



fiction

The Adversary

by Abdul Mannan Syed

HE had other things on his mind. That's what he hadn't noticed. And it was quite some time after Abed climbed on the rickshaw before he became fully aware of the way it was being driven. The man, the one peddling, was old. Abed felt annoyed. Just exactly the way it always happens! Whenever he had to get somewhere in a hurry — Abed reflected — he would invariably find himself with a rickshawala who either was ancient or just starting out ('The other day he'd been extremely pressed. As soon as he walked out of the house he had stepped up onto a rickshaw and sat down. But he became impatient when he noted how it was moving. For quite some time, though, he just sat there, gritting his teeth, till finally he could stand it no longer and asked sarcastically, "What's the problem. Is it your first day or what?" The rickshawala, to peddle, replied humbly, smiling, "Yes, Sir, Today's my first time out on the streets."), or they would be caught in a traffic jam, or there would be something wrong with the rickshaw which prevented it from going fast, or at the very least they would catch all the red lights and have to wait at each and every intersection. But whenever there was nothing urgent, when he figured he would just enjoy the scenery as he went along, it was then that by some quirk of fate a robust young fellow would turn up — hair fluttering in the breeze, colorful handkerchief around his throat, from his lips a whistle or maybe an off-colour word or two, his rickshaw shiny bright, flying through the air, or like a skiff on water, gliding smoothly and swiftly.

It always happened so, exactly like that, to such an extent that Abed wondered if it were not simply a matter of his own perception, maybe, when he felt pressed for time, the rickshaw in fact traveled normally and it merely seemed to him it wasn't being peddled vigorously enough. Could that be the case? Not really. Abed checked. The rickshaws from behind were one after another passing them by and going on ahead. Then? He mumbled under his breath a few choice insults at his driver.

And he continued to do so. What else was there to do? Had he realised at the start, he could at least have changed rickshaws. But he'd come too far to get down now. It was nearly 11 o'clock. He had told his publisher he would come between 10:30 and 11 o'clock. The time had been of his own choosing. His publisher said he would be there then. And now he was about to be late. Abed grew restless. On top of it all, there was the suffocating, sultry August heat. It felt as though it were raising blisters within him; his body oozed. By 11 o'clock the August sun was already throbbing. Crowds streamed down Nawabpur Road on either side of him. Any way, thank goodness, it was now a one-way street. There used to be one traffic jam after another. But they had changed it in '71 — as best he could recall — during those days of great upheaval. Beneath that August sun, that stifling heat, Abed longed for a little shade — shade for thought. But his thoughts kept coming back to one place: he needed to see his publisher. Not a lot, but if the man could give him hundred takas, from the receipts from his novel.

About four years ago that novel had been published, the first edition still not sold out. It hadn't been written for the money. Goaded by youth's consuming romantic yearnings, the words, which at first wouldn't come, suddenly burst forth, and in a matter of days the piece flowed to completion. *Dead Moon*.

His first novel. After publication, it was much discussed in various journals. Critics had called in morbid, obscene. One senior critic wondered why a young novelist would name his very first novel *Dead Moon*. The novel really didn't amount to much. Not for the reasons the critics gave, however, but by Abed's own standards it didn't amount to much. Too unstructured, unreal, romantic. He had named the main character Faheem. Now he couldn't remember from where he got that name. The whole thing had been fabricated. A colorful bauble, a bubble, nothing more. Faheem isn't even a name one gives a Bengali Muslim boy. That bubble burst and disappeared — good riddance. The only embarrassing part was that the fellow who blew the bubble still had to live a very real life. He had to manage somehow, writing those bubbly novels. He needed the money. And for that very reason he had been running here and there for the last few days. He couldn't even tell you how many times he had approached this one particular pub-

lisher.

Abed didn't write poetry, though he used to once.

