

SHORT STORY

A Night's Paradise

FAYYAZ RAFAT
(Translated by Bakshanda Jallil)

HERE were three of them; all three had sworn to be together for the rest of their lives and to die together. Who were they, where had they come from, what was their religion, which part of India did they come from—these were questions that had remained unasked among them. The one thing they had in common was unemployment, relentless unemployment, which had brought them inextricably close to each other. Their past clung to their foreheads like grains of sand. Their present was cloaked in thick layers of mist. They lived solely on the sweet dreams of a glorious future.

And now... Now one of them was dead. His corpse lay squarely in the middle of the footpath where just seconds ago his companions had covered it with a ragged old sheet. The sheet, being a bit short, couldn't cover the dead man's body fully, leaving his face exposed. Anyone looking at that face could tell that the man had died at the very bloom of youth. He had barely begun to grow his whiskers.

Now his face wore an unfamiliar, deathly pallor. His hollow cheekbones stood out clearly on his gaunt face. Yet the beauty of that youthful face clearly shone through, even after death. That classically long face, aquiline nose and limpid blue eyes could soften even the most stony hearted. The young man had died of abject poverty. Death had not been due to natural causes. The distressing severity of his circumstances and ceaseless financial hardships had nudged him into the arms of death much, much before his time. Weakened by hunger and starvation, he had been swept away like a twig in a gust of wind. And with him were gone his dreams and aspirations, lost forever in some surging

unknown ocean. He had come to the city with such dreams, but now those dreams lay trampled in the dust. The dazzling city lights, the buildings that reached up to the sky, the array of beautiful faces—all remained strangers to him. No one had befriended him. No one had ever extended a friendly hand toward him. He kept knocking on the doors of those buildings that rose to the skies,

pause awhile, to rest his weary limbs. There was not a single sheltering tree on those brightly lit, endless city streets where he could find rest and respite. His eyes ricocheted off countless beautifully groomed faces, but no one ever brought their face close to his. The beautiful faces took in his disheveled clothes in one quick look and blithely went their own heedless way.

People were gathering

extolling their dead friend's virtues.

Till last night the dead man had been sitting with them in a roadside shack, laughing and joking over a bread-roll and a small cup of tea. Afterwards, they had gone to their usual places on the footpath. In the morning when they woke up, they found him dead. They wept and wailed.

Witnessing their loud lamentation, a crowd slowly

one, two, even five-rupee notes to secure a place for themselves in heaven.

In this manner, two hundred and thirty-four rupees and five paises in all were collected.

The dead man's two friends looked meaningfully into each other's eyes. Casting a quick, all-seeing look in every direction, one said, "Everything is OK. Two hundred and thirty-four rupees and five paises are quite enough. It won't be wise to delay any further. It's dark already. The last rites should be finished." A muffled giggle escaped him by the time he said the last sentence. He looked at the dead man and spoke admiringly, "What a wonderful scheme my friend has concocted! Imagine earning two hundred and thirty-four rupees and five paises in a single day!" He tugged at the sheet covering the dead man and said, "Now get up quickly. First we'll go and have a grand meal somewhere, then we'll go to a brothel, maybe even get drunk." The dead man continued to lie there—mute and still as a corpse. The dead man's friend shook him and said again, "Great acting, man! Now get up quickly or someone might call the police and we'll be in real trouble."

The dead man heard the word "police" and immediately came to life. He bolted up like a spring and within the blink of an eye all three disappeared down a dark alley. They were heading for a certain place on Byculla Road where, on the fifth floor of the seventh building, Punjabi, Sindhi, Gujarati, Bhutani, Santhali, Rajasthani, Marathi, Anglo-Indian and Burmese girls practiced the age-old profession. One, two, or more—there were enough here to last all night long. You could take your pick from young and old, novices and experienced hands. Country liquor like the Horse brand was

plentifully/also available. You could order mashed potatoes, fruit chaat, minced-meat samosas and tandoori roti. For two hundred and thirty-four rupees and five paises you could buy all this for one night.

They looked around with sharp, inquisitive eyes as they approached the building. Then they sprinted up to the fifth floor. A decrepit old madam measured the three young men with her jaded, world-weary eyes. Within a flash, a bevy of brightly-colored fairies surrounded them. Each of the three men picked the girl of his choice by looping an arm around her waist. They picked up a bottle of booze each, ordered their food, and placed the grubby notes and rust-speckled coins on the madam's wizened old palms.

