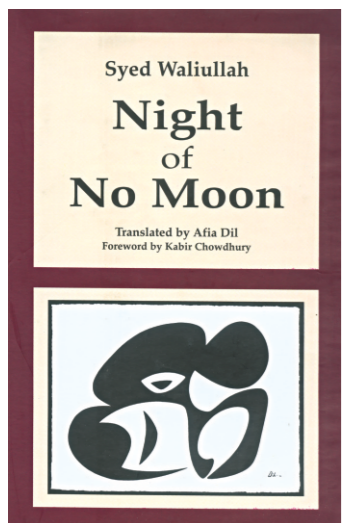
Perhaps then, amusing as it may be to the locals, there will be no more drug-addled westerners howling at monkeys and talking to plants.

David Sanderson is a correspondent for The London Times.

BOOKNOTES

KHADEMUL ISLAM

Night of No Moon by Syed Waliullah (translated by Afia Dil); Dhaka: writersink; 2006; pp. 144; Tk. 350.00

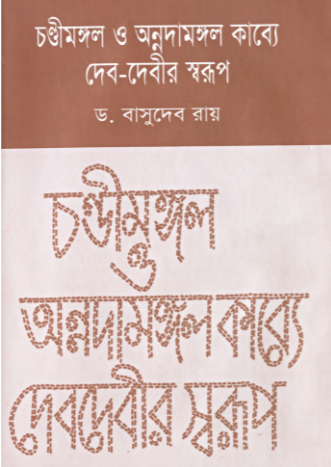


The publishing concern writers.ink set up by Niaz Zaman is to be commended for bringing out translations of Syed Waliullah and attempting to make his work available to a broader audience. Last year writers.ink published *Tree Without Roots* (the translation of Waliullah's famous novel *La Shalu*) and this time around it is *Night of No Moon*, the English version of his *Chander Amabasya*. Syed Waliullah, as Professor K. S. Murshid, observes, "is our first truly modern writer of fiction... (who writes of) a world where deception, silence, suffering and loneliness are the dominant realities." This characteristic world is readily apparent in *Night of No Moon*, whose good-hearted anti-hero Arif Ali stumbles, metaphorically as well as literally, far into a night of deep terror from where there is no return. Syed Waliullah was also observant of mofussil life in Bengal, as in this still life from a backwater college:

"The teachers' lounge was adjoining the headmaster's office. There was an ordinary table in the middle of an uneven floor. Around the table there were a few chairs of different sizes and shapes. Everybody, however, had his eye on one particular chair. There were innumerable fat, well-fed bugs in every hole of the woven lattice, but it was made of cane and so was comfortable. Its back had a slight angle. It also had two arms. Nobody really minded giving a little blood to the hungry bugs in exchange for the comfort of this chair. Today, Mr. Alfazuddin, the Arabic teacher, was seated there with one knee up. He had a look of comfort on his face."

There are some hiccups in the translation by Afia Dil, such as the repetitive "half" in the very second sentence of the book: "In that half-light, half darkness, the young teacher had seen the half-naked dead body of the young woman." Also, modesty should have decreed that the translator not be given equal billing with the author, with a full-page bio, repeated with photo on the inside back cover. Afia Dil should be aware that in Bangladesh, the quality of a book usually is in inverse relation to the length of author/translator bio. Happily such is not the case here. As Professor Kabir Chowdhury writes in his Foreword, the translator has stayed "as close as possible to...Waliullah's Bengali text and its unique literary flavour."

Chandimangal O Annodamangal Kabyay Deb-Debi'r Swarup by Dr. Basudev Rai; Dhaka: Utsha Prokashon; June 2005; pp. 544; Tk. 425



This volume is, as per the author's preface, a "polished and abridged version" of a PhD thesis submitted to, and degree granted by, the Bengali department at Dhaka University. As such, it is admittedly a specialist work unlikely to be read by general readers. Nonetheless, it is an interesting book, and in an academic system generally castigated for its non-academic interests and pursuits, indicative of some serious research work.

"*Mangalkabya*" has to be one of the most aptly named genre of poetry anywhere, since the term 'mangal' in Bengali means 'good,' or 'well-being,' and these epic verse works of the Bengali Middle Ages about deity/ies were meant to promote the spiritual and material well-being of their listeners. As Dr. Rai writes, in Bengal during the Middle Ages there were famines, widespread poverty, destitution, fear of tigers and snakes, as well as the urgent need to ensure the continuity of Hindu religion and culture in the aftermath of the Turkish conquest. Out of such varied motives, out of a fusion of pre-Aryan gods/goddesses, Puranic Hinduism and Tantric Buddhism, came the folkloric, populist and mythic poems called *mangalkabya*. The first such work written was *Manasamangal*, and two later variants were *Chandimangal* and *Annodamangal*. Dr. Rai's resolute research is in the area of Hindu iconography of these two latter epics.

