

Fiction

One Night

From 'Ek Ratri' of Rabindranath Tagore

I was with Surabala I went to the village school, and played the wedding game. Surabala's mother used to treat me with much care whenever I went to their house, and on bringing us together she used to tell, "Dear Lord, they make such a good pair!"

Even as a child, I could understand what she meant. I knew I had a special right over Surabala. I at times got carried away with my prerogatives. Surabala carried out my orders, received my punishments without any complaint. Everybody appreciated her beauty, but in my unthinking mind it had little appeal. I only knew, Surabala was born in her father's house only to be ruled by me.

My father was the caretaker of Chowdhury, the Zamindar. It was his wish, to put me in a clerical job and take up the job of a revenue collector. But, deep inside, I hated it. I rather wanted to be like Nilratan who became the Sheriff in the civil court after running away to Calcutta. If I did not become the Sheriff, the least I hoped for was to become the head clerk in the Judge's court.

I always saw my father treating the court-men with reverence they were offered fish, vegetables, and coins. Even the petty officials of the court or the messengers ranked high in my heart. They were like deities in miniature worshipped in our country in addition to the thirty-three crore others. The sheer dependence on these men for material accomplishment is far greater than that on Lord Ganesha. These court men probably get the entire share that was once due to Ganesha.

Inspired by Nilratan, I took the first chance to run away to Calcutta. I was staying with someone from my village. My father started sending some money for my education. My studies were going fine.

I joined some associations and started attending their meetings. I was convinced that we must be prepared for greater sacrifices if required. But how this could be done was beyond my grasp, and nobody showed me the way. Still, there was no dearth of inspiration. We were village boys, we did not learn to ridicule everything like the smart boys of Calcutta. Our dedication was firm. We listened to the organizers, solicited from door to door with the donation books and without any food in those hot sunny days, distributed leaflets, laid benches in the meeting venue, and was ever ready to fight against anyone who spoke ill of our leaders. The city boys thought we were but rustics.

I could have been the Sheriff in a civil court or the revenue collector. But my new plan involved becoming Mazzini or Garibaldi. My father and

Surabala's father took the initiative of our wedding.

I ran away to Calcutta when I was fifteen, Surabala was eight then; now I am eighteen. My father thought I was passing my marriageable age. By then I was resolved not to marry in this life but to die for my country. I told my father that I would not marry before completion of my studies.

The news of Surabala's marriage to a pleader called Mr. Ramlochan

into commanders of future India. But, I soon felt the rush of examinations was far greater than the fate of future India. My interest died down in a few months.

It is easy to have fiery imaginations sitting comfortably in the house. In reality, when we have to finish our duties just to fill our stomachs and carry the yokes of life with lowered head and twisted tail, little is actually left for grandiose plans.

It was the duty of one school-

pleader Ramlochan Roy was near our school. And his wifely childhood companion Surabala was with him.

I met Mr. Ramlochan on several occasions but did not know whether he knew about my acquaintance with Surabala. I did not consider it appropriate to talk about this as well. It did not occur to me that Surabala was a part of my life.

One day I went to Mr. Ramlochan's house. We were probably talking about the plight of India. He was not particularly worried or concerned. He smokes of tobacco we dragged our discussion for over an hour.

Suddenly, I heard a soft clinking of bangles, the rustling of dress and a little sound of footsteps in the next room. I could feel a pair of curious eyes, observing me through the chinks in the window.

Instantly I remembered the pair of eyes two black large eyes filled to the brim with innocence and childhood fondness with black eye lashes and remarkably graceful gaze. I felt a sudden pain in my chest.

I returned home with the pain lingering with me. I could not find an outlet for my pain, not in writing or reading.

When the pain eased a little, I asked myself why. Somebody from inside, queried, "where that Surabala of yours has gone?"

"I have set her free in my own will. Would she wait for me for her lifetime?"

"You could have got her if you willed. Now you don't even have the right to see her no matter what you do. That Surabala of your childhood is so near yet so far away from you. You hear the clinking of her bangles, feel her presence, but you will never cross the wall that stands in between."

"So be it. Surabala, who is she to me?"

"Surabala is today nobody to you but what Surabala could not have become to you."

What Surabala could not have been to me? Closest of all to me, nearest of all to me, could have been the co-sharer of the joys and pains of life today she is so far away, so distant. Today it is forbidden to see her, talking to her is a crime, to think about her is a sin. Ramlochan, without any connection at all is in her life. Through chanting of one or two mantras he has snatched away Surabala.