But he gave it up. There was this aspect of his nature which let him watch lightning and not be overwhelmed with fascination. Was it because of this that, at his young age, he had been able to quit writing poetry? He also wrote short stories, but there were no publishers for short stories. He hadn't so much as made the effort to find any. Then one day he suddenly gave up short story writing too. If you wanted to get published, you wrote novels. But did even novels attract a publisher? Take a twenty-page story and stretch it out into a hundred-page novel. Finding a publisher here for that, however, was no easy matter either. In fact, these days one found publishers for poetry, of all things. Quite a number of poetry books had appeared on the market recently. Amazing! It was probably precisely because Abed didn't write poetry that that genre was now getting published, and so much honour and renown for poets! Maybe it had been this realisation, at work within him, which caused him to cut back on his story writing. Actually, he had been thinking about writing more novels — to maintain his name as a writer — and it was just possible, after all, that he had gained some experience over these years of being in the thick of things. But where was the time, that needed chunk of free time. Still then, he had dashed off another short novel recently — it too in part was simply what had been commissioned, in part, met his own standards. Yet all of these things were only bits and pieces of a mirror for his consciousness. When would the total reflection appear?

Seated there on the rickshaw, Abed's whole body burned in anger and the heat of the day. And then there were the critics. Critics! Character, plot, pattern: a mishmash of clichés. Cashews! Cashew nuts, or maybe just nuts! Anyway, from cashew we got Kashem — Kashem Ali, Mr Kashem Ali. "That son of a ... cashew!" said Abed out loud, intending it for the critic. With a sneering grin, Abed sat there all alone on the rickshaw mocking Kashem Ali. His lips moved slightly; his face got even more flushed from rage and the searing sun; his brows furrowed into a sign of utter contempt. Abed knew full well: his own writing could not simply be dismissed. They would have to acknowledge him for the simple fact that his writing had permanent worth. Yet — yet those critics! The reading public relished their spicy comments. As long as you wrote, they were going to be nipping at your heels. They couldn't write a line on their own, but they could split the hairs of another's writing and analyze each strand. Nothing short of divine powers, theirs.

When Abed stepped down from the rickshaw in front of the publisher's, it was by his watch — which he took a glance at — 11:25. No telling, maybe he'd already left.

With a stern look, Abed paid the rickshawala, turned, and strode into the shop.

Rahman Saheb's chair stood empty.

As he entered, a couple of employees familiar of face but whose names he didn't know gazed at him giving no sign of welcome.

"Rahman Saheb's not in?" asked Abed.

"Just left a short while ago. Not more than five minutes if that." As he was giving the reply, it seemed a little life came into the employee's voice. But what about Abed?

Through that heat Abed took his sticky body over and lowered it down upon the unquestioning, unwelcoming chair right beneath the whirling overhead fan. "Did he say anything?" Abed, dubious but eager to know, stared at them. Then noting their expressions, he asked, disheartened, "When's he to return?"

Can't tell you for sure. He didn't say anything."

So as to enjoy a few moments under the fan, Abed, his voice recovering slightly from the disappointment, announced in an undertone, "I'll wait a bit and see."

The employees didn't hear, or possibly they just didn't respond. Abed seemed to have spoken to himself. They went about their own business. Still feeling the force of that letdown which follows high hopes dashed, Abed glanced indifferently at today's newspapers lying on the desk as he continued to dry his sweaty body beneath the fan, trying to shake the fatigue. The names of the papers were different, the news the same. Newspapers, what a joke. News. Journalists. Integrity. Dreams. Overworked: underpaid. Words, any

number of words were swirling around in Abed's head. He put too much trust in the world he saw with his eyes, heard with his ears.

"My goodness, if it isn't ... is Consciousness still being published?"

Abed turned his head to look. Then with a laugh, he said, "Ah yes, Raheem Saheb ... well, how are you ... it's been a long time." More nervous laughter. "Yes, our magazine, well, if folded, where else would we get it printed ... and about your money ..."

It was at Raheem Saheb's press that Abed and a few of his story-writing friends had had their little magazine Consciousness printed. In all, three issues came out. They had had great plans. They were going to start a new trend in short story writing, focusing on stream-of-consciousness. But within only three issues their own consciousness' stream became muddled. A cold war of clandestine competition broke out in their ranks. By the third issue, things had come apart. Not a single paisa of the money due Raheem Saheb's press was ever paid: at various other places too they had debts outstanding. Among the founders Abed had been one of the more prominent. It was in that capacity that Raheem Saheb knew him. During all this time they hadn't once gone to see Raheem Saheb. Half-unconsciously, each kept his distance. Who would have thought that today, quite by accident, Raheem Saheb would turn up.

