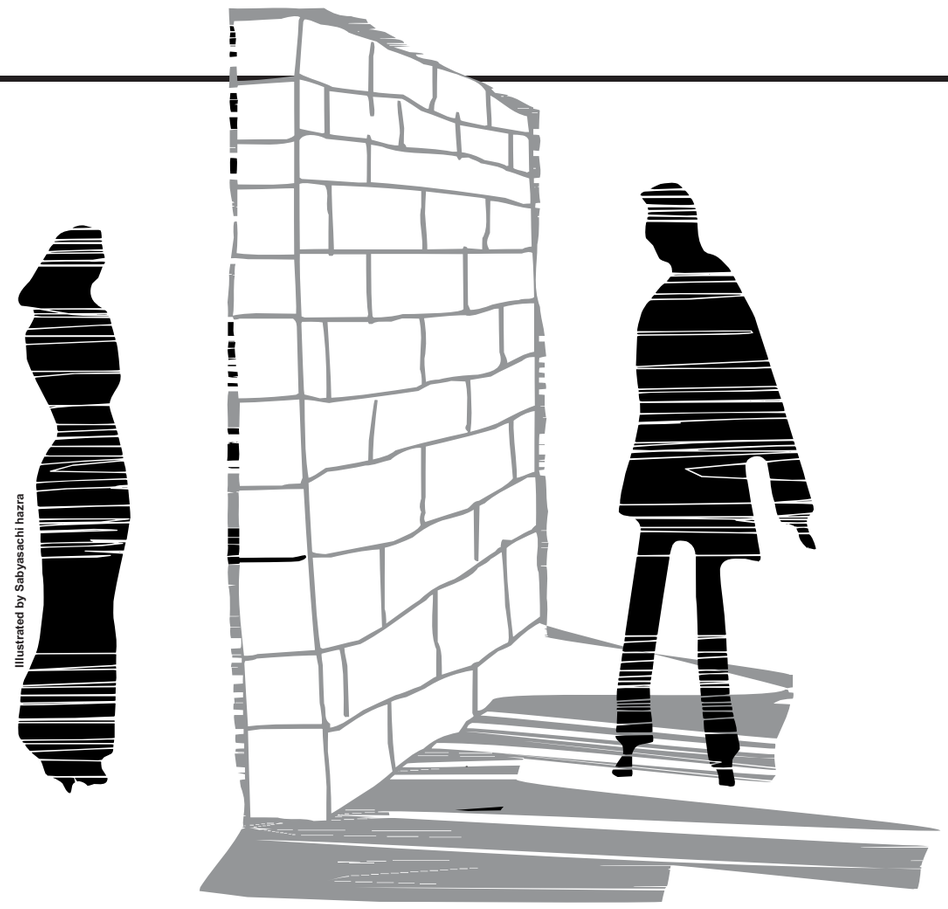
SHORT STORY

Conjugal Life

RASHIDA SULTANA
(translated by Farhad Ahmed)



Illustrated by Sabyasachi hazra

"Come on Rita, tell me how it feels when Asif kisses you. I swear I won't tell anybody. I won't even a make a big deal out of it, Rita, I have come to accept the affair."

My husband keeps on speaking in a drugged, tranced voice, as if he harbours no dislike of Asif. As if Asif is a close relative. I lie there like a dead fish. I realise that he gets aroused thinking about Asif and me.

"So how does he keep you under his spell"?

The voice thickens, gets deeper, as though he's letting loose kiss-mantras into the air. Mantras they must be, because they quickly get him excited. Just a short while back, this man had woken me from a deep sleep. I still lie there like a dead fish. Soon my mood changes for the worse.

"Why do you force me, behave like an animal? I can't do this any more. I find it unbearable."

Truly, it is intolerable. I can no longer bear to have him touch me. But then this is my life. He is fine as a friend, as somebody to talk to, have addas with, sit side by side and chat up a storm, but only as a friendin bed he is unbearable. How many more days can he go on like this, forcing himself on me? I feel like throwing up on his face when he rouses me up in the middle of the night.

And this very minute, beside me the man sleeps like a log.

"If *I* touch you, it's a sin. I have to use force, but that bastard of a deputy minister's son, that swine, *he* doesn't need to. Why should he, when you just run over and start stripping off your clothes."