I have neither set out to introduce new rules in the human society nor have come to bring down the society, nor do I want to tear apart bonds. I am only expressing the real state of my mind. The emotions that rise in one's mind are they all rational. I could not drive away the

thought that Surabala is far more mine than that of Ramlochan. This thought of mine is simply improper and wrong I admit, but not unnatural.

I could not concentrate on any work, in the middle of the day when the students studied their books, everything outside shimmered. The hot air carried the fragrance of clustered flowers of neem, and I did not feel like I do not know what I felt like leading a life of correcting the grammar of all these future hopes of India.

I did not feel like staying in the large classrooms. I found it difficult when some gentleman came to visit me. In the evening while listening to the meaningless whispering of the betel nut and coconut trees by the side of the pond I pondered, human society is a web of complicated follies. Nobody remembers to do the right thing in the right time, afterwards it is the wrong desire in the wrong time that drives us to restless desperation.

A man like you could have lived happily, become old as the husband of Surabala; but you wanted to become Garibaldi, and eventually became the second master of a village school. And Ramlochan Roy the pleader, there was no real reason for him to become the husband of Surabala. Even at the time of marriage, Surabala was to him what Bhabashankari was. Yet by marrying without much thinking, he earns five-taka as the government pleader, rebukes Surabala if the milk smells of smoke, and places order for new jewelry for her if he is in a good mood. A thickly set man, dressed in robe, holding no resentment; one who never spends the evening sitting by the side of the pond grieving away the time looking at the stars.

Ramlochan was gone for some time to attend an important case. Quite likely Surabala was as alone in her house as I was.

I remember that was Monday. The sky was overcast since the morning. It started drizzling from ten in the morning. The Headmaster ended the classes early sensing the mood of the sky. Clumps of clouds kept wandering across the sky throughout the day as if taking part in preparations for something big. The next day by afternoon it started raining heavily and a storm set in. As the night lengthened the rain and the intensity of the storm increased. In the beginning the wind was blowing from the east, gradually it started blowing from the north and northeast.

It was useless to go to sleep in that night. It occurred to me that Surabala was alone in that calamity. Our school shed is much stronger than her house. Often I thought of

asking her to join me to spend the night on the bank of the pond. But could not make up my mind in any way.

The sound of tidal wave could be heard when it was past one o'clock the sea swelled. I left the shed and started walking towards Surabala's house. The bank of the pond was in the way the water was soon up to my knee.

I rushed for the bank as the remaining place was already under 15-20 feet of water. By the time I reached the bank, another person reached it from the opposite direction. My whole being from head to toe knew who it was. She knew it too. Everything around us was under water, we stood there on an island of which was hardly 8 feet in diameter.

It was doomsday, there were no stars to light the sky and all the lamps of the world was snuffed into darkness there would have been no harm if a single word was uttered then but not a single word could be said. None of us spoke.

The two of us only kept gazing into the darkness. The dark mad waves of death roared and crushed at our feet.

Today Surabala has left the whole world behind to stand beside me. Today Surabala has no one but me. Surabala of that far away childhood, floated from another life, from the old mystery shrouded darkness to be beside me on this world of sun and moon; and, today after a long time leaving behind that luminous populated world Surabala has appeared alone beside me in this fearsome desolate apocalyptic darkness. The flow of life brought that teenage girl to me, the wave of death has brought that blossomed flower to me now if only one more wave comes from this part of the world, we could drop off from the stalks of this separation to unite as one.

Let that wave not come. Let Surabala live happily ever after along with husband and son. This night standing on the bank of doomsday I have relished the taste of everlasting joy.

The night has nearly come to an end the storm stopped, the water receded Surabala went home without saying a single word. I also went to my house without saying a single word.

It occurred to me, I could not become the Sheriff in the civil court, nor a revenue collector, nor Garibaldi, I am the second master of a crumbling school, in my entire life for some time I experienced an everlasting night; in the nights and days of my entire life span that one night is the only greatest fulfillment of my trifling life.

