

SHORT STORY

Feet

PARVEEN SULTANA
(Abridged and translated by Andaleeb Shahjahan)

The long procession of men and women, walking into the burning heat of a *Chaitra* noon, are marching forward. Sitting in the soothing shade of my balcony it is difficult for me to gauge which is more scorching – the merciless heat of the *Chaitra* sun or the anger of the marchers. The procession is headed by women, their hands festooned with banners. At the very head of the procession two or three of these women, though facing the congregation and walking backwards, yet are proceeding forward. Their march has a nice tempo to it. Every now and then the marchers seem to want to burst into a dance, in time to the shifting rhythm of their feet. One of them breaks into a slogan – “The price of rice, lentil, sugar” – the rest of the crowd takes up the sentence flung in mid-air, and vibrating with the emotion the words evoke in them, finish the sentence – *Has to go down, has to go down.*”

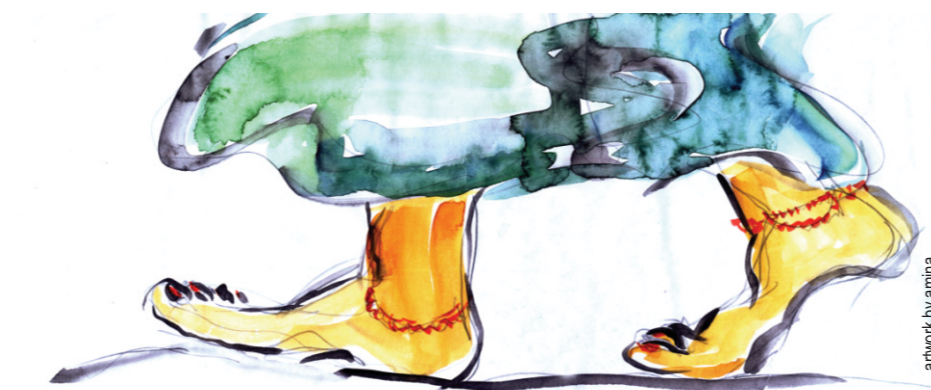
All of a sudden, as a *Brahmachary* wind, a wind of remembrance sweeps up and over the women into the ranks of the men, unsettling the women's *ornas* and *aanchals*. They seem annoyed rather than embarrassed by this sudden displacement of the extra coverings on their bodies. The woman in the lead ties her *orna* around her waist and tucks up her *shalwar*. And I get the first glimpse of her milk white feet! The soles of her feet are of a delicious reddish pink hue and shaped somewhat like an egg. My gaze now loses interest in her previously *orna*-eclipsed breasts to rest on her lovely feet where all her energy, anger and gusto seem to have converged. I marvel at the thought that she has taken to the streets under this fierce *Chaitra* sun, instead of resting those lovely feet on a lazy *hartaal* noon in the comfort of her bed. She must have come from a long way off, I speculate.

“Hey, you asleep?” asks Shanu, with a steaming cup of tea in her hand. I stretch my hand sluggishly to take the cup from her hand and thank her. Then, as if to explain my presence in the balcony, I tell her about

the procession. Shanu stares at me curiously, but adds in a neutral tone, “Oh, that. Yes, I heard them too from the kitchen but couldn't leave the meat on the stove. You know how it is if it gets burnt.” I look at her. The lazy pleasure she seems to be deriving from cooking at mid-day is reflected in her lips, in the spot of gravy at the corner of her mouth. This is Shanu, my wife, a Bengali housewife for all seasons. I tear my gaze from the beautifully sculpted features of my wife's face and look at the procession melting away in the distance. The image of the long road with its procession of people lingers in my eyes.

