

POETRY

MAYA

BIPASHA HAQUE



I'm telling you  
amidst the whispering cropped-headed paddy field,  
in the lore of these reeds,  
in the orchestra of these auburn after-harvest field  
by the seedlings that crack this soil--  
I am their spokesperson.  
Those who (habitually) trespass this squarish land,  
taking a diagonal turn towards its right,  
rhythmically toppling over its ridges  
and then bypassing the purple blossoms  
of the bean trellis—I speak their mind.

I stand for this two-crop yielding soil,  
as it sucks as much of wintry mist as it can.  
I shout out too for the distant line of jet-black ants  
crawling through the limestone rings of *shuparigach*.  
See this dried up creek? I ventriloquise its wish,  
despair at the way it marvels at being  
submerged or drowned, and then  
tided away in muddy monsoon rain.  
The sagging wind of this village,

the countless village chimneys,  
and the newby calf- haplessly mooing  
for its mom's smell beckon them to come.  
*Biroho* throbbing in *maya* nod at them to come  
while musing, "whatever the ebb exposes,  
who wouldn't receive them?"  
The twister looming in a mother's bosom  
wrapped in *maya's* abundant petals,  
allow them to come.

The *derwish* air of this village  
swirls around beckoning them,  
muttering, "how I wish nobody ever knew  
how *biroho* thrashes all things inside-out."  
Whatever is unpresent, whatever wilts in the abyss  
remains here in the seam line of unpresence—  
the aura of twisty turvy air implores, "so let's whirl,  
let's whirl in *maya*."

*Bipasha Haque is a diaspora writer with particular interest in life-the way it is. By profession she is a university teacher.*

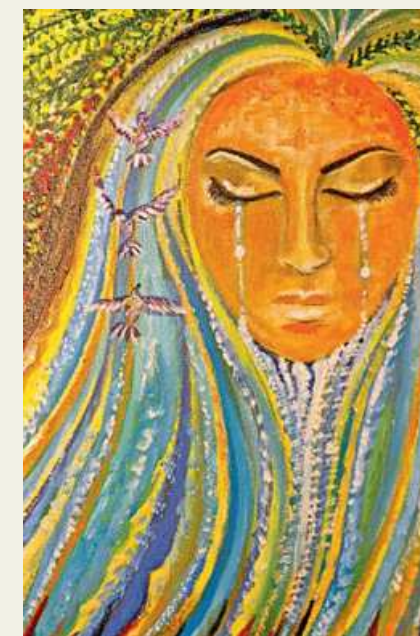


PHOTO: RUBAB JAFRI

Poetry

AHMAR MAHBOOB

The river wept, as we left  
But its tears were not for us.  
It cries not for those who leave;  
It cries for those who stay:  
The fish that live in acid rapids  
And the birds that prey on them;  
The trees that struggle to stay green  
Amidst all the dust and grey.  
The river wept, as we left  
But its tears were not for us.  
It cries not for those who leave;  
It cries for those who stay:  
The fields of plastics amidst the wheat  
And lands drenched in chemicals;  
The children who grow up in dirt  
Never knowing what pristine meant.  
The river wept, as we left  
But its tears were not for us.  
It cries not for those who leave;  
It cries for those who stay.

*Ahmar Mahboob is a Linguist. Currently, he is Associate Professor at the Department of Linguistics at the University of Sydney.*

Moving On

MITALI CHAKRAVARTY

Flowers on Facebook —  
Violet, red, yellow, orange —  
splashed a welcome  
into a garden never visited

Then... they stopped  
faded like the fragrance  
of my childhood.  
Time had put a halt

Long gone days —  
curtains drawn  
on past hurts,  
past wrongs.

Only memories remain  
of the love, the warmth  
the friendship  
that was sought...

The last song of an exotic bird called Nostalgia.

*Mitali Chakravarty is a writer and editor of Borderless Journal.*



NONFICTION

Substitute Cook

SOHANA MANZOOR

Last November, our elderly maid servant Fatema's ma who works full-time at our house, wanted to take leave to get her son married. Of course, I agreed immediately. But she would be gone for about two weeks and hence she proposed that her eldest son's wife might work in her absence.

While normally I would prefer to have a substitute cook, the problem in this case was her daughter-in-law herself. On an earlier occasion, when she had substituted her mother-in law, she whined and pined for extra money (beyond what I was giving her). I was willing to help them out occasionally, but I did not want to make it a regular practice. Moreover, she had the habit of disappearing without notice. So, I was not too keen on having her around. My brother Sumit scratched his head and said, "Isn't she the one that had cooked fish with fish scales? We might as well have Food Panda." I smiled ruefully because she did cook the fish once with hints of fish-scale in it.

So, Food Panda was a better option indeed. But what about cleaning the house? Much as I disliked cooking, I liked cleaning even less. Maybe we could ask the sweeper to do it twice a week. Suddenly, Sumit started to laugh uproariously. As I stared at him questioningly, he threw up his hands and asked, "Masuda's ma isn't still around, is she?"

I gasped, "She died years ago. Why do you ask?"

He smiled, "Nah, I just happened to remember the things she did when the regular cook was gone. Remember, you came back home running and said that you're not going to visit Nanubari until Masuda's ma gave up cooking?"

