SHORT STORY

ABDUL BISMILLAH

ir Saheb was resting inside on a mattress while his associates were sitting outside on the verandah crowded with devotees, whom they were initiating into the various ways of intoning the holy words. They twisted their mouths into comical shapes and swayed their heads while reciting them and the devotees assiduously aped the manner of their preceptors.

My grandfather was sitting among those devotees. He had had his beard trimmed after many months and was wearing the *sherwani* which had been consigned to a box for these many years. In his younger days the *sherwani* had formed the main item of his dress and he wore it every day. Later on, he used it on special occasions such as a festival or a feast. And now he wore it very sparingly, only when he went to make his obeisance to Pir Saheb. The sherwani had three conspicuous patches and its collar had fraved and looked like a tattered frill. He had its pockets altered and kept money in them. But that day his pocket contained only a soiled and dog-eared two-rupee note. His hand frequently felt the note as he sat there reciting the holy words.

I was sitting by his side, raptly watching him. In fact, I was feeling utterly bored, my luck not having provided me with any device to dispel the boredom I often fell a victim to. After Abba's death I had started living with Grandfather and he took me along wherever he went. Whatever the occasion, he always got embroiled in some

controversy--about the country, about religion or about our community. Most of what he said went over my head. I had no interest in these discussions. It was boring! But even so, I

resolutely stuck it out with him.

Nowadays our house was steeped in gloom; everything looked so bleak. After Abba's death it had become a hotbed of squabbles. My Abba had been the sole breadwinner of the family and with his passing away our income had shrunk seriously. Grandfather was not up to much and my uncle had separated from the family. We were eking out an existence by selling our property bit by bit. Because of these financial difficulties my mother often tried, through my grandmother, to prevail upon Grandfather to let her go and live with her parents. But he would have none of it.

'If my son is gone, has that made my daughter-in-law redundant?' Grandfather would argue. 'She's as much a part of our family now as she was then.

This would always end in a quarrel with my grandmother. As a result, Mother could neither leave the house nor have any peace of mind. Unfortunately, I could not remain aloof from these bickering. Sometimes, being too young to understand the gravity of the situation, if I happened to make some extravagant demand, I would come in for a thrashing. After beating me, Mother would keep crying for a long time. but that only added to the tension.

As compared to us, Uncle was not badly off. But he never bothered to give my grandfather any monetary help. If he came

The Devotee to invite Grandfather on Bakri-

'I denied myself every comfort to have you educated and to teach you some craft,' Grandfather would say. 'Was it to face these wretched times? As soon as your wife came home you washed your hands of the family. You never care to find out whether this old man or the old woman is hungry or going about naked for want of clothes. And today you have come to show your affection for us? I piss on your food.'

Eid it would lead to a serious

Uncle was not in the habit of taking things lying down. In reply, he would say something nasty, with my aunt doing her best to fan the flames. Angered, Grandmother would beat her breasts and cry. The festive mood would change into a feuding tit-for-tat. Amma would also start crying while I could do nothing but look on helplessly.

Then I saw a great change coming over Grandfather. He read the *namaz* five times a day and never quarreled with anyone. By the time I had left my childhood behind he had retired from his schoolteacher's job. Till then he had never said the namaz except on Eid or some such festival. I was surprised at this sudden change.

Then he started making occasional trips to the city. Later on I learnt that he had become a devotee of a Pir Saheb.

Apart from the portion of the house that had gone to Uncle, three rooms fell to our lot. Of these we had rented out one room to a man of our village. We ourselves lived in the second room. The third was filled with junkiron rods, discarded chairs



and charpoys, tattered clothes and heaps of such other rubbish. Grandfather had made a place for himself in that room by spreading out a tattered floor-mat in one corner. He kept an aluminum pot by the side of the mat. An old apron cloth spread on the floor served to hold the Holy Quran. His meals were sent to him in the room and he ate them without demur

and then returned to his prayers

and meditation. He rarely left

the room--not even in summer. Some signs of liveliness appeared on his face only when there was news that Pir Saheb had come to the city. Grandfather would immediately start making preparations to go to the city. He washed his clothes in the river and got his beard trimmed by the barber. Then taking me along he would set out for the city.