Shanu stands by my side. Maybe she waits for me to finish my tea. She knows I can't stay awake without a cup of tea after a heavy lunch. I don't know what prompts her but all of a sudden she asks, between yawns, “Do you know which party they belong to?” I am pleased – at least she's showing some curiosity. I answer, “Which-ever party they belong to, they are voicing our demands also.” Stiffing another yawn, she asks, “Really? What did they say?” And even though the words are indistinct, I can make out what she's saying. I reply, “They are protesting the horrendous price-hike of rice, sugar, lentil.” Shanu laughs and says, “And you - you have a salary close to 80 or 90 thousand a month. So what if the prices are a little high, right? If only we could now buy our own apartment...” I am annoyed at these words but say nothing. Her beauty pales before my eyes. I tell myself – “This girl is not only average, but quite selfish too.” I return the empty cup of tea and as she walks happily away with it, she glances back once to murmur, “Listen...” But I tell her I'd rather sit here than join her for a nap. Her happily hurried footsteps falter a little at these words and give away the fact that she's disappointed.

I work for the UN, and can't afford to take any break before the weekend. Perhaps we should be whiling away this unexpected *hartal* holiday, lying down beside each other in bed, relishing the love and the warmth between us. And yet, something in my recalls at the thought. Before she disappears I take a good look at her without her noticing it. I fix my gaze once again on the anklets wrapped around her beautiful feet, which



artwork by amrita

highlight the pinkish, egg-shaped soles of her feet. That pair of anklets is a gift from me to her. I married Shanu because I liked her. We were more like acquaintances then, not lovers. Her complexion is on the darker side but she's always had exquisitely pretty feet. Her pinkish white toenails have a brilliant luster to them. Her nicely shaped toes are so inviting that I feel like touching them every time I see them. My mother tells me that since my childhood days I've always had a fascination for human feet.

Sitting still in the balcony makes me doze off a little. I step softly into the bedroom, trying not to wake Shanu who's by now fast asleep. My heart goes out to her. I lie down next to her. I detect that yellowish gray-stained spot on her lips. Sleeping sideways, her soft, cuddly breasts brush against the fabric of her maxi. I scrutinize her posture and tell myself – “There's no simplicity in her sleeping posture.” I realize I'm still holding a grudge against her for her nonchalant reaction to the procession that walked past our house. I don't reach out for her. Instead, thinking of a recent incident, I feel more annoyed than ever. Last Friday we had gone to visit a relative in the hospital and by the time we reached home after some bazaar-shopping it was noon. It had been intensely hot. On top of that we hadn't been able to get any CNG-driver to give us such a short ride home.; they usually preferred longer trips. So, as we stood helplessly in the scorching heat, an old rickshawallah came to our rescue. And reading our minds, he said, “How long have you been standing in

the heat? Come on, let's get you home.” Shanu and I almost jumped into his rickshaw at these words. The old man helped us get our grocery stuff on to the rickshaw. As we hopped in, my gaze once again found its way onto his old, and yet incredibly industrious, feet; they defied the scorching mid-day sun, the fatigued passengers' arrogant behaviour, and even the 8-9kg-load of our groceries and paddled on efficiently. We had taken the umbrella with us, anticipating rain before leaving home. So I said to the rickshawallah, “Do you want me to hold the umbrella over you?” The old man looked at me over his shoulder and I saw his face – his sweat-soaked face – light up with joy. He replied, “No, sir, but you offering to do so filled my heart with joy.”

When we reached home, I was busy taking the groceries off our rickshaw. Shanu, meanwhile, gave the old man a 10-Taka note, then asked for two Takas in return. The joy he had felt just a while ago got swept away at these words. He pleaded, “That road was hard on me, and this heat...” Shanu, unmoved, lashed at him, “Don't tell me the heat made the road longer!” I intervened quickly at this point and told her to go inside and send our maid out. Then, turning to the old man and tucking a 2-Taka note into his palm, I said apologetically, “Don't mind her, the heat has gone to her head.” The old man put the money in his little purse and stared at me, joy suffusing his face once again. Taking the *gamcha* off his waist he rolled it up and wiped the sweat off his face, hands and neck. Then he mounted on his seat – ready for another trip.

His robust feet paddled away and took him slowly out of my sight. I kept staring at his hard-working feet, spellbound, until they disappeared into the distance.

Shanu, lying next to me in bed, rolls over to the other side all of a sudden, shaking the bed and with it my thoughts too. Her maxi rides up to reveal her ravishingly beautiful feet. They tempt me. My anger starts to cool off. I slip my feet in between her nicely stretched legs and close my eyes. Sleep descends quickly.

