



fiction Different

by Nasreen Jahan (Translated by Rebecca Haque)

THE lamp stands in the middle. On the other side is my daughter's face — sometimes clear sometimes coppery, sometimes spreading like water all over the room. I see her fully for the first time. I look at her in utter silence. How strange to think that I carried this woman in my womb!

There's a knock at the door. A moment later, my daughters voice cries out irritably. Does anyone use a lantern in this twentieth century?

I go to the door. My longer leg is numb. I put my weight on it nevertheless and reach for the latch and ask, Who is it?

No one answers. Who is it?

There is no sound.

This has been happening for some days. Somebody knocks at the door. Day and night, intermittently. During the daytime I have opened the door. It is bitterly cold in the verandah.

Must be the same bitter wind, my daughter laughs.

So it seems, I say as I come back. On the other side of the light the half-done crotchet work is spread out and I look at it.

My daughter says, whatever you say, Ma, you are a miser. How much does it cost to buy a charger light? Every two days the electricity is off.

Everyone has a charger light in the city now. It's no longer a novelty.

It is not a question of novelty. Why shouldn't we benefit from those consumer goods which are within our means? Why not throw away the TV and the fridge? In many small towns and villages, people use still lanterns, says my daughter.

But the lantern is disappearing from the city. If everything and everyone became the same... I realise that I have started to lose the argument. I will have to concede defeat in the face of her irrefutable logic. But still, let me carry on. In fact, we must have something of our own so that each of us can be unique.

With a lantern, then? laughs my daughter.

Look at this crotchet piece, I say with great enthusiasm. Because one needs great patience to do this, the tradition is being lost in many homes. Yes, with a lantern — what's wrong with that? What a mysterious light it spreads everywhere. It is not open like candle light which looks like a tongue of flame wanting to devour everything.

My daughter continues to laugh. Are these arguments? Listening to you, I wonder what nonsense you have brought me up on.

Have I forced any of my arguments on you, ever?

Of course. I have to sit here tolerating the lantern. Ma, if you cannot discover anything new, at least learn to enjoy the benefits of today. What is so different about holding on to the old, to what existed in our homes these past centuries?

I go to bed.

I dream that I am running about. My two legs are of the same length. I am ten or twelve years old, much younger than my own daughter. Rarely have I seen such a dream. It would have been more natural to have seen this dream often. Must I admit that having legs of uneven size has given me no cause for remorse? I have often thought about this matter. Perhaps, to ward off remorse, I have become so conscious that even my dreams cannot pierce the iron walls of my will. Still, I have always dreamt that I can walk with ease on my legs. Yet, even in my dream it felt strange to be walking naturally. Even in dreams I cannot escape.

Tonight's dream is special. I am running smoothly without stumbling. On top of it all, I am a child once more. On awaking, I see my legs under the clear light after many years — as if they are two young brothers growing up together. One cannot leave the other. In the midst of all this, the girl on the wall with streaming hair laughs in a strange voice. Why that streaming hair? Why do you keep that photograph, my daughter asks angrily. My well-wishers say that all I do is unnatural, of course. They will say this. In fact, they are hinting at my deformity. I limp — surely that is unnatural.

Once there was such a wall inside me. Such a wrenching pain. Heaven and hell became one. When I became a young woman — is this my body, my form? Is this the body I have to carry throughout my life? I would not walk. For hours I would sit tight on my bed.

After some time I found an explanation for myself.

I explained that everyone has two equal legs — everyone walks normally. However bad I might look — I am different.

Gardening was my passion. With the spade I was able to produce myriad colours from the ugly clay — red, yellow

Many ordinary people have this passion too. The more ordinary the person, the greater the number of flowers that

bloom. All the time I wonder, What can I do that others cannot?

Knock, knock.

My heart leaps up. The bright light soaks up the green light of the room. A strange wind blows. I drag myself to open the door — my daughter.

She says in a strange voice, Ma, I have dreamt a bad dream.

I say, it is good to dream bad dreams. Come, come with me.

You always say something strange and different, my daughter seolds me. Why did you close your bedroom door?

Lying on the bed, with my hands in her hair, I say, I don't know what I thought. Last night I thought I was closing the outside door, but I really closed my own.

Bad dreams are good, snickers my daughter. So you believe in superstitions too.

Melting in the warmth of the quilt, I say, I have a reason. I hope you won't argue just for argument's sake.

Ma, your stomach is so cold.

You were in there once.

The way you say it. As if no one else ever bore a child.

For you the world is as clear as water. Actually, the problem is mine. Now that I see you growing into a young woman, you do not seem to be my own daughter.

What do I see? Your friend?

No, not even that. It seems that you were in my womb for a long time; now you are out in the light and the air and you will never come back. You are someone far away.