I lie on the bed with my head jammed between two pillows so that I don't have to listen to him. Soon enough, the screaming and the yelling will die down.

Once upon a time my husband, Nazim Chowdhury, had been a good friend of mine. He had also been my lover for quite some time, both before and after our marriage. But now my love for him is a distant memory. I have had six or seven years of a normal marital life with him. There were of course quarrels over petty things once in a while, and now and then we even hurled things at each other and broke them. Still, I think my husband does love me. But I can't love him back, there is nothing left in me to respond to it.

I was well acquainted with Asifur Rahman, long before I actually set eyes on him, from the stories I had heard about him,. My husband admired him tremendously. But however much devoted he was to Asifur Rahman's political ideals, his admiration and trust in the man himself was much more. Whenever news would come that Asifur Rahman was headed to his village home, my husbandoh yes, the highly-placed government clerk that he was--too would take leave and rush off. He would take long LAP leaves before an election. That I, his wife, would be left all alone in a rented flat in Dhaka city, that something untoward could conceivably happen to me, never seemed to occur to him. A request from Asifur Rahman seemed to be no less than a summons from the heavens. The day he first took me to Asifur Rahman's house I was running a high fever, but since it was a request from Asif *shaheb*, my husband was not going to pay heed to my protests. He chose the sari I was to wear, told me how to arrange my hair and even put the small bindi on my forehead before leading me out of the door. Although Asifur Rahman was a solicitous host, my visit was not particularly enjoyable due to my worsening fever. Nor did I get a chance to properly get to know the gentleman that day.

During the last parliamentary elections my husband again took medical leave and went to Mr Asif's village for the latter's electoral campaign. He returned home walking on air: surely this time his *neta* was going to win. To listen to my husband go on about Asifur Rahman was to think that he was a living god: the man's personality, the breadth of his knowledge, the way he talked and walked, his charm, everything had my husband spellbound. One evening, after returning from the village, my husband set upon me to go there and campaign among the women. Asifur Rahman must win, he kept on saying, otherwise we his supporters will never again be able to hold our heads high in the village. I was reluctant at first, but he kept coaxing me throughout the night, murmured sweet words, and in the end succeeded in winning me over. This time, when we were reintroduced to each other again in the village, I did like the gentleman. On seeing the handsome, polished man with a strong personality in front of me I thought my husband's choice was correct. A man in a high position, yet amiable and friendly. He personally enquired after everybody. The very first day he patted the sofa next to him and told me to sit there. Sinking my feet into the soft carpet, I felt fulfillment. At the dining table, "Bhabi take this, bhabi, have that", how genial! No supplicant ever returned empty-handed from him. It felt good working for such an individual. After going door to door the whole day pleading for votes he would sit down to review everything in the evening. He would give special consideration to my views, would ask me to stay back after everybody had left, would then go over the details with me.

My husband left for Dhaka while I stayed back in the village. As Asifur Rahman and I worked together, had talks and discussions, the distance between us gradually lessened. It was certainly far more enjoyable than staying by myself in Dhaka. I was the wife of a simple clerk. To exchange opinions with a such notable man, to have him value me, praise me in front of everybody, all this felt like I had achieved the pinnacle in my life. He entrusted me with directing the women workers and in planning their various programmes. I even got to make little speeches from the dais, which he praised highly. Soon I even won an important post in local politics. On hearing it, my husband was elated. He sent word that I was not to come back to Dhaka before the elections.

Then I received news that my husband was ill in Dhaka. I went to see Mr Asif. By now he had started addressing me with the more familiar "*tumi*". He said, "Your husband is very close to me, but you are now even closer. If you go, I will lose the election." I smiled in reply, "I won't be long." His parting words were "If you don't return soon, I am going to send men to bring you back."

I returned to Dhaka. My husband had a fever of 100-101 degrees. After two days staying with him in Dhaka, Nazim's fever started to subside, and I experienced a surprisingly keen urge to return to the village. It kept on getting keener. So I told Nazim, "Your fever is going down. I had better return to the village. Asif Bhai told me again and again to return as soon as possible. You know, he tells everybody 'my votes have gone up after this girl has arrived'." My husband's face lighted up at hearing this. Then, as if he had committed a grave wrong, he said to me, "Just because you heard I was running a fever doesn't mean that you should have rushed back here. I wasn't feeling that bad."