These days I make it a point to come home early from work. Shanu and I are expecting our first child! When I'm at work Shanu is left at home with a boy who helps her with the household chores. I feel a kind of affectionate longing to come back to her as soon as I get done at the office. Or, maybe it's the as-yet unborn member of the family, dwelling safely in Shanu's womb, who makes me gravitate toward home. And almost every day Shanu regales me with one anecdote or the other about our womb-dwelling child. She would say things like – “Guess what? Your child moved quite a bit today”, or “Your son rolled over at least three or four times today”, or maybe “The little brat pokes me from inside quite often. He's kicking too much these days.” I laugh at these words to express my affection for both mother and child. But I'm quick to detect Shanu's use of gender while talking about our child. “How do you know it's a boy?” I ask her. Shanu replies with conviction, “I know it's boy, it has to be because I want a boy. I would be upset if it's not a boy. Men carry on the family legacy. They are the torch-bearers.” I am tempted to retort, “And women are not?” How can she think like that being a woman herself, I wonder. I decide not to get drawn into an argument over this and so remain quiet. I don't want her to get upset about anything at this vulnerable stage. So, every Friday, like today, I lie down beside Shanu after lunch. I do this because I feel it gives her some moral support and company. Shanu, lying next to me on these lazy afternoons, sometimes buries her joyful, self-complacent face coyly in my chest every now and then. Sometimes she makes me touch her belly so I can feel the movement of our child kicking away inside.

Shanu would point sometimes to the left or to the right corner of our belly where she feels it nudge. I trace the shape of two little feet protruding from her belly. I touch Shanu's belly and the contact with the child overwhelms me.

A few days later, Shanu gives birth. I enter the cabin and find her lying in bed with a kind of languid pleasure. Next to her lies a tiny human being. Our first child –and it is a boy. Shanu is happy beyond words. She's had a normal delivery and that's why she seems to be in good shape already. A nurse changes his nappy and checks his belly button. I stare at the soft, naked body of our son. His resemblance with Shanu is quite perceptible already. He has feet like hers! I feel a joyous shiver throughout my body as I touch *babu's* small feet. The nurse signals me to go outside for a while – it must be some woman-to-woman issue. I step out onto the balcony.

It's dawn now – a dream-like dawn surrounds me on all sides. I feel elated. I resist the temptation to smoke a cigarette. Standing there I think: “The boy looks like his mother but I will shape his mental terrain. His little feet will accompany me on my journey in the days to come...”

Some twenty minutes later, the nurse comes out of the cabin. I smile at her. She smiles back. But neither of us disturbs the deep silence of the dawn. The nurse then starts walking away along the mosaic floor of the balcony. The stiffly starched white sari that they wear as a uniform is usually worn a little above the heels. I guess that's because it makes their movement easier. I stare at her quickly moving feet. Her heels move up and down as she walks forward. Ah! Those feet – in defiance of a good night's sleep and the fatigue that comes from a sleepless night -- carry her forward to the next patient who needs to be nursed. Staring at those feet, my gaze lights up like the rays of the early morning sun.

Parveen Sultana is a young Bengali writer. Andaleeb Shahjahan is a free-lance editor/translator.



On Armstrong, Dalrymple and Shobha De

MUNEZA SHAMSI

There has been a definite international flavour to literary activity in Karachi since Eid, with the visits of Karen Armstrong, William Dalrymple and Shobha De. Of course everyone has been talking about the President's memoir *In The Line of Fire*. Literary it is not, but it is a quick, easy read and Musharraf's views on political events are inevitably of interest and significance: Kargil, the coup against Nawaz Sharif, the War Against Terror, peace talks with India, Dr. AQ Khan and much else. However not everyone has approved or agreed and the debate in the Pakistani press has been both lively and stimulating. The ghostwriter is said to be the son of the bureaucrat who is believed to have been the ghostwriter for Ayub Khan's *Friends not Masters*.