Do not speak so, says my daughter, rubbing her cold hands against my warm ones. It makes me very sad. You did not explain your argument about dreams.

It often happens in my case. For instance, I see a beautiful dream — I am roaming in different lands or I have found something valuable. Upon waking, my heart shrinks — to think it is not true makes me sad all day. On the other hand, say, you dream that a murderer is pursuing you, you are running endlessly, and then suddenly he gets hold of your body. Or say, I have died, you are all alone in the house. You have covered my body with a white cloth.

Upon waking you will notice that your head feels empty. But all day you will feel relieved to think that all that was only a dream, it didn't happen in reality. What, asleep already?

Secretly, I read a book about dreams. How easily I explained dreams to her. But I really believe in the good and bad influences of dreams. I believe in palmistry. Most of all, I believe in stones.

My gold ring contains two stones. My daughter knows that they are only there to enhance the beauty of the ring. Can I show her, tell her everything?

No, the book says nothing about the significance, good or bad, about a lame girl dreaming about running around freely and easily.

There's a knock at the door. Pintu, from next door, has come around before. My daughter leaves her book in the drawing-room. I have taught my daughter that eavesdropping is wrong. She has learnt this well. I am myself eavesdropping now, under the pretext of washing my hands at the dining-room basin.

They are very free together. But I know they are only friends. If Pintu ever proposes, my daughter will die laughing. Yet, they are talking about current sexual topics. Pintu is narrating tales of his sexual exploits in a brothel.

My ears sting. My daughter has not yet crossed fifteen. I feel helpless. I stumble into bed with a severe headache. I try to reason with myself. This is me. I haven't been like other mothers, that is why I have taught her everything since puberty. First menstruation, conception, how the fetus is conceived, love, marriage, and everything else. Abroad, they have classes on such topics in school. I see nothing wrong in any of these young children. I have also taught her that everything has its own age, its own phase. Will my daughter remain within the bounds of my teaching?

This, this is her own nature. This is what she is proving now. Who knows?

One day she might even bring some layabout hooligan and try to convince me that this is her true mate.

I am afraid. Very afraid. My problem is that no one is attracted to me. That is why, night and day, I focus all my attentions on her.

If I could find any other object for my affections, I could have escaped this poison of love's overflow.

For many years I have been looking for a book, some biography of a crippled woman in order to understand how she looked on life, to know her feelings. I have read the life story of the blind Helen Keller. She was blind from birth, I could not empathize with Helens light and shadows.

Then, must I believe that no crippled woman has ever become a writer? After this — a strong determination takes hold of me. This is my different path — I shall write my autobiography I shall publish it. My growth, my father's abundant love, my mother's sad and weeping eyes at beholding me — what is so different in all this? My parent's deaths, my brothers' separation, my father's getting me married, to a useless but propertied man, his death — yes, death hovers around me. We have let out the downstairs. My daughter and I are alive and kicking — so where is the struggle?

I have waited so long, so hungrily for two normal legs, for one handsome man.

No, everybody walks normally, while I alone hop along like a frog. This is where I am different — I hide my face in the pages of my book. What a damp smell. I take off the poster of the desolate girl from the wall.

I plunge into the white filigree work of the crotchet, into that deep forest Madhabkundo in whose solitude the icy cold water cascades down the fall. Once, I had pressed my father's finger in delight and had exclaimed, Beautiful!

I have not seen anything beautiful for a long time!

I stick another picture on the wall — a man's face with his hair blowing in the wind, but with half of his face covered with a tom-cat. My daughter will surely say to me, Where on earth do you

happens often. Someone I see seems so familiar. But, after talking for a while, I find out that the person is a native of Calcutta and has come to this country for the first time, this happened to my husband on our wedding night. When he said to me, Your face is so familiar, I had answered, But of course, it would be so because we two have something in common — we are both human beings. Perhaps this is human nature; not the desire to know the known, but to know the familiar.

Mahmuda says, The few female writers that I know here are pretty conservative. Their writings are pretty restricted. They describe tyrannical mothers-in-law, adulterous husbands, unfamiliar children — these are the issues that matter to them. There is probably some reason. They will find it problematic to deal with your complex issues — the foetus and its growth, childbirth. The other day, a writer friend of mine said to me she had written a story about a woman's adultery. Before sending it for publication, she gave it to her husband to read — and the husband was furious. Since then, the husband has suspected his wife of some such sin.

I am very sleepy.

Goldfish swim in the water. I stare at them. After some moments, I whisper, Do you know anyone who can give me an amulet to ward off Jinns?

Mahmuda is taken aback. You believe in these superstitions?

Somebody knocks at my door night and day — I know it is a Jinn. I don't tell my daughter — she will laugh at me. You do not know — those who are deformed always have Jinns with them.

Ridiculous! You are going crazy.