Generally, he didn't have any money on him. He had to ask for it from grandmother who never parted with it without a

squabble.

That day too, asking me to wait, he went to grandmother to ask her for some money

'What's it that you want?' she asked in a mocking tone.

'I want some money, Grandfather tossed off the request with a casual air. 'You think I've trees that

grow money?' grandmother said in a sharp voice.

'Don't be angry. Pir Saheb

'So what? How am I concerned, tell me. 'I must have something to

offer Pir Saheb. 'Where's the need?' Grandmother cried. 'What good does it serve your becoming a devotee? Has it lessened your

Grandfather flared up. This question was a direct attack on his convictions and faith.

'Get out of here!' he shouted. 'Be gone, all of you. This is my

house. As long as I earned, all of you cheerily chewed the meat from the bone. Not a word you uttered--as if you were tonguetied. Now that only the bone is left you want to throw it away. Have I no say in this house? Your stomach churns food because of me. It's the rent of the room that keeps you going. What do you do with all that money? I want a clear account.

The last statement, in fact, had taken the force out of Grandfather's argument. It was no grandmother's turn to go full tilt at him.

'What rent are you speaking of?' she cried. 'Here, I'm ready to give the account of those measly twenty rupees. If I stop taking in tailoring jobs your neck will lose its stiffness in no time.

'Yes, I must have the account,' Grandfather insisted. 'What have you done with those twenty rupees, tell me?'

Grandmother started reeling out the details of those expenses. It transpired that all that was left to her now was a two-rupee note which she had tied to the end of her *orhni*.

She undid the knot and threw it in front of Grandfather. Then she started crying. Grandfather picked up the note without uttering a word and put it in the pocket of his sherwani. Gesturing to me to follow him, he started for the city.

The skirmish between my grandparents made me sad. Grandmother's weeping face haunted me and I felt like crying. It set me thinking. Why did it happen like this, I asked myself. In the end I felt that religion was at the bottom of it. If religion is for the good of the people why do these pirs accept money from the poor? But I could not gather the courage to put this question to Grandfa-

The city was about eight kilometers from our village. Walking the entire distance we arrived in the city in the evening and went to the place where the Pir Saheb was staying.

He had arrived ahead of us and the ceremonial welcome in his honour was already under way. Platters of food covered with handkerchiefs and wafting tempting smells were being brought in. Some people were being initiated into the *pir*'s fold with great fanfare and a qawwali had been arranged in his honour in the evening.

I was feeling ill at ease with the pomp and show of the place. It was something entirely new to me. At night when I joined the congregation I was feeling very hungry. I told Grandfather about it several times but he just ignored it. I wanted to cry to express the state of my stomach, but could

I saw that people from among the audience were throwing currency notes at the singers to express their appreciation for the couplets they sang. Grandfather's hand went into his sherwani pocket again and again but then he would take it out empty from his pocket and curl up his nose to denote that he did not think much of the couplet. I feared that if Grandfather gave away the note to a singer I would burst out crying and tell him I was famished. Why should he give it away instead of feeding me? But things had not yet come to such a pass.

At last I fell asleep in the early hours of the morning and when I woke up I saw Grandfather saying his prayers with other devotees. He had laid me to sleep in a corner. I woke up with a pang of hunger but I told Grandfather nothing about it.

Suddenly all the devotees stood and lined up in the passage. *Pir Saheb* was ready to depart and had stepped out into the verandah. His two associates were standing a little apart from him and the devotees were going to *Pir Saheb*, one by one, to receive his benediction. I saw that while shaking hands with him they slipped a five-rupee or ten-rupee note into his hand. Then they kissed his hand and stepped back, making room for the next devotee.