Meanwhile I was utterly engrossed in *The History of God The 4,000 Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* by Karen Armstrong. I am still amazed at her ability to make complex themes so accessible. She moves with great ease between the familiar and unfamiliar, from the earliest prophets to the Reformation and the religious revivals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Armstrong, a British ex-nun, first encountered Judaism and Islam when she made a television documentary on St. Paul. This took her to Palestine. Amid the fierce hostility between Palestinians and Israelis, she discovered there were many links between the three Abrahamic religions. She began to explore this through her writing, looking at what she described to me in a Dawn newspaper interview as “a triple vision, seeking inwardly the paths to the divine.” This has been central to her work ever since.

Shortly after Eid, she gave a talk “What is Religion?” at The Aga Khan University in Karachi. People literally flocked to hear her – almost 1,000 strong. I had to get there an hour early to ensure a good seat. The overflow from the auditorium was accommodated in adjoining lecture halls with large video screens.

Armstrong who is learned, erudite and forthright, spoke about The Axial Age - 900-

200BC - which was pivotal to the spiritual development of mankind and which is the subject of her new book *The Great Transformation: The World in the Time of Buddha, Socrates, Confucius and Jeremiah*. She went on to describe man's quest for spirituality and transcendence in societies riven by conflict. She spoke of the wisdom of Buddha, the sayings of Confucius, the non-violence of Jesus and The Prophet's many acts of humanity and reconciliation. She said “The bedrock of spirituality is compassion.” She is a member of a UN peace initiative, the Alliance of Civilizations, and continues to work tirelessly to build bridges between cultures and faiths in today's fractious and polarized world.

William Dalrymple is another Briton, who brings together East and West in his writings. Now he lives in Delhi with his wife, the artist Olivia Fraser. He has visited and written about Pakistan since he was an undergraduate. He is also a great supporter of The Citizens Foundation (TCF), a charity founded by philanthropists, which has set up numerous schools across Pakistan for underprivileged children. Two years ago, he gave talks for the TCF about his book *The White Mughals* in London, Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad: the proceeds from sale of books at these events were donated to the cause. This winter he was in Pakistan again for the TCF to speak about his new book, *The Last Mughal*. In Karachi, the function for some 500 guests was held at a local hotel and I was asked to do the introduction. Dalrymple is witty, articulate, affable and immensely at home in Pakistan: I have never seen him in anything but a shalwar kameez and Peshawari chappals. I have enjoyed his books ever since I read his travel book, *A City of Djinns*, about his discovery of Delhi and its layers of history.

The White Mughals is a historical work which revolves around the poignant love story of an aristocratic Hyderabad lady, Khairunissa and William Kirkpatrick, the British Resident The book also explores the many inter-racial marriages between well-born, early ‘Indianized’ Englishmen in the sub-continent and Indian women of rank. During his research

Dalrymple discovered that his eighteenth-century ancestor had married a Bengali lady: her descendants include him and his distant relative, Virginia Woolf.

Dalrymple's new book, *The Last Mughal*, revolves around the tragic poet-Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, but carries the story of the British in India forward to that great watershed in Anglo-Indian relations: 1857. The book also describes the splendour of Mughal Delhi, its architecture, culture, customs and literature. While Zauq and Ghalib vied for the Emperor's patronage, the British could only see an impoverished puppeting and all Indians with increasing disdain.

Dalrymple has unearthed some rare, untapped primary material to bring together, for the first time in English, the narratives of Urdu and Persian sources, as well as British records and writings. He is a wonderful story-teller and brings alive a host of full-blooded characters, British and Indian. He does not flinch from sepy atrocities nor the horror of British reprisals on Delhi after they had re-captured the city.

The Indian writer Shobha De is famous for her racy books and television scripts and her glamour. She was in Karachi to launch a first novel, *Kolachi Dreams*, by Nadya AR. The young author's in-laws, Farooq and Khalida Rahimtoola, gave a glittering reception to celebrate, with fairy lights, shamiana and sumptuous tea after the speeches. The publisher, Tyaba Habib, spoke on behalf of Sama Books, of which she and Yasmin Qureshi are co-founders. There was much applause for Shobha De. Dressed in long silvery earrings and in a shimmering silver-and-salmon pink sari, she described Karachi and Mumbai as “twin cities”. She spoke from personal experience of all the tensions that a new author suffers. She praised Nadya's writing and talent, but the Nadya's speech was all too brief. It would have been good to have had a reading at least.