I laughed too. Masuda's ma is a legendary figure in the family of my maternal grandparents. My younger cousins may not remember her, but we certainly do. She used to work at my Nanubari in Old Dhaka. I can still recall her scrawny form and waspish temper. She had one bad eye and it was whitish in colour. She worked from early in the morning till lateafternoon with occasional respites in front of the kitchen, or in the yard. I remember her sitting in the yard after lunch and chewing on betel leaf with a bit of betel nut and *khoir*. Sometimes she would borrow thin strips of tobacco leaf

from either of the two other maid servants of the house and as she chewed on it, the expression on her face said that she was in seventh heaven. They would all chit chat near the large water drum in the yard, laugh over things and occasionally quarrel too. Then my ever-busy grandmother would yell from the veranda, "What are you up to, you lazy ones? Are you done with your day's work?" And the three of them would immediately scurry off to complete their daily chores.

Now do not get me wrong. That was a different era. These maid servants were part and parcel of the family. I saw them through my entire childhood and teenage years. They left once they were too old, but in many



cases, their children came to work. They were loyal to my grandmother, and my Nanu also trusted them. I always saw her concerned over their well-being. But she never displayed affection and was stern with her children and helping hands alike. The softer side of her nature came out only with her grandchildren.

As it happened, my Nanubari was a large two-storied house. It was painted in pink with intricate blue and white designs as most old-town houses of the pre-Pakistani era were. My Nana had the house exchanged with some Hindu gentleman when he moved from Kolkata to Dhaka in 1947. He extended it and had carved the name "Shafi Manzil"

on the front side of the building. My mother had eleven siblings and when I was a child, I could never be sure how many people actually resided there at a time. Much of my childhood was spent at my Nanubari. You can probably understand, there were also a number of helping hands. Cooking was mostly done by my great-grandmother and she was assisted by Rahman's ma. Masuda's ma and Hali's ma did the scrubbing and washing but the latter was not allowed in the kitchen because my Boroma (great grandmother) found her habits not too clean. Apart from them there were a couple of boys to run errands. There were two teen-age girls too who looked after my little cousins. The time Sumit

"That will do. You surely know how to cook rice and daal? And you can at least chop things? And don't you worry, I'll double your salary."

Masuda's ma nodded. And her days in the kitchen began.

The first day passed smoothly. My Nanu was hovering around the kitchen protectively and even though the daal did not turn out as fragrant, there was no serious mishap. I went to visit on the second day and met one of my *mamis* (wife of maternal uncle) standing near the front door of the ground floor. She had a strange look on her face, a peculiar mixture disbelief, anger and mirth.

I asked, "How are you, *Moni Mami*? Is everything okay?"

She turned to look at me and took some time to frame her reply. "I think I'm well. But have you ever had '*dori bhaji*', Sohana?"

"What's *dori bhaji*?" I was thoroughly confused. I have eaten dory-fish in the restaurants in recent times, but in those days of the late-eighties, *dori bhaji* made no sense.

"Masuda's ma cooked the *dori* (ropes) tied with the *laal shak* today. When I asked her why she had not washed the leaves, she told me she cannot clean them because she has only one eye. So, we should clean them while eating."

I gaped at *mami* and then both of us burst out laughing. It was no laughing matter, however, when I was given a bowl of noodles to eat, noodles that somehow tasted of soda and soap. I took a spoonful, threw it up and ran—straight back home.

But curiosity got the better of me, and five days later, I went to Nanubari again. As soon as I entered the house, I heard my aunt Swapna shouting. Swapna khala was a level headed, soft-spoken person who rarely raised her voice. What was going on? As I alighted the first floor, I saw her standing in the long veranda that went from the drawing room to the kitchen with my Chhoto Mama's quarters on the right. She was saying, "How can anybody be so careless? What would my mother-in-law say if she hears of this? Now throw away the chickens. Eeks!"

I knew that Swapna Khala's mother-in-law had come to visit from Comilla for medical check-up. Khalu was in Saudi Arabia and Khala had come to visit. Her mother-in law

was staying with her. Swapna Khala had got chicken for her to make soup. Two live soup chickens were kept in the kitchen and they were supposed to be slaughtered in the name of Allah as is the custom in our country. When Khala asked Masuda's ma if the boys had been there to do the chickens, she looked at her nonchalantly and exclaimed, "Oh, it wasn't done? The chickens were lying so still that I thought they were dead. I have cleaned them- they're ready to be cooked."

As we were having *keema-paratha* (from the local vendor) and tea that afternoon, one of my cousins said, "I wonder what would Masuda's ma put inside *keema-paratha*."

My Nanu exclaimed, "Allah! Who knew that woman's so crazy! I caught her about to pour black pepper in the *payesh*, and yesterday she was asking how much *dalchini* (Masuda's ma's word for *daruchini* or cinnamon) to put in daal."

Chhoto Mama asked, "Amma, how long will you let Masuda's ma continue?"

Nanu replied without batting an eyelash, "Till Rahman's ma comes back. I won't allow anybody else in my kitchen."

The household members were bracing themselves for more of Masuda's ma's antics when Rahman's ma finally returned. And my great grandmother also seemed to be recovering.

On seeing Rahman's ma, the substitute cook exclaimed, "What took you so long? What do I know of cooking, eh? Here's your kitchen. Now I have to rescue the house from Hali's ma. That wench has no notion of cleanliness. The place stinks!"

All these happened years ago. The dates are lost now, but the stories are fresh and intact. Masuda's ma died a long time ago too. In spite of her quirks and peculiarities, she was a good soul; honest and trustworthy. Rain or sunshine, she would appear on time, do her work and leave in the afternoon.

I sighed and presently told Fatema's ma to return on time. She is attached to us and like my Nanu, I also did not want anybody else in our kitchen.

*Sohana Manzoor is Associate Professor, Department of English & Humanities, ULAB. She is also a Deputy Editor of The Daily Star.*