I looked at Grandfather's face. I feared he would start crying, so overwhelmed he looked. And so humble, so helpless.

I was taking stock of the situation when I saw Grandfather drawing near Pir Saheb. He quickly stepped forward and while shaking hands with him slipped the two-rupee note into his palm.

He had bent low to kiss Pir Saheb's hand when the venerable man quickly withdrew it from Grandfather's clasp and stretched it out towards another devotee. For a second Grandfather stood stupefied. Then he caught hold of my arm and pulled me away.

Abdul Bismillah has written widely in Hindi. He teaches at Jamia Milia Islamia in Delhi. Jai Ratan is a founder member of Writers' Workshop, Kolkata.

Opna Manse Horina Boiri

by Rashida Sultana, Shraban Prokashoni, Dhaka, February 2004, 62 pages.

ABHILASH

Newspaper readers will be familiar with some of the short stories in this collection by Rashida Sultana--Shorfuddin Ebong Tar Borolok Attiyer Golpo, Pratyakhyata Protisruta, Gibot, Matal Prithibi Toley, Asroy, Opna Mansė Horiňa Boiri, Acid and Dampotyo--since they have all appeared in daily newspapers over the last couple of years, including a couple of translations into English on this page.

Rashida has a distinct style of telling stories, a cool, dispassionate tone that at times can feel less like a crafted story and more like conversational bits of her own life. This feeling is also reinforced by the abrupt way some of her stories tend to end. But what ultimately remains with the reader is this even tone, a tone that compels her readers to stay with the stories.

The collection starts with 'Shorfuddin ...'. He is a clerk who keeps boasting to all his friends and acquaintances about his VIP cousin, a major general who lives in the cantonment. The major-general and his wife treat Shorfuddin and his wife shabbily, like rich people normally treat their poorer relatives. It is a well-known theme that has been written about before by other writers. But here Rashida's skillful handling of the various characters and her accurate ear for dialogue makes this familiar subject matter come alive. Rashida is very knowledgeable about a particular slice of our middle class, and the reader delights in her expert weaving of this social set-up.

Her main appeal lies in the stories that deal with men-women relationships (Pratyakhyata Protisruta, Matal Prithibi Toley, Asroy, and Dampotyo), in that she writes about love and sexuality, about extra-marital affairs, babies born of such union, of tired sex within dead marriages, in that offhand, dispassionate manner--and which has a way of making a reader think about these things that perhaps a more 'literary' style could not. The absence of guilt, the matter-of-fact acceptance by the women characters of such events in their lives elicits interest: Is this the contemporary



Binoo K. John, Penguin Books India, 2004,158 pages + xvii.

ZAFAR SOBHAN

Perhaps I should have been warned by the fact that the paperback version of *Under A Cloud* included lavish words of praise heaped upon Binoo K. John's other travel memoir, The Curry Coast.

Normally, by the time the paperback version of a book is published, one is able to find at least two or three people who have some kind words to say about it.

This is not to say that *Under A Cloud* is wholly without merit. But I couldn't help thinking, as I read it, that the author had misconceived his entire enterprise.

Let me elaborate.

Bengali

woman,

who can no longer afford the luxury of

middle-class guilt or moralizing? Even

the spark of illicit joy in her stories-

the only time metaphors suddenly

become giddy, with bodies being

flooded by stars--is quickly extin-

her stories fail their women; they

guished in the sodden landscape of

middle-class marriages. The men in

tease, they arouse deep expectations,

and then they fade. Rashida maps this

terrain of fading, of disappointment.

If she keeps on writing in this vein

one day she will give us a very

middle-class Bengali woman's

complete picture of the modern

marriage that society foists upon

them. And all of it in that suitably

unfussy prose style

alienation from the kind of love and

This is Rashida Sultana's first book.

She is still a beginning writer, some-

thing which is evident in some of the

underplotted. I also wish this compila-

tion had been named 'Dampotyo',

since that is more representative of

Rashida's style than the title story.