Muneza Shamsi has edited three anthologies of Pakistani English writing. She is a regular contributor to Dawn newspaper, Newline and She, The Journal of Commonwealth Literature and www. LitEnycn.com.

Talking with Bapsi Sidhwa

(Bapsi Sidhwa has become well-known as the author of the novel *Cracking India*, which was made into the 1998 movie 'Earth', directed by Deepa Mehta. She, however, has been around for a lot longer than that. As more than one reviewer has pointed out, her first book *The Crow Eaters* was first published in 1978, a full year before Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. She was born in 1938 in Karachi, Pakistan, into the Parsi Zoroastrian community but later moved to Lahore and grew up there. All her subsequent work, which includes nonfiction (with the *City of Sin and Splendour: Writings on Lahore*, 2006, being the latest) reflect her identity and experience as a Parsi, a woman and as somebody who witnessed the 1947 Partition of India at close quarters. Ahmede Husain recently talked with her via emails.)

Ahmede: Does your background as a Parsi Zoroastrian influence your identity as a writer?

Sidhwa: It certainly does: it has formed my habits, my thoughts, my values, and I have fun portraying my community, as in *Crow Eaters*. No matter where they are the Parsis are a minority, and the tension this creates compels one to express feelings, ideas, politics etc. Being a Parsi also can also make a writer a more objective observer perhaps.

Ahmede: In *Water* we see you narrate the story of an eight-year-old against the backdrop of Indian independence movement. This little girl has been abandoned at an ashram after the death of her husband. We see this theme of an individual's presence in history coming back to your work like a leitmotiv. Can you explain this for us?

Sidhwa: I like the way you've put that question. One cannot really remove an individual from his/her political or historical context. The Partition was one of the defining moments of our history, and the mass exodus and carnage affected millions of lives in the subcontinent. Unfortunately too little has been written about it in fiction. It is our history and



shapes what we are today. Gandhi's influence in moderating bias and injustice benefited the subcontinent in substantial ways.

Ahmede: How do you perceive the role of religion in the social and cultural life of South Asia?

Sidhwa: Religion is so subjective: I think we each mold it to suit our needs. I think religion appeals to what is

noblest in humans. It has nourished and brought peace to us through the ages. It has also been misused by those in power to benefit themselves and wreak havoc in its name. In the subcontinent I grew up in, one learned from infancy not to discuss it, and to respect other people's religion.

Ahmede: As a woman coming from Pakistan, how free do you feel as a writer?

Sidhwa: There are thousands of women writers, journalists and poets in Pakistan. Writing is a solitary activity -- it does not entail interacting with men, and as such is considered a suitable and even laudable pursuit. Of course there is the extremist element who are ready to take umbrage at what they consider to be “fawsh” or obscene, but luckily they are not given to reading fiction. I find quite raunchy stuff written even in Urdu. I am disappointed though that my books are not taught in colleges and schools because of this prudery.

Ahmede: You, we all know, write in English, a language that has once been imposed on the people of the region where you come from; and at the same time, people of South Asia have embraced English at the latter half of

the last century and have modified it significantly. What is your response to this issue?

Sidhwa: Although Gujrati is my mother tongue, English is the only language I learnt to read and write in. It has become the dominant language and people in most countries are striving to learn it for commercial or scholarly benefit. It was perhaps among the better features imposed on us by the British. I have no problem incorporating the Punjabi, Parsi, or Pakistani idiom in my fiction.

Ahmede: Does the concept of South Asian fiction really exist? Or it's only the people and region that defines the genre?

Sidhwa: Well, people need to compartmentalize for convenience; it makes life easier for many professors in the West also. But I do find the definition limiting if not demeaning - each writer stands on his or her merit in the community of world writers.