Translated by Syed Maqsum Jamil

POEM

The Unnameable Vase

VANESSA DROZ

EQUAL	GOLDEN
your name irreconcilable of blood your name situational	like an egg unnameable and premature flight how it flows, how it mounts engraved on the great vase of the ground wherever grievous in the meeting against the ground doubled your body and your inner silence
of the sea habitual habitual	a duality of two foot with ground that emerges the sphere (the perfect vase) feeling yourself endowed with sick death
of the foot dual	death
that is not earth with sea but rhythm completing and you move endowed unequal	graver without pity to inaugurate of blood and mine desolate realm tamed with my hands
and the good with all its dead you move sexual and you approach sadness throughout my sensual	soft death giver of life to your doe silence and the silent grieving and thus engraved you are grieving without faith, without faithful of blue waters without god transparent and blue without sky)
soft with virtual	soft death giver of life to your doe
before ritual	silence and the silent grieving and thus engraved you are grieving
ritual	without faith, without faithful of blue waters without god transparent and blue without sky)
conventional	grieving
(depths -god	grieving
without equal	grieving
I call and your Diluted without In the words textual	name Falls possible memory I invent for myself reduced by force vase without total form docile
thus incomplete actual in the poem in language and to hold you (unnecessary vase liquor drunk residual inert	(a necessary vase to hold you) here is useless to lose you) without brew noose I invent for you unnameable vase You return
I invent you Lost vase	always irretrievable

Translated by Sylvia Molloy. "The Unnameable Vase," from *La Cicatriz a medias*, is an experimental poem by the Puerto Rican poet Vanessa Droz (born in 1952). Droz experiments with texture, surface, cuts, and sutures. She inquires into poetic form as a metaphor for the body's sensual or a body of texts yearning for fixity and at the same time yielding to a seductive flux that works against it.

Essay

"There is Now": The Moral Vision of Philip Pullman

"We shouldn't live as if (the Kingdom of Heaven) mattered more than this life in this world, because where we are is always the most important place." -- Lyra Belacqua in *The Amber Spyglass*

SHABNAM NADIYA

An amazing thing happened in 2002. For the first time, a children book was "overwhelmingly" chosen for the coveted Whitbread Book of the Year Award. The book was *The Amber Spyglass*, the third book (preceded by *The Golden Compass* and *The Subtle Knife*) of the trilogy *His Dark Materials* by British writer Philip Pullman.

Children's literature has long been the stepchild of "mainstream" literature. The genre of fantasy in particular has never been the darling of academicians despite the fact that creative literature dealing with alternative realities has been around for quite some time -- including names such as Bunyan, Swift and even Milton. However, none of these writers were given credence or literary respectability as writers of fantasy. The exceptions of course are the hallowed names of Tolkien and Lewis. C. S. Lewis' *Narnia* series gave fantasy a dash of respectability. And then of course, arrived Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (the trilogy comprising *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *Two Towers* and *The Return of the King*) creating a "serious" audience for fantasy.

Written with the clamor of World War II resounding in the author's ears, *The Lord of the Rings* achieved what previous fantasy novels had not: as a cult classic, it succeeded in garnering critical acclaim. Compared to C. S. Lewis' *Narnia* novels, the *Ring* books were more "serious" -- darker in tone and vision, aiming at a more mature audience. Not surprisingly, considering the era during which it was written, *The Lord of the Rings* is about a great battle between the forces of good and evil. The Dark Lord Sauron attempts to gain control of the world of Middle Earth, and the forces of good form an alliance to do battle. Broad in scope and diverse in its imaginative ambience (hobbits, humans, dwarfs, elves,



goblins, wargs traverse the pages), it is, however, on the integrity, courage and the strength of two individuals (the unassuming hobbit Frodo Baggins and his ever faithful Samwise Gamgee) that the fate of the world depends. Of course, the book ends with the forces of good triumphing, albeit after many sacrifices and pains.

Philip Pullman's trilogy *His Dark Materials* roughly deals with similar issues -- there are the forces of good and evil. Great things are attempted and achieved by unlikely heroes. Like *Rings* trilogy, *His Dark Materials* is also a story of growth; it is a coming-of-age story for two children from different worlds. Lyra Belacqua and Will Parry are tested in the fires of life, and they emerge as better human beings.

However, the scope of Pullman's narrative reaches far beyond the simplistic view outlined above. Pullman's novel has proved once and for all that the fantasy genre can legitimately be part of the mainstream literary discourse. Pullman himself reinforces this when he claims that he thinks of *His Dark Materials* as evocative of "stark realism" and the fantasy elements help him "say more about being a human being" -- the essential task of any good novel. The novel moves between different worlds with characteristic ease, depicting characters like armoured bears, witches, the diamond backed, wheeled *mulefa*, soul eating *spec*ters and *dæmons*. *His Dark Materials* is deeply realistic in psychological terms. Pullman is out to give his

reader a good story about growing up, suffering, understanding and finding one's way in the world. In short, it is about what it means to be human.