"But, how come you're" Abed did not keep his surprise concealed, with still that forced smile stretched across his face.

"I do some work for them, too."

"Oh, but of course. Naturally. They're in the publishing business, after all — bring out all sorts of textbooks and what not."

Sure, it was to be expected that press owners maintained contact with publishers. Yet when we don't think about the logical connections, we're constantly amazed. Everything is bound by a chain of laws emanating from somewhere — but we tend to forget this fact. Are the ways of the poet, the artist, the great men of history in defiance of those laws? Are they all adversaries of those tightly linked, pervasive laws?

Raheem Saheb was basically a good soul. He really had been more than cooperative in the matter of their magazine and had put up with all their craziness and silly whims, sometimes to his own detriment. They had given him plenty of trouble for those three issues of Consciousness he printed. And he, without a hint of annoyance or impatience, had borne it all. Then they cheated him — what else could it be called but cheating? At least they should have gone once to see him — certainly he felt hurt. His complaint against them stemmed more from the hurt they caused him than from their not paying the money, no doubt. Abed, rather than sit there any longer (pointless to hang around anyway; who knew when his publisher would return), left with Raheem Saheb. That steamy, sticky heat. Back out in the street the faces of everyone they passed showed exhaustion laved in sweat, that totally disheveled look.

With Raheem Saheb, Abed was conspicuously polite. He expressed great interest in his affairs — so that Raheem Saheb might at least feel somewhat compensated for this monetary loss. "You do understand, don't you, they aren't swindlers — they had a valid reason why they couldn't pay." Raheem Saheb walked a bit further with Abed but then eventually went on his own way. And Abed, following that little interlude, sank once again into despair. He had badly needed they money. But what irritated him most was that Rahman Saheb had said he would be there. Then he simply forgot and went off elsewhere. At any rate he might have left a message with his employees. Then again, what would have come of it had they met. Rahman Saheb would probably have said — as he had said many times — that things were a little awkward for him right then, financially. And that would be that. Nothing Abed could do.

Now he had to check with the printers. Just the thought of having to go to the press depressed Abed even more. Who knew how far along they were with the new gallery proofs. Once again would they tell him — as they had so often before — to come back tomorrow, just hadn't been able to get around to it today. And that would again be that. The book was nearly printed. Only two or three formas, a mere thirty to forty pages, left to do. But it was those every pages they were being so slow about. Raheem Saheb, press manager, moreover, was not your most affable sort. He

never opened his mouth to say a word unless it was absolutely necessary. Abed felt still more put out about that. He himself liked to talk. Abed might go on talking non-stop, and Haleem Saheb would just listen, with a solemn expression on his face. Sometimes he'd utter a word or two, but most of the time, not even that. He was only the manager of an ordinary press, yet oh how he affected a sense of his own importance and authority. Abed, on the other hand, was relatively well-known writer: he handled words with care and could be, if the situation called for it, an excellent conversationalist.

The press was located down a filthy alley. Open drains on either side, with both dog and human excrement, and on the lane proper, sizable piles of garbage. Getting past all that, Abed lowered his head and stepped through the doorway. There sat the manager busy with some sort of calculations. As soon as Abed entered, Haleem Saheb spoke. "Have a seat. They are printing up your galley." He had looked up to say that. Now he lowered his gaze again and went silently about his own task at hand.

Abed let out a sigh of relief and sat down. Thank heavens. Given they way the day was going — at least now it wouldn't be a complete bust. The fan was on, and right beneath it sat Abed. Within a matter of minutes, revived, he got up and went in the back to see how far they had progressed on the proof sheets. Abed was indeed excited. The manager had taken no notice, continuing on with his own work single-mindedly.