Prokashani's better productions. The

number of typos is comparatively low.

ever: readers must add 4 to each of the

attractive; however, the color scheme

attention to improving its products.

Abhilash is the pen-name of a free-lance writer and critic.

But their page setting is as poor as

pages indicated in the contents to

match up. The cover design is

is dull. Shraban must pay more

It is also one of Shraban

stories, which can be said to be

Cherrapunji, we are informed early on, is the wettest place on earth, receiving an average annual rainfall of about 12,000 millimetres from 1973 to 2001. For the sake of comparison, we are informed that Calcutta receives an average of about 1600 millimetres and Mumbai an average of about 2400

I honestly have to say that for me the matter of whether Cherrapunji is the wettest place on earth is neither here nor there, and I found the author's fascination with this tidbit of information mystifying.

If more rainfall were recorded on a Hawaiian island or somewhere in the jungles of South America would it make one bit of difference to Cherrapunji, and make it less worthy of our attention? I really do not see how this would be the case.

In any event, John's fascination with the precipitation in Cherrapunji did not, to me, translate into moving or insightful writing about the rains and the effect they have on the surrounding areas and its inhabitants.

Having recently taught a class in post-colonial literature, I could not help but contrast John's rather lack-lustre account of the rain-swept Khasi hills with Nirad Chaudhuri's marvelous and majestic descriptions of the monsoon rainfall in Kishorganj.

Where the book comes alive, however, is in John's description of the beauty of the hills just north of the Bangladesh border, and his

account of the lifestyle of the Khasi people who inhabit them.

worries?

This, to me, seems to be the heart of Cherrapunji, not the rains, and, although John may be unaware of it, the heart of his book as well.

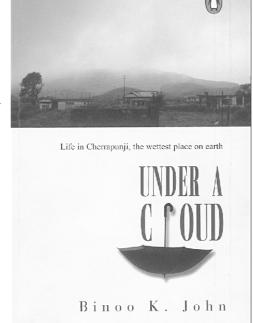
Cherrapunji, an hour and a half north of Shillong, appears as a wonderfully old-world and traditional corner of India, and John does a good job capturing its atmosphere of calm and tranquillity, far removed from the hustle and bustle of modern India.

The history and sociology of the Khasi people who inhabit the hills is rendered well by the author, and it is fascinating to learn of the impact of the Welsh Presbyterian missionaries in the region, and of the earthquake of 1897, which all but decimated the entire Cherra plateau. Most compelling of all to me is John's depiction of the everyday lives of the Khasi people.

It is in bringing alive to me a part of the world that is often forgotten, and which is also just across the border from us here in Bangladesh, that the book truly succeeds.

I remain supremely indifferent to the precise amount of rain that falls in Cherrapunji, but *Under A Cloud* did open up to me a world of which I knew little, and it does make me want to take the short trip to the Khasi hills to experience for myself the serene pleasures of life there, and I suppose that that is all one can ask for in a travel book.

Zafar Sobhan is assistant editor, The Daily Star



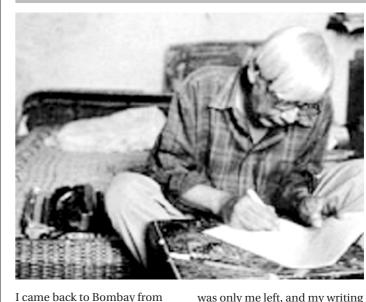
Dom Moraes (1938-2004): "a peculiar shiver ran down my spine..."