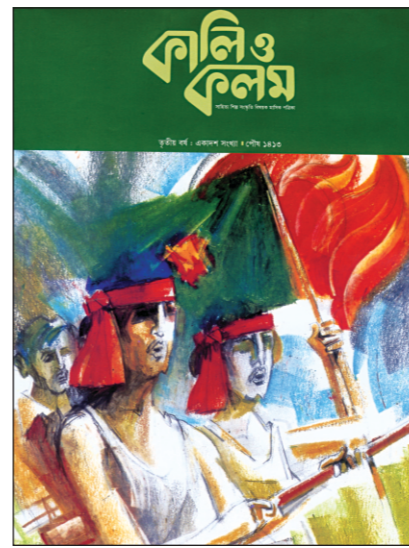
Ahmede Husain is Staff Writer at the Star Weekend Magazine. His last work, a novella titled 'Blues for Allah' has been published in Colloquy, Monash University's journal.

Mourning a sibling, celebrating a maestro

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

Kali O Kolam, Editor: Abul Hasnat, December 2006 Taka 25-

Kali O Kolom has, much to its readers' relief, held on to quality. In a literary world where quality often happens to be a fleeting affair, even a tentative one, *Kali O Kolom* is certainly nourishing for the intellect. Its emphasis on the varied strands of Bengali literary, indeed social, heritage has once more come through this new package of thoughts. The reflections on Protibha Basu by Abdul Mannan Syed are not merely a rather good reminder of the genre of thought Basu represented through her career in writing, but in a very significant way, they are also a pointer to the aesthetics that can be brought into celebrations of the individual. And while you read Syed's tribute to Basu, prepare yourselves, naturally, to be enlightened anew about Buddhadev Basu as well. The man remains a Bengali icon. Among the moving pieces in this offering of the journal is 'Shohodora Suraia'ra Smriti', Dilara Hashem's remembrances of her sibling Suraia Khanam. Those who knew Suraia



Khanam (this reviewer was her student in the mid 1970s) can certainly relate to the images Hashem draws of a woman whose beauty and intelligence came in equal, full measure with her impatient (often misconstrued as irascible) attitude to life and people around her. Khanam was a poet not to be dismissed lightly; and then again, she was the creator of the work *Nacher Shobdo*.

These and other facets of her personality, her unpredictability as it were, are synthesized remarkably well in this eulogy by a foremost writer of Bengali fiction. And yet there is the sense of hurt in Dilara Hashem, wounds inflicted on her by the one now dead. Hashem's pain takes on a vicarious quality, which is why you will read the piece through to the end. One of the gems in the current issue of *Kali O Kolom* is Debjeet Bandhopadhyaya's tribute to Sachin Deb Burman on the centenary of the maestro's birth. You hardly need to remind yourself of the overwhelming presence of Burman in Bengali and overall Indian music. The old songs, the tenor of music he employed, the pastoral that he sought to forge beside the many elements of the urban are ideas that go through a revival in this admirably written essay. It promises to be a point of reference in the times ahead, especially for those who spot the timeless in Burman's songs. Mention is made here of the unsurpassable *Jhilmit Jhilmit Jheelar Joley Dhayu Kheliya Jai Re*. That (as also the reader's own recollections of *Banshi Shune Aar Kaaj Nai*, et al) gives a familiar lilt to the heart.

Dr. Anisuzzaman's observations in 'Shwadhinota O Shonskriti' are focused, and will deepen your understanding of the cultural underpinnings of the War of Liberation. That Bangladesh is home to people other than Bengalis – the writer refers here to Chakmas and other indigenous societies – is a necessary point raised in the essay. The approach is appreciably dispassionate and so serves up fresh food for thought. Ferdous Nahar's 'Toronto Theke: Ketaki's Shonge Ek Din' is another aesthetically charming write-up you cannot ignore. Men and women who have grown to adulthood hearing about Ketaki Kushari Dyson cannot but read and digest the sentiments expressed here, to their intense satisfaction.

And that sense of satisfaction is elsewhere in the journal too. The poetry, the short stories, theatre --- all of these rainbow slivers of culture come packed in this issue. Read them, read about them, even as winter descends through the early arriving evening.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is executive editor, The Dhaka Courier.