A bit later Abed reappeared, a stack of still wet proofs in hand. With obvious satisfaction he spread them out directly under the fan, securing each with a paperweight or whatever else was handy, so they would dry more quickly. In the meantime, he held up one sheet, running his eyes over it. Ah, how gratifying! This was not the first time he had seen his own words in print, but still it gave him an incredible thrill. Moments later, uncapping his pen, he began with genuine enthusiasm to go over the proofs. First he checked the sequence, then read through one page after another. Proofreading by oneself has its drawbacks, but for the time being there was no other way.

While reading, just for the sheer enjoyment of saying something, he asked Haleem Saheb. "Uh, 'ayatta' is spelled 'ta', isn't it."

The manager raised his sober face and stared. Then out of nowhere, it seemed, there appeared a soft smile — as if from the depths of his eyes or the recesses of his cranium — shading, as it were, with a cooling could-cover all his tedious bookkeeping. Without answering Abed's question, he gazed wistfully in his direction and said, "Did you know, sir, I too am an author?"

"Is that so?" Abed was truly taken aback.

"Yes, sir, I've even published a novel."

"Really?"

The manager's usually serious countenance seemed a glow with emotion. He said, "I tell you, it was some feat. I used to work on that novel every night, by the light of a hurricane lantern — writing page after page. My wife would say to me, 'What is all this you're writing?' For three solid months I wrote like that. But then came the problem of a title. What was I going to call it? I was in a real bind. Couldn't come up with anything. I had a friend in the neighborhood, Farid Saheb — and I had read out to him whatever I wrote each night. Then one evening, after the things was finished, he and I sat down to choose a name. My wife brought us tea, then betel nut — 10 o'clock, 11 o'clock — my friend Farid Saheb would suggest a name, but it wouldn't be quite to my liking; then I'd suggest one, and he wouldn't like it — and so on, 11 o'clock, 12 midnight — we smoked; my wife made more tea for us, and smiling said, 'So late, and still you two can't decide on a single name?' Finally at about 1 a.m. we settled on the Chaste Woman. Everyone was pleased, even my wife."

Abed took in all this with a smile on his face. But he was actually flabbergasted. Was this fellow making up some sort of fairytale or what. His own wife, Firoza, never let him write in the evenings. "Did you marry me just to write the whole night long? I won't have it. No sense ruining your health by staying up all hours. Come along, time for bed." His hand were tied, legs hobbled — even now when he thought of it, he got a twinge. At that time Abed had a job with a newspaper. He used to sit in his office and write — yet that was writing of a different sort. Journalism. He needed solitude to write literature: only the confines of his own home would do for

that. But constantly, night and day, Firoza used to make those snide remarks. "Writing! Literature! Can you feed and clothe a wife properly from literature? If you'd put that time to other use, we'd have a few more paise to spend. Life would be a little easier! But do you understand that? In the middle of the month, or towards the end, you come up with a couple of takas and think you are doing me a big favor. He can't afford to buy me one new sari a year, or even provide two square meals a day — and on top of that the man dabbles in literature!"

Abed had to listen to the same sort of thing at his wife's father's. Sitting together on the veranda, his father-in-law used to tell him, "Nobody makes a decent living in this country by writing."

And Abed had to put up with Firoza's incessant carping. It even came to the point where when he sat down to write, she'd actually tear up his papers and say things like, "Go to the ration shop. Do the marketing. Get this or that from the store." He paid attention to some of what she said, would even carry out some to the tasks. One might have thought, though, that his writing was Firoza's out-and-out enemy — such was her behaviour. "Why did you send anything to that worthless rang? They don't pay."

Abed would reply, "It's one of those little magazine. My duty to support them with a piece or two. If we could spare little money on top of that, so much the better. You realize, don't you, Bengali literature depends on them in particular — not on the well-established journals."

"Yuk! Literature! Bengali literature! The high and mighty!" Firoza would mutter, as though hurling a curse, "Let them eat their literature!"