Even though he still had a 100-degree fever, he came to see me off at the train station. Sitting in the train passing by the roads, houses, sky and air all around us, it felt as if I was headed towards some terrible destruction. Everything about Dhaka had irritated me these last two days. As if I was being caught in some all-enveloping web of destruction. Over my head the sun seemed to be grinning at the thought that just like it I too would soon burn forever in my own flames. I told Asif, "Even though Nazim still has a fever I came back just for you."

"I was thinking if you didn't return soon I would have gone myself to fetch you," said he.

And the light and dark of millions of stars swept into my head and started to dance dazzlingly, and soon spread in waves through my each of my veins. There was no way anymore for me to resist my own downfall. I thought of my innocent husband. And forgot him just as fast. Around me everybody seemed heavenly. Never before had I realised that there could be this much earthly happiness. It was with so much enthusiasm that I asked for votes for Asif from door to door every day. Sometime later he went to Dhaka on some business. I also left saying that I had to attend to home. I stayed with Asif at resort not too far from Dhaka. Whenever somebody praised him I too would swell with pride, as if part of the praise was for me too.

His wife came from America a few days before the polling. She did not seem particularly fond of this land, its culture, weather or anything else. I heard that she had grown up in America, and stayed there most of the time. I just couldn't get to like the woman. Without any particular reason I found a thousand faults with her, talked about it with the people around me : can you imagine Asif Bhai getting along with her? I burnt to ashes, unendingly, unremittingly, with jealousy, with the grief of separation.

Just before elections, Nazim took leave from his office and came down to the village. He worked day and night for Asif. The latter, too, praised my husband's hard work. My husband's face would light up at Asif's words, as if his whole life had been redeemed. Asif was duly elected to the parliament in the election. For a time after the elections, I stopped feeling like the wife of a clerk. My husband was also ecstatic, kept saying repeatedly, "Look! If a person like him doesn't win, who will? How many people like him do we have in the country"?

In the meantime, tongues had started to wag about my relationship with Asif. Nobody of course dared say anything to Asif's face. It was me they signalled it to me in various small ways, some of it by overmuch flattery. A few even came to me to plead with me to solve their troubles. A strong rumour floated for a few days that Asif was going to be appointed a minister. Asif proved the rumour mills right by actually becoming a deputy minister. After that, he became even more busy. He still longed for me, but I could feel it turning to pity. My husband asked me, "What's all this talk about you? People keep asking me: do you know what your wife is up to? I think some of them even hinted that perhaps I am not man enough!" I replied, "Don't pay any attention to such useless talk."

Now, though, I just can't bear to be in bed with him. His touch seems like a stranger's. He asks me again and again why am I changing, why do I cringe at his approach? I remain silent. One day he asks me, "Don't you love me anymore?" I don't what possesses me, I tell him the truth, "No." I can feel his heart start to beat faster, but I feel no guilt, have no regret. These days I have come to realise that Asif also doesn't quite feel for me the way he used to, that whatever he does feel is now mere pity. But if Asif told me this straight to my face, I would have broken into little pieces. And yet how unhesitatingly I state my feelings to my own husband, a person towards whom I certainly should be more sensitive. I can see him crying, diamond drops of tears welling up in his eyes and rolling down his cheeks. The sight is mind-numbing, but not affection-arousing. At least not for me, not now. Now, even death seems merely a passing whim. Before, even the slightest suffering would make me weep. I would be desolate for days even if I heard the news of a stranger's death. If I saw somebody crying, I would cry too. No longer do I feel the same. I have become aware that Asif pities me. I am resigned to it. When I see somebody crying, I do feel a slight uneasiness. But that's it, nothing more. Sorrow and death are nothing but bits and pieces of a fading stage. My husband's eyes flood with tears, and within my heart sits a little unease, nothing else.

Even that tides over and in clear tones tell him, "It's true, I don't love you anymore." If Asif would use this same tone with me, I would die. Again and again Nazim asks me if his state makes me sorrowful, wants fervently to know if I am aware of the terrible tortures he is undergoing. Keeps looking at me with desperate, pleading eyesexactly the way I have looked at Asif a few times. If only once, just once, Asif would say…I would be alive again, I would be born again for an eternity.