Then they sat down and began to talk. Their beloveds for the night sat beside them and kept plying them with drinks. When their intoxication had soared up their spinal chords and exploded in the back of their skulls, they began to hurl the choicest abuses at each other. Swaying in the arms of their beloveds for the night, they tottered off to their rooms.

All night long they took the pleasures of paradise they had bought for one night. By the time morning dawned, there was bedlam in the entire building. The madam heard the girls squawking and crying and woke up. She found the three young men sleeping peacefully. When she tried to wake them, their necks lolled over and blue flecks of foam frothed from their mouths.

According to the forensic report, the cause of death was illicit, home-made liquor.

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sketch by Ahsan ul Haq

but no one ever answered his knocks. He trudged along on the brightly lit streets till every bone in his body had ached and his shoes had worn off.

But no one ever asked him to

donations for the dead man's last rites. His two companions stood silently with bowed head on either end of his dead body. Their mouths had run dry and their tongues had grown tired of

gathered and started dropping big and small coins for the dead man's last rites, each according to his own status, on the grimy sheet. Some people who were more Godfearing than others left



Traces

KAISER HAQ

Mirror mirror on the wall
Make me the prettiest of us all

And once again the mirror
Promptly answers my prayer

While the dotting husband wanders
In stolid suit and shiny shoes

I review the work of art, my face,
Prepared according to Mary Quant's

Classic tips, pause for a sip
Of tea the maid's just brought--

And reach for the perfume spray--
Joy by Jean Patou, my favourite

As I pump the fragrance around my hair--
My "magnificent coiffure" it's been called--

I notice a lone silver strand, and pause
And stare--it stares back, sleek and confident

I raise the cup again, feigning nonchalance,
Only to be pulled up short by the sight

Of a crimson smear on the smooth rim--
Hideous as a fresh wound.

Suddenly

That regular outrage in these parts,
A power outage, instantly annihilates

My loveliness with all its accoutrements.
I think of the moment when all lights

Will go out forever: perfume in the air, opaque mirror,
Lipstick smear--is this all I'll leave behind?

Kaiser Haq teaches English at Dhaka University.

On Bharati Mukherjee in Dhaka

KHADEMUL ISLAM

Bharati Mukherjee was born in 1940 to an upper-class family in Kolkata. She was educated in England, at Kolkata's Loreto school and the universities of Calcutta and Baroda. She left India in 1961 to attend the University of Iowa's well-regarded Writers' Workshop.



While there, she met Canadian writer Clark Blaise, and after a two-week courtship, married him during a lunch break. After completing her MFA and PhD, she immigrated to Canada in 1968, and wrote her first two novels there: *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife*. Finding life in Canada difficult as a 'dark-skinned immigrant' she re-crossed the border back into the United States in 1980. In 1988 she won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction for *The Middleman and Other Stories*. It ensured her a place in American literary life. Other books followed. Among them are *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993) and *Desirable Daughters* (2002).

So when she came to Dhaka a few days back, why didn't she cause much of a ripple? One interview with her in a daily, brief mentions of her speaking at the Bangla Academy buried on the back pages, and something in our weekly magazine. I too interviewed her--telling her that meeting her now was making up for missing her reading at Olsson's bookshop in Washington D.C. a few years back--but as I began to think about writing the piece I found that what interested me more was the fact that she had failed to generate a buzz in Dhaka. Which on the surface is strange, because normally Bengalis get excited about visiting writers. It's in our culture; writers, singers and artists (*shilpi, lekha, kobi*) are accorded a special place. The most outstanding example, of course, (and one that might be a

little unfair in terms of comparison, but still...) being Gunter Grass's visit to Dhaka in December 1986. Even though Grass had lectured Dhaka's literati on their silence vis-a-vis the treatment being meted out to the Geneva Camp inhabitants and the tribals in Chittagong Hill Tracts, still to this day they fondly recall his visit in their addas. The Bengali temperament with respect to writers, both local and foreign, tends to be voluble, warm and opinionated.

So what happened here? Why were people kinda cool, to put it mildly, towards Bharati Mukherjee?

A partial answer could be the fact that she spent only three days here, and therefore could not be expected to make much of an impact. But I suspected that the real answer was ideological: that she was perceived as somebody who has made a career celebrating the fact of her immigration and rebirth as an American, of American values--all her later fiction can be construed as a continuing narrative about freedom, democracy and the American way of life--and which sounded like crap to an audience that sees the United States in absolutely different terms. An audience that sees itself on the receiving end of American policies.