So it used to go. Then one day Firoza went home to her father's for a visit and didn't come back. Abed arrived to fetch her. She informed him bluntly: she wasn't going back with him. Nor were his in-laws very cordial. Abed went another time. But Firoza still wouldn't return. Unbelievable. Abed was not really sure what offense he had committed. He tried to look at things from her point of view, from the perspective of a woman who after two years of living with her husband felt somehow compelled to leave. True, Firoza had her many wants and needs. But was Abed's offense so totally unforgivable? And what, after all, was that offense?

Today he seemed to have found Haleem Saheb in a talkative mood. Totally self-absorbed, Haleem Saheb proceeded with his own story. "And so the book was ready. Now it had to be published. I went to Haji Saheb, a publisher I know personally. I said to him, 'Haji Saheb, this was a pet project of mine, something I did not for the fun of it. Now you have to put it into print.' And Haji Saheb replied, 'Since it's your book I won't even have to examine it. Just leave me the manuscript. It's as good as published.' I left there elated. Then days passed, months went by — but the book didn't come out. I would go talk with Haji Saheb from time to time. He'd say, 'I'm just about to get started on it.' With these I'm just about ... I'm just about ... a full year slipped by. Finally, I got mad. I went to Haji Saheb and demanded, 'Give me back my manuscript!' Even though I managed to control my temper, Haji Saheb realized I was furious. He said, 'I'm going to get to it — this coming week.' But I seized his very worlds and shot back. This coming week I myself shall get the book printed and show it to you.' Haji Saheb didn't say anything more. I took back the manuscript and left. But by that time I was determined: I would get the book printed somehow and within a week show Haji Saheb at least the first forma so he could see for sure that it was being published. I got in touch with a gentleman I knew who had his own press. In the past I had done a bit of work for him. So I said to him, 'You've got to print this book of mine.' — and I told him the whole matter candidly, that it was a matter of pride now. He was willing."

Haleem Saheb paused. Abed, fascinated, had been drinking in, so to speak, the sudden gush of words pouring out of this usually sedate soul. Haleem Saheb recounted complication after complication, to be sure, but from his eyes, from his entire face, there radiated an almost beatific luster. He seemed to float along, caught in the current of his won narrative. It became clear that Abed functioned as mere pretext. Haleem Saheb was actually telling all this to himself — and deriving immense pleasure from the telling.

The fan's breeze could not dispel the

suffocating August heat, but his tale had made Abed oblivious to his physical environment for the time being. He too seemed almost swept away in the stream of Haleem Saheb's narration.

"Then a problem arose concerning the subject matter of the story. In my novel an unmarried girl gets into trouble. Actually, she had secretly married her lover. But Rasul Saheb took exception. It isn't quite right — what is the society — at large going to think? I responded by saying there was no point in arguing over it. But, in the end, I made a few minor revisions. There were some blocks at Rasul Saheb's press already cut. From those, we selected one and used it to print the cover design. Oh, I forgot to mention — during all this time I didn't drop by Haji Saheb's place even once. Rather than show him just one forma, I took the completed book by some three months later. Haji Saheb was all praises. By that time my anger had subsided, anyway. Of course, I'm in this line of work, you know, and have a lot of friends out there. I got the book distributed throughout the outlying areas, and in just two years, it sold out."

Haleem Saheb stop talking. His appearance seemed to have been transformed completely in that short amount of time. Abed said nothing but thought to himself: happy, these sorts are truly happy. Abed had been writing for the last ten years. People knew his name. His juniors debated the merits of his work. He doubted there would be other editions of his writings in his lifetime, yet he knew his books had lasting value. People said he was natural writer. They said he was serious, that his books were serious. O, seriousness! Curlew, cry no more ...!

Firoza had left him. Had children been involved, the matter would be much more complex. Luckily they had no children; compliments to the Sheikh.

Abed finished the proofreading and gave his okay to print a forma. By then it was nearly 3 o'clock, and he hadn't eaten a bite. Thanks to Haleem Saheb, he had had one cup of tea during the course of that autobiography. Abed was ravenous.

"I'd like to finish up your book quickly," said Haleem Saheb. "Another forma has all been set in type. Wait just bit. You can take the *taleys* with you. These are only the first proofs. If you take those today, you could return them in the morning. Otherwise we'll lose a day."