I become angry. How can you say that? You yourself pray five times a day. Islam believes in the existence of Jinns. Have I said anything contradictory?

After coming back from her house, I fall on the bed. How content I am. Human beings struggle so hard. They sleep on the streets, barely manage one decent meal. I do not have to struggle for money. If father had not left this house to me, I could have procured money by showing my deformity to the world.

I sigh as I think of my daughter. How smart and sophisticated I wanted her to be. Once, I was besotted with her singing lessons. But she said, Everybody sings.

My words were returned to me. Then this is all you will ever be — only a girl. Then my daughter said, Let me walk upside down on my head. That will be doing something different.

Now this girl talks about God knows what with Pintu. Have I made a mistake in telling her everything? But a few of her friends — whose parents are shocked and tongue-tied at such topics — are even more daring. When I hear of their forward behaviour from my daughter's mouth, my nerves throb with anger. Some of them have already had sex at this age, some....

My daughter just talks. Why then do I watch her so? She never hides anything from me. What else do I want?

She could not become anything different, special!

A heavy sigh, heavy as grey smoke, issues from my suffering breast. That is why I look at myself. Since birth I have seen that people stare and crane their necks to look at me like they look at big, glamorous stars. But their expressions always make me cringe. Some of them have given a muffled laugh and mocked me with, Ah, ha! I find myself amidst such people still. The more I walk, the more I suffer. I am stubborn. I want to display myself even more. What can I do to make my deformity exceptional?

At one time I had thought that I should cut off my leg to make them both the same size. This feeling used to wrench my heart. My constant thought would be, How can I make the two equal? Once, leaving such bizarre thoughts aside, I had specially made wooden shoes. One had a heel, the other did not. I was walking along, somewhat draggingly, when a youth commented from behind. When did this cripple fix herself? In such situations people are very cruel. I hurled away the shoe and once again became my natural self.

When I think of this, I feel goose pimples all over me. I feel somebody is walking on the other side of the mosquito net. I hear a sound at the front door. Am I sleeping? I cannot identify the sound for a while. Is it the sound of my own foot? Who is it that threatens me so with fear? Why this continuous tapping on the door? Do I know who it is? I am very afraid.

As I open the door to walk into my daughter's room, I hear breathing in the corridor. I run and fall on my daughter's breast, deathly afraid.

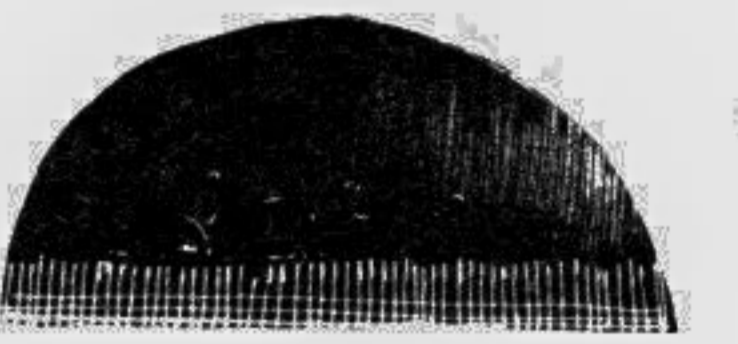
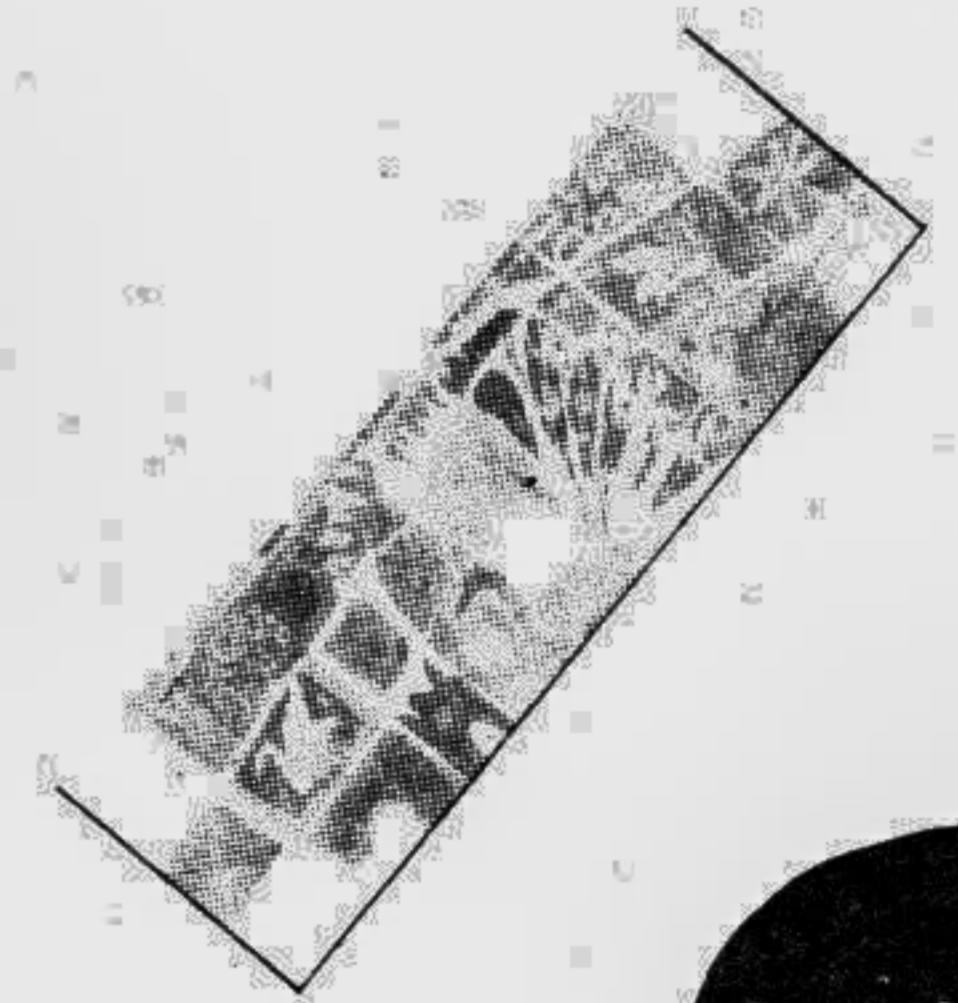
My daughter runs her fingers through my hair and says, You are so alone, it makes me sad. After a long silence, she adds, You could have remarried!