So I conducted an unscientific poll. I asked my brother about her, who replied via email, that while he had liked *The Middleman and Other Stories*, the fact that she had wrapped herself--literally for Mother Jones magazine and symbolically in her novels--in a red, blue and white sari turned him off from her.

I mentioned her to Kaiser Haq, English teacher at Dhaka University. He turned up his nose. Muttered that I don't know what the big deal about her. Also something about being lightweight. Then brightened up and pointed to a book on the bookshelf behind me: *My Broken Love: Gunter Grass in India & Bangladesh*. Do you know, he asked me, that they have a piece by me in there? There we go, Gunter Grass again, I had thought.

I brought up the topic with Sajjad Sharif, literary editor of Prothom Alo newspaper, and an important indicator of the views of the local literati. He turned his head from the computer screen and started to say "But Khademul Bhai, all this 'I'm an American, I'm an American'... then trailed off. Then added that if we were to rate writers, for example, on a scale, she would be behind, say, Rohinton Mistry. It was basically the same reaction from a couple of other people, one an older person who had heard her talk. What had she talked about, I asked him. "Jani na, ai aar ki. Actually, bhoolai gechi" was the reply.

I would have liked to ask Fakrul Alam, too, of Dhaka University, about Bharati but he was out of town. Perhaps mercifully so, since he had written a book on her and maybe I would have gotten a full-length seminar on Bharati instead of a quick gut reaction.

What is all this vehemence about being an "American writer", I had asked her when I met her for an interview at Hotel Lake Castle, hard by the American Club in Gulshan in Dhaka. This is what she said.

Bharati Mukherjee: Yes, I want to explain that, because that's a question that keeps coming up, especially in a hostile way, from Indo-American scholars, postcolonial scholars, like Gyatri Spivak and so on--

Khademul Islam: Aijaz Ahmed?

BM: Aijaz Ahmed is--that's a whole different story and I think I saw *In Theory*, that book, a reference to me that 'Oh, she must be Republican' because I said I'm an American writer, and I said have you ever checked my voting record, do you know what party I'm registered for, so that kind of easy lumping--the moment you say I'm an American writer, South Asians, and other US-based postcolonial scholars whose careers are dependent on being more Indian, more Bangladeshi, or more Pakistani or whatever it is abroad than they

were--my quarrel is with mainstream Americans who always marginalize citizens from non-traditional, meaning non-European, countries as being hyphenated. So if you're Chinese-American, Japanese-American, Filipino-American, Indo-American, always Asian-American, but they don't do it consistently, or ever, with white American. They don't say about Ann Beattie, every time they mention her name, that she is an Anglo-American, or they don't say that about John Irving, or John Updike. So that's the quarrel that I'm fighting, that you cannot lump together--the term Asian-American doesn't mean anything because the people you are comparing me with are second- or third-generation Americans, they're Christians, they're a different race, but it's only a way to Otherise them. I am not going to forget who I am, but don't you think that you can pretend that they are all here just as tourists and transients and not as permanent parts of society, remaking that society as much, or even more, than he or she has been changed or remade by it. So that's where I am an American writer.

This is her core explication, both in her fictional narrative and her personal life history in Canada and the United States. And yet people in Dhaka were essentially uninterested. So what, they seemed to be saying? What's so special about it? So now you are an American? So what? The post-colonial critics she quarrels with put it in more complex terms: That Bharati Mukherjee, by positioning her writing not as opposed to mainstream America, as not on the margin, but as the newest entrant within the American mainstream, in fact, claiming to be the new mainstream--which when freighted with her own personal success in the United States, with her personal mythology of immigration and 'assimilation' firmly entrenched within the new canon, given favourable reviews and space everywhere--has meant that she had become the poster girl for a resurgent American nationalism. And therefore very acceptable to certain American constituencies, who find it useful to display the occasional non-white cheerleader for the American flag. And though Bharati may have initially not at all seen this real-world consequence of her writing--a rather nice illustration of the vital intersection of literature and politics--once she realized it, she has not shied away from playing this role either. But actually has done the opposite, been the willing vessel, as it were.