Pullman's narrative is more "real" compared to that of Tolkien because of the moral complexity. Tolkien's characters are fairly simple. We have the good guys -- Frodo and his friends -- and the bad guys -- Sauron and his gang. Sometimes the good guys have moral lapses like Boromir falling to the temptation of the Ring, Saruman the White betraying the fellowship; sometimes the bad guys are instrumental to good as the deeds of the hapless Gollum. However, these issues are not delved into deeply.

Pullman's characters move in a different moral dimension altogether -- the dichotomy between good and bad is not painted in black and white; shades of gray abound. Lord Asriel, one of the "good guys", achieves the first blow for freedom from the tyranny of the Authority (God) by creating the bridge between the worlds through a highly immoral act -- the murder of the child Roger. However, this murder is what initiates the act that is crucial to ending the domination of the Authority. To seek forgiveness from the murdered Roger's spirit, Lyra enters the Land of the Dead, compromising the ultimate authority of the Creator by opening it up to the world of the living. Asriel and Marisa Coulter embrace death in the Abyss in a successful attempt to destroy Metatron (the leader of the Authority's forces). However, their motives are different. Lord Asriel, the foremost freedom fighter for the Republic of Heaven, makes the supreme sacrifice of death for the good of all conscious beings. Marisa Coulter, arguably the most morally corrupt character in the story, gains redemption as she dies to save her long abandoned daughter Lyra. The biological parents of Lyra, or Asriel, or Mrs. Coulter do not parent to the

girl -- or engage the loyalty of the reader. It is the people that Lyra meets during her quest -- the wry Texan balloonist Lee Scoresby, the armored bear-king Iorek Byrnison, the witch queen Serafina Pekkala -- that do the job. One feels sorry at the death of Lord Asriel and Mrs. Coulter -- but the heart breaks at the brave death of Lee Scoresby to save the little girl he loved so well.

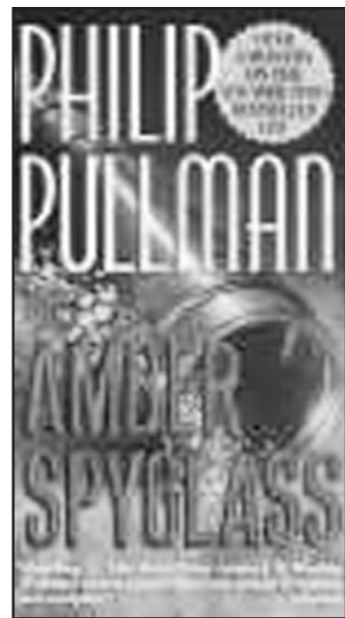
The real theme of the story however is the attempt to establish the Republic of Heaven. Although marketed as a children's book in the UK and a Young Adults Book in the US, a category that one would not look to for "serious" books, *His Dark Materials* deals with issues that children's books do not usually deal with (religion, adolescence and sexuality) -- or at least do not deal with in a serious manner. Pullman is not a believer. In an interview with Christian Aid he maintains: "When you look at organized religion of whatever sort -- whether it's Christianity in all its variants, or whether it's Islam or some forms of extreme Hinduism -- wherever you see organized religions and priesthood and power, you see cruelty and tyranny and repression. It's almost a universal law. The moral bankruptcy of established religions is central to his story. As in the "real" world, the "Church" -- representing organized religion -- speaks incessantly of good, but almost consistently commits immoral acts to promote that good.

Philip Pullman takes a central human myth -- the temptation and the fall of Eve -- and inverts it. In *His Dark Materials*, we are told that the witches have a prophecy that there will be a new Eve who will also be tempted. Whether she succumbs or not will decide the fate of all worlds. It turns out that Lyra is the new Eve. The Church seeks to destroy Lyra desperately, to ensure they must stop the Fall takes place. To enforce this, the Church sends out an army in search of Lyra and a priest assassin to find

and murder the tempter. Significantly the tempter in this modern day fable is Mary Malone, ex-nun and scientist.

Lyra is tempted -- and she does fall. However, in Pullman's world, Lyra's Fall is not the beginning of sin -- her initiation as a sexual being is perceived as a good thing -- a necessary step on the road to knowledge and maturity. Although traditional wisdom teaches that innocence is good and experience bad -- what Pullman teaches is that learning and growth through knowledge are desirable as it defines us as human beings.