What would have happened to you then? I would have called that man my fa-

ther. I have not done it, that is why you say so today. If I had, you would have punished me.

You do not know me. I don't know you? I ask, incredulously. Some time ago you were a little, different. You would cry so much because you wanted to take me to your friends' get-together. You would say, My mother may be broken, she may be a cripple, still she is my pride. If anyone

from his wife as soon as it is born because it does not have any hands. He runs and runs with it across the green fields to throw it into the river. He stumbles and falls. The newborn babe immediately says to the father, Father, can you not find me? Here I am, inside the paddy fields. This is no story! I tell the woman next door, I really want to write. She says, exactly my predicament. If I could only write a single line! take up paper and pen. There are so



laughed, you would quarrel with her. Now you say, if you went to such places, you would feel sick and uneasy. You would not be able to tolerate so much noise.

Actually, that is not it. My friends say that you are over-protective.

Actually, your world has become much larger. I say, and I admit it readily without pain. Your mother hobbling beside you would only diminish your beauty.

You yourself have changed so much. Mother, I hardly understand you now.

After many years, I feel my own mother's pain. Why did you not die in the womb, my mother always lamented, and so I had always thought her to be my enemy. Actually, everyone's expression of pain is unique. When she was dying she had called for me — I had not gone. I understand her feelings now. A child remains the property of its mother for some time. How stubborn I had been then! I was just such a problematic property of my mother. Because my mother could not throw me away, she had behaved strangely with me. My daughter's slight originality therefore frightens me. When I think of my mother's dying, and her terrible agony, I weep silently.

I look at the distant road as I sit on the chair in the verandah. This part of the city is still uncongested. This road, this palm tree, they give me solace every time. The house on the right has a verandah on which a young boy now stands. I have never seen him before. There is a magic play of light and shadow — do I really look so remarkable? He is staring at me so strangely. I shrink but then I realize that he cannot see my legs. After many years, my nerves begin to jangle. I think, even if he stands there forever, I shall not get up in front of him to walk back into the house.

My daughter comes to the verandah. I am like a frozen statue. She sits on the verandah with her legs apart. With green, wet henna on her palms, she says, Isn't the boy too thin and gangly. Mother?

I often think that I will write. I cannot paint. I cannot sing. I know Bengali. Through it I will express my feelings. I think in so many ways. So many of my thoughts have the same theme — deformity and decrepitude, I think, I will write a story — a man steals his child

poem

Destiny

by Monzoor Wakil

When you are chasing the destiny facing freaky storm,
you are in the midst of hundred strangers.
Sounds of weeping,
sounds of clapping,
sounds of laughter, and whisper.
You are lost in paradox.
When you find no passerby around you;
no cry, no shy, no anger, and no backfire.
The road is your sole sense heart
the road is your sailing bravery.
You lit the bonfire of your single willing fuse.

Last summer when you lost your no risen friend,
last autumn when your friend lost his mother,
I used to dream;
millions of rainbow dust made their days,
millions of colorless dust making their days now,
98 people were on the rainbow dust,
2 people are on the colorless dust.
This is life.
(in memory of Kamrul and Khalamma)