This was the crux of the 'problem' with Bharati here: the fact that her stories, about South Asians, or other Asian immigrants, redefining themselves as Americans, inscribing themselves heroically on the grand American narrative, left Bengalis cold. Which is a bit of a paradox, really, since she is the blue-eyed girl of the State Department, for whom she lectures around the world as a cultural ambassador. And who had sponsored her trip here for precisely the opposite effect. As she put it in another interview: "I believe in cultural diplomacy as very much the way to counteract the stereotype a lot of non-Americans have about American culture."

Which may be true, but in Bangladesh she proved to be futile against the massive countervailing weight of American foreign policy in its daily form.

It was something which I did try to bring up. She and her husband Clark Blaise had written a book in 1987 (*The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy*) exploring the causes of Sikh terrorism. In the ghastly aftermath of 9/11, this book elicited interest. In an interview with Bill Moyers she had said that Islamic fundamentalists "feared modernization", that 9/11 had been a "great marketing opportunity for the Islamic bosses", that the root cause was "hatred, unexamined hatred against Americans and America."

I mentioned the above interview to her. She remembered it. So, wasn't it too simplistic, I asked, given the fact that Islamic anger against the West, against America, has complex roots? And as for pinning the blame solely on modernization, what about other

causes, say, Israel?

She answered that she hadn't obviously been talking about the refugees in Gaza, that her answer to Bill Moyers had been confined solely to the fanatics and the fundamentalists. That was it. Period. I was surprised how short the answer was, given the fact that all this time, she elaborated at length--winding answers that darted into recondite alleyways, that ate up my allotted interview time--on how it felt to be in Bangladesh, about Kolkata when she was growing up, about Canada's 'mosaic policy of multiculturalism', versus 'assimilation' in the United States, about identity and racism. The answers of a cultural ambassador, practiced stuff which she had said before, many times, in many interviews. For example, about her visit to Bangladesh, she was virtually unstoppable:

KI: So is this the second time you've come to Bangladesh?

BM: This is the second time. Last time, we, my younger sister and I, made Dhaka the headquarters, the base camp so that we'd come back from our long drives when we're out. We had rented a van and we took a whole lot of local people, so I got to see the school in Faridpur--of course Faridpur has changed used to be, my father is from Faridpur, Madaripur district.

KI: That's your *desh*, right?

BM: That's my *desh*. So my father used to talk about Faridpur High English School (laughs) so we saw the building. The original building is there and they have built newer annexes, and they have--and I have pictures of us standing in front of it. My mother's side of the family was all from Dhaka. My *dadu*, my mother's father was a sort of well-known lawyer practicing in the High Court and he had--which I used in a couple of novels--he then defended two freedom fighters and got into trouble, you know, got very upset about the whole legal system and said I'm going to do business and he never got back into it. But see, my mother was a very good storyteller. She was not an educated woman, she got married when she was sixteen and a half, very conservative family, my father wouldn't allow her to go outside the house. She used to tell me and my sister stories about the household, about daily life, how as a very small child go across the *rasta* to the Buriganga and swim. I can't swim, we never learn to swim, even though we had a swimming pool..."

There was more, much more. I was polite, didn't want to interrupt. But which had meant that I couldn't really get to other questions I had wanted to ask.

But despite all this talk of *desh* and Madaripur and Buriganga, perhaps she has changed. Perhaps she is not really Bengali anymore. And proof of that lies not in her long answers, but in her other words which can be revealing precisely because they are not thought out beforehand. It had been a wet Wednesday when I drove to Lake Castle Hotel, next door to the American Club in Gulshan, to talk with her. With the rain coming down by the bucketload. On the clogged streets had been thin, drenched figures, wraiths in the temple light: women garment workers, male bodies straining to push-pull overloaded carts, ragged children. But nobody really minded being wet, you could see everybody welcomed the relief from the heat. I had lowered the window a crack, just to hear the sound of rain and the rushing water. Rain, which never fails to remind me of Shaheed Quaderi's poem *Brishti, Brishti*. And so, wanting some words from Bharati Mukherjee to that effect, some memory of wind and monsoons and childhood, at the beginning of our meeting, as we exchanged pleasantries, I had mentioned it, the rain outside, that the very day she had landed in Bangladesh it was thunder and rain. And she answered me in a very prosaic, very matter-of-fact way about oh, yes, and now how difficult it was going to get to move around now that it was raining.

A very non-Bengali answer. In fact, a very American answer.

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