"No, I don't feel any pain."

Alas! I too can say this? Though after Asif became deputy minister, I too twisted in anticipation day after day: If only Asif would at least tell me he wanted to spend some time alone with me, if only he would say, "Come on, let's go out somewhere."

Poor fellow! My husband! I really feel pity for him. Surely Asif feels the same, for me. Asif becomes busy, starts to pay less and less attention to me. Oh! These days! Between waking up till it was time to sleep again the whole day flies by in a flurry.

I tell myself, "What's the use in worrying over such useless matters!" One day Asif himself says these very words, to hurt somebody within me. I become demanding, and soon find myself in a trance of demanding, of asking. On the other hand, my own husband, too, is acting like a madman. He is passionately demanding my love, he too is in a trance. And I find joy in rejection. At long last, I've found the arrogance necessary for rejection. The more he begs, the stronger my rejection. My husband is now somebody like me, and I am somebody like Asif. He is crying, and I all I can think of is that I also would shed tears for Asif. He is like my own image in the mirror. To the extent I feel pity it is only for a broken-off part of my own dusty past, not for my living, flesh-and-blood husband. Asif has gradually silenced the person who used to sparkle with longing, fire, sorrow and hope. I have done the same to my husband…

Asif seems such a lucky person! I am tormenting my husband while my anger at Asif is gradually receding. Nazim wipes tears from his eyes in front of me, and yet I feel not the least affection for him. All I can think is: How can this man be so immature?

He keeps coming back to Asif, "Tell me the truth, what is your relationship with Asif *shaheb*?" Time and again he presses me on the issue. I remain silent. He says, "I won't say a word to you, just admit to the affair." I reply, "Stop this nonsense, I don't like hearing all this."

At night he says, "My fate! The clerk sleeps with the deputy minister's lover!" And again at other times, "Tell me, where do you meet him? His house, or somewhere else?"

Gone is the old respect he had for Asif: nowadays my husband has left everything, no more going to his village home, no more politics. Office and home-- this is now his daily routine. If I go shopping or visit relatives, or go anywhere outside the house, he gets back from the office and rages. "The whore and her lover! She can't think of anything but his honey!" my husbands screams. I say nothing, wait for him to cool down.

However, I do have a relationship with Asif. People come to me, with pleadings, with their small problems. If I go to Asif with a request, he keeps it although he doesn't talk with me for more than a couple of minutes because of the huge number of hangers-on, the crush of people all day long. Also, he is very image-conscious these days. Be as it may, every time I come away from a meeting with him, I feel very depressed. Yet I can't tear myself away, I love the extra attention people accord me. In bed I am faced with all sorts of questions from my husband. I am aware, he gets excited thinking about Asif and me the same way other men get aroused watching pornography. He touches me, then asks, "Tell me, how does he makes love to you? Is he better than me, does he make you happier?" On and on the questions keep coming, they never stop. I keep silent. My heart remains cold. Like a grave.

Rashida Sultana has published short stories in various Dhaka newspapers, including Prothom Alo. Farhad Ahmed is a writer/translator.

TRAVEL WRITING

Not an actual journey with backpacks, toothbrush and Raybans, not a travel-writing piece per se. Rather, Uma Dasgupta reads through Travel Writing and the Empire, edited by Sachidananda Mohanty and published last year, and ponders about narratives of the self, about the interface between travel and the Empire.

TRAVELLERS have always wanted to tell others at home about what they saw on their travels; and, right from the old travellers' tales of centuries ago, to contemporary reports of "embedded journalists", we are always interested in hearing what it's like out there.

But travel writing has only recently been getting the kind of academic attention it deserves. It is interesting to see how travel writers imagine the world to which they travel, and how their ways of seeing the world can tell us not only about that world but also about themselves. Also interesting is to see the strategies that are available to writers, and how they are used, in their efforts to describe or imagine the world that they are describing.