In *Annodamangal* deities lose their centrality in favour of humans, and consequently there is a detailed contemporary record of the life in those times, as can be seen from this quote on p. 229 of Dr. Rai's book, which reveals not only that age's practice of giving young girls in marriage to old men, but the young bride's timeless lament:

আর রামা বলে এ মাথার চুড়া।
আমি এই যুবকী আমার পতি বুড়ে ॥
বলুন বলুন লড়ে বলুন বলতে
আমার পতি বুড়ে ॥

It may not be out of place here to observe that the author perhaps uses the term '*mangalkabya*' a little too broadly, thereby accepting the periodization of Bengali literature into ancient, medieval and modern ages. Some scholars (Edwin Gerow, for instance), have pointed out that such periodization can reflect superimposed Imperial/Western analytic categories, which may obscure the underlying continuity in Indian literature. *Mangalkabya* is descended in some measure from the hymns of the Rig Veda, which yoked the lyric mode to Hindu religious practice, while Behula of *Manasamangal* is not a character as much as a type, and one that continues to be invoked in modern Bengali literature.

Kali O Kolom, Ashwin 1413/September 2006, and *Kartik* 1413/October 2006; editor Abul Hasnat; publisher Abul Khair.



Chandra De by Shahaduzzaman Khan. It argues for a greater recognition of the efforts of the legendary collector/archivist of the folk songs known as *Mymensingh Geetika*. Abu Hena Mustafa Enam discusses, with broad brush strokes, two novels by Bangladeshi writer Mahmudul Huq in terms of new directions in Bengali fiction. Bismillah Khan, the noted musician who died recently, is remembered in two articles, while poet Ruby Rahman, wistfully, in the context of university life immediately after independence, recalls Suraiya Khanum, who died in the USA. Suraiya wrote poems of alienation—some fairly severe—in Bengali while teaching English at Dhaka University. Notable

among the short stories in the issue is Manobendra Pal's *Khor Khor*, with its memorable opening line. From New York Hasan Ferdous has penned illuminating portraits of three *probashi* writers: Ferdous Sajedin, Mahfuza Shilu and Purobi Basu, though comparing the latter's novels with Isaac Baashevis Singer's Hassidic tales in terms of excavating memories of homeland might be stretching it a bit too far. One of the welcome features of *Kali O Kolom* are its fairly regular pieces on Bangladeshi film, and here Tariq Rahman's article on Bangladeshi documentary films is no

exception. Among the reviews of books, art and theater, the discussion of Chittagong theater group Nandimukh's staging in Dhaka of their play *Belasheshher Golpo* in terms of regional theater groups and aesthetic belief (that content is superior to form) is a worthwhile read.

The October issue is a special one devoted to poet Shamsur Rahman, who has recently departed from us. It is a welcome one, especially in light of the Bangladesh government's disgraceful conduct in neglecting to give him a ceremonial state funeral. This neglect is especially ironic, as diverse op-ed commentaries have pointed out, in light of the fact that Bangladesh was founded by a liberation war whose beginnings can be traced back to Shamsur Rahman's poems in the '60s. This latest *Kali O Kolom* issue is thus deservedly a thick one, a dense 184 pages featuring 38 articles by prominent literary figures, 14 of his more famous poems (*Asad'er Shirt*, *Swadhinata Tumi*, et cetera) as well as a short bio and exhaustive list of publications. To his myriad fans, this volume should be a collector's item. The articles can very roughly be divided into personal recollections (of which the beginning piece *Kichu Srii Olpo Kotha* by Abul Hosain is the leading example) and the more analytic-critical (Abid

Anwar's *Shamsur Rahman'er Kobitar Chondo* is exemplary of the other approach). While not all of the pieces can be said to be uniform in terms of readability, the tone of the whole volume is lightened by some wonderful photos of the poet at various times with various literary and cultural figures. *Kali O Kolom* is to be congratulated for having published this tribute to our iconic poet.

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.

Missing

ABEER HOQUE

Paro's shoulders look so frail under the bejeweled blouse the heavy *achal* of her sari undulates lengthens behind her as she runs through the house doors of iron and stained glass flying open and shut everything trembling with her loss

I sigh
I can't feel it
her emotion is less striking to me than her sumptuous outfit the bollyfied film set

Rumana is sitting on the floor watching, rapt she gets up now as I ask her to help me pour water into the glasses

the water spills ever so slightly pooling on the wood table I glance at her face, surprised only to see what I should have seen before the maid's tears are blinding her she can't see the glass or the water she's crying for Paro she's crying for love

I look back at the TV to see what I'm missing Paro's grief beckons for a moment but my eyes soon slip to her throat, glittering with gems

apparently it's my Bengali heart that was missing all along

Abeer Hoque won the Tanenbaum award in 2005 for nonfiction.