Immensely powerful men and women move through the pages of



His Dark Materials, but the principal agents of change are a boy and a girl. The emotions that initiate the change are not grandiose either -- Lyra's curiosity starts off a chain of events; it is kept it is not great people who change the world, it is changed by ordinary people by the extraordinary acts that they carry

out in extraordinary times, Pullman shows us in keeping with the idea of the Republic of Heaven. In motion because of Lyra's love for her playmate Roger, and Will's love for his mother.

Pullman's idea of the Republic of Heaven is so exceptionally apt in addressing the moral and spiritual vacuum of today's world. Changes are inevitable, we are told. The Kingdom of Heaven has failed to deliver all that it has promised; the King is dead and so also is the Kingdom. However, the things that the Kingdom of Heaven supposedly stood for are the things that we still need. In an interview in Oxford, Pullman observes: "Joy...a sense of meaning and purpose in our lives...a connection with the universe... we need it in the world where we do exist...". But we cannot simply sit back and wait for things to happen. We must act to achieve our desires. That seems to be the answer that the Republic of Heaven offers us -- responsibility as mature living beings.

Humans just cannot afford to sit and wait for the golden apple to be dropped on their laps by God. This is something we must work hard and selflessly to achieve. That is why Lyra and Will cannot be together. They must move beyond the self. The story thus ends with a positive feeling. Lyra and Will look toward tomorrow; as Lyra tells Pantalaimon (her daemon) -- "We have to be all those difficult things like cheerful and kind and curious and patient, and we've got to study and think and work hard, all of us, in all our different worlds, and then we'll build...the Republic of Heaven." (*The Amber Spyglass*). These final words of Lyra encapsulate the essential values of the Republic of Heaven -- a vision not unsuitable, perhaps, for the rest of us in the "real" world.

The writer is a free lance writer, works at Data International, a consulting firm.

in history

THIS WEEK

AUGUST 10

1820: Vietnamese poet, creator of the epic poem Kim Van Kieu, Nguyen Du, dies in Hue. Considered by some to be the father of Vietnamese literature.
1912: At London's St. Pancras Registry Office, Virginia Stephen, 30, marries Leonard Woolf, 31.

AUGUST 11

1921: Pulitzer Prize-winning author Alex Haley (Roots; The Autobiography of Malcolm X) is born in Ithaca, New York.

AUGUST 12:

1774: Robert Southey, who will be appointed poet laureate in 1813, is born in Bristol.
1827: William Blake dies at 70 in the small room off the Strand where he has spent the last few years.
1955: Thomas Mann dies at 80.

AUGUST 13

1977: Henry Williamson, English novelist best remembered for Tarka the Otter, dies in Berkshire.
1998: American novelist Julien Green, the first foreigner to be elected to the elite Académie Française that serves as a watchdog over the French language, dies in Paris.

AUGUST 14

1773: Samuel Johnson, while visiting Edinburgh, meets Boswell's wife, who complains of his manners and her husband's relationship with him: "I have seen many a bear led by a man, but I never before saw a man led by a bear."
1867: Novelist and playwright John Galsworthy (The Forsyte Saga) is born in Coombe, Surrey. He will win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1932.
1956: Social and ideological reformer of the theater, Bertolt Brecht dies in East Berlin.

AUGUST 15

1771: Sir Walter Scott is born in Edinburgh.
1785: Thomas De Quincey, (Confessions of an English Opium-Eater) is born in Manchester.
1858: In London, England, children's author, novelist, and poet, Edith Nesbit is born. She will be one of the founders of an association known as the Fellowship of New Life, out of which will grow the Fabian Society.
1888: The author of The Seven Pillars of Wisdom, T. E. Lawrence (who will become known as Lawrence of Arabia), is born in Tremadoc, Caernarvonshire.
1947: "I was born in the city of Bombay...once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it's important to be more...On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact." From the opening lines of *Midnight's Children*, by Salman Rushdie.

AUGUST 16

1902: Wallace Thurman, African-American editor, critic, novelist, and playwright associated with the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, is born in Salt Lake City, Utah.
1949: Margaret Mitchell (Gone With the Wind), 48, dies in Atlanta shortly after being struck down by a taxi.
1998: Dorothy West, the Harlem Renaissance writer who experienced her own renaissance in her 80s, dies at age 91. The Boston native began writing stories in 1914, at age 7; at age 19 she moved to Harlem to join the burgeoning literary and artistic movement led by Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman, and many others. The movement faded in the early 1930s, as did her fame. Then in 1995 she published *The Wedding*, which became a bestseller (and made into a TV miniseries by Oprah Winfrey).

Source: Internet