There has always been a close relationship between writing, conquest and empire building, with travel writing not only facilitating but also itself being made possible by imperial expansionism. The travel narrative was one of the ways for the Empire to assess its territory, grow and gain stability. In Europe, although individual explorers and adventurers were already out there "discovering the world", the culture of travel dated back to the 18th Century, when young men from the English aristocracy were sent on their "Grand Tour" as part of their education, and to emphasise upon them their great burden of colonising the world.

Many travel accounts were written in the language of imperialism, racism, Orientalism and patriarchy; but there were also some travel writers who exposed the violence and insensitivities of Empire-building. Travel narratives, in all their adventure, romance and violence, throw light upon the ways in which the Empire perpetuated itself. **Travel Writing and the Empire**, edited and introduced by Sachidananda Mohanty, gives us interesting glimpses of this adventure, romance and violence.

In her essay "The Empire, Travel Writing, and British Studies", Susan Bassnett looks at why it is important to study travel writing, and what it can tell us about the ways in which one culture constructs its image of other cultures. Bassnett points out that the discipline holds many possibilities ranging from the areas of literary travel and travel as tourism and diplomacy, the question of the veracity of travel accounts, the question of identity, and of writing the self.

Pallavi Pandit Laisram, in her essay "Hajji Baba: Ideological Basis of the Persian Picaro" takes a look at the 19th Century European reconstruction of Persia through James Morier's "best-selling" picaresque novel **The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan** (1824). While appreciating the elements that made the story so popular, she says, it is also important to examine its reductive and even offensive aspects. For, she says, "A meaningful, non-hegemonic, crosscultural dialogue can take place only when individuals can sympathetically `travel' into the thoughts and feelings of another culture."

William Dalrymple, in his excellent and readable essay "Porous Boundaries and Cultural Crossover: Fanny Parkes and `Going Native' ", compares the intelligent but rather sterile writing of Emily Eden in **Up the Country**, which has been long regarded as a classic of British Imperial literature, with that of Fanny Parkes, whose **Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque** had no second edition. He quotes Fanny's delight in everything Indian, from the Taj Mahal and the Ruins of Delhi to the handsome men and the graceful women. More than anything, she loves the country: "Oh the pleasure of vagabondizing in India!" and is critical of some of the philistine ways of the British, as for example when they organise a band for a dance at the Taj. The boundaries between the cultures, notes Dalrymple Hindu, Muslim, English were more porous before 1857, and there was greater intercultural hybridity. Alas, this world was swept away with the uprising.

In "Colonialism, Surveillance and Memoirs of travel: Tegart's Diaries and the Andaman Cellular Jail", Tutun Mukherjee looks at the "Memoir of an Indian Policeman", a compilation made by Tegart's wife of the diaries of Charles Augustus Tegart, British loyalist and Police Commissioner. The Memoir, Mukherjee notes, records a particularly violent chapter in India's colonial history, that of extremism, British repression and brutal colonial incarceration. Travelling to the Cellular Jail in the beautiful Andaman archipelago in 1913, Tegart notes the careful architecture of the prison, recording all the many ways in which the prisoners were kept under control, his eyes ever alert for lapses in vigilance. Such was one of the uses of travel in India's colonial history.

Other essays in the volume include a fresh assessment by Mohammed Zaheer Basha of Katherine Mayo's **Mother India**, her propagandist and judgemental account of her travel in India; an interface between travel writing and gender studies, by Sindhu Menon; Pramod K. Nayar's examination of the colonial rhetoric of travel brochures today; Narendra Luther's elegant account of Hyderabad as seen through the eyes of 18th and 19th century visitors; and V.B.Tharakeshwar's essay looking at the ways in which Kannada travel fiction and travelogues are "writing back". A readable, intelligent introduction to the interface between travel narratives and the Empire.

Uma Dasgupta is a writer and poet who lives in New Delhi.

The Middle Class

ABUL HUSSAIN
(translated by Kabir Chowdhury)

Sometimes it seemed to me
There was no point in dying
Bit by bit. What was the point
In living this life-in-death?

Over cities and villages
I scattered the seething fire
Raging in the cells of my brain.
And then in a cool moment
I returned to my room
And wearily looked for the wick of my lamp
In utter darkness and stared
With empty eyes at my rat hole;
And I muttered to myself:
Let him who wanted to go, depart,
Let us hold on even to this life-in-death.
I belonged to the hollow strawmen,
the middle class.