Last week we ran an article on Dom Moraes in our Indian Poetry in English series. Barely in time, it seems, for he died of cancer on the evening of 3rd June. The literature page mourns the passing of a unique man of letters of the subcontinent, a restless, troubled soul who for most of his life felt himself strung between England and India, and yet one who returned home to Mumbai during this last decade. In a tribute to Moraes, Ranjit Hostoke, one of India's younger poets, suggested that the poet had a streak of stubbornness in him, an inner resilience that made him refuse "to submit to the rigours of diet and treatment demanded by his affliction. Mr. Moraes decided, in the words of Dylan Thomas, a poet with whom he shared a love for the archetypal myth and the richly arcane word, that he would 'not go gentle into that good night." Perhaps it was that same streak of independence and inner fortitude that made Dom Moraes wait out an inordinately long period when he found himself unable to write poetry, a time, in Hoskote's words, "of exile from poetry" when following the publication of a "chapbook,

Beldam & Others (1967)... (Dom Moraes) then passed into a phase of poetic silence, during which he felt the energies of mystery and lyric had deserted him; he could not shape thought and image into verse, although he remained haunted by the memorable characters he had created, the sinister gardener, the innocent prince, the wizard trapped in glass, the innocent sinner, the selfmortifying saint...'

Then, after he returned to India in 1979, nearmiraculously the poetic impulse returned. Dom Moraes wrote about that return, about that long-lost tingle in the snine in his extraordinary three-nart autobiog extraordinary because nothing like it has quite been written by any other writer/poet from this part of the world. The passage is reprinted below. It is a rare look at the rebirth of a poet, of the poet and the man, both within the same body, looking at each other with a tremulous mix of wonderment and fear.

---Editor, Literature Page



Madhya Pradesh in early 1982, not knowing exactly what I would do next. Leela had been appointed editor of a magazine, and was away most of the day. During this time I wandered around the city. I visited scantily stocked bookshops; I walked by the polluted sea. I did this one afternoon, when the tide was low; there were beached boats on the wet sand, and, across the shimmery, gauze-like water beyond, a single island lay, with a look of solitude. There was nobody about. A peculiar shiver ran down my spine, and at first I thought I must be ill. Then I recognized my own symptoms. I had not felt like this for seventeen vears

Certain words and phrases came to my mind. I went home, sat down and began to write a poem; it was about what it would be like if everyone in the world was dead. As I worked, I felt pure power coming out of me. I was concentrated to such an extent that the world around me did, in fact, seem dead: there was only me left, and my writing hand. It was a sensation that I had forgotten, slightly unpleasant, but simultaneously exceptionally exciting. After about four hours, I could not continue any more. I followed an old habit, and put what I had written aside for some days.

During these days I worried; what if, when I went back to the poem, it was no longer there, was no longer as good as I had thought while at work on it? When I returned to my notebook, the two days being up, I found it was still there, and could see some of what needed to be done. I continued to work on it. It was protean, taking on different shapes as I worked, until at last one strong shape remained.

I typed this out, and called it 'Absences'. It was the first poetry I had written in seventeen years which I felt was poetry. It was like nothing I had previously written, but, partly because of that, I felt once more what Cecil Day Lewis called 'The Poet's inward pride. The

certainty of power'... Perhaps I should quote it here. I feel a tremendous pride in it still, not because of its quality, but because it was the precursor of a great deal of new poetry in the years to come, a John the

Absences

Smear out the last star. No lights from the islands Or hills. In the great square The prolonged vowel of silence Makes itself plainly heard Round the ghost of a headland Clouds, leaves, shreds of bird Eddy, hindering the wind.

No vigils left to keep. No enemies left to slaughter. The rough roofs of the slopes, Loosely thatched with splayed water, Only shelter microliths and fossils. Unwatched, the rainbows build On the architraves of hills. No wounds left to be healed.

Nobody left to be beautiful. No polyp admiral to sip Blood and whiskey from a skull While fingering his warships. Terrible relics, by tiderace Untouched, the stromalites breather Bubbles plop on the surface, Disturbing the balance of death.

No sound would be heard if So much silence was not heard. Clouds scuff like sheep on the cliff. The echoes of stones are restored. No longer any foreshore Or any abyss, this World only held together By its variety of absences.

(From A Variety Of Absences: the collected memoirs of Dom Moraes., Omnibus edition 2003)