

SHORT STORY

The Snake Charmer

CHUNILAL MADIA  
(translated from Gujarati by S. J. Mohan)

JAKHRA, a snake charmer, was playing his flute studded with white, flower-like shells. He was blowing at it so hard and playing it so loudly, it was as if he was puffing at the bellows of a blacksmith. The show was at its climax. The male and the female cobras, which he had caught hissing from the ant-hill in Ujadia, were now swaying in the midst of that tightly packed crowd. The snakes were raising themselves in mid-air, spreading their hoods wide like sieves.

The more the snakes swayed, the more Jakhra, who was kneeling when the show started, raised himself up and up. The muscles of his face became more and more tense every minute. It looked as if he was dragging air from the deepest hollows of his stomach and stuffing it in his flute.

And there was justification too for all this, for he had lured into his basket a divine pair of cobras that would never have come under the spell of any spirit. And, even if they had, they would never have remained prisoners had it not been for the magic power he had inherited from his dead father. And which, at least in these parts, had not been equaled. At the instance of the village head, he was giving his first public performance that afternoon.

The cobra pair was swaying in the direction of the alluring music of the flute. Their movements were like the motion of the fresh, big ears of *bajra* (millet) swaying with the wind passing over the fields. The audience was deeply absorbed in what they saw. All eyes were fixed on the pair. The two snakes, with their graceful curves, looked like two lean bodies standing bent at the waist.

This was the supreme moment of Jakhra's life. It was the moment of fulfillment of that sacred power which his father had passed on to him, and for the attainment of which the apprentice had to undergo arduous training.

Jakhra's quest had begun

many years ago. Old *Ladhu*, who in the end could not maintain purity, initiated his only son into the sacred power so that it should not be forgotten. At the same time he warned his son about the difficulties and dangers of the path. He said the pursuit of the path demanded a purity that would go beyond the austerities of the yogis of Jullundur. He emphasized that the threefold purity of mind, body and speech was absolutely essential if one wanted to follow this way. The slightest deviation--and one would roll down to the valley from the heights of attainment.

Jakhra was then very young; yet he was not inexperienced in the field. When his father went from village to village with the basket of 'animals' on his shoulders, Jakhra would accompany him carrying the tarpaulin bag in which would be stuffed the flute, the bowl, the snake-charmer's bag and other odd things. When the show was on, his father would concentrate on the snakes. And Jakhra would pick up small coins thrown by the onlookers in the dust. He made all the preparatory arrangements before the show began--such as playing the little trumpet to draw the crowd--first the children and then the grown-ups, clearing the ground, letting out the mongoose from the bag and fixing the peg in the ground. In the meanwhile *Ladhu* would smoke *dhattura* to prepare himself for his work. At the end of the show, when he threatened the children to get some flour from home (and cursed their mothers if they did not bring any) and when the fear-ridden children did at last bring some leftover stuff, it was Jakhra who collected it in his bag.

It was the practice that the father and the son should get out of the town by evening. They had to face the police if they failed to do so.

Actually, when they left the border of the town, they had to allow the guard to inspect all their paraphernalia--in case they were hiding a basket a high-caste child!

The father and the son would go into the forest and take out

the crumbs of bread. If there was not enough to eat, *Ladhu* would make Jakhra eat even if he himself had to go hungry. He would pour milk in a shallow bowl for the snakes. At times, when the rays of the moon, filtering through the thick, vast tamarind tree, played hide-and-seek on Jakhra's rosy, charming face, *Ladhu* thought of Jakhra's mother who had been as rosy and as charming. But the ascetic in *Ladhu* would bring him back to his senses. He would say to himself: 'You were mad about her; as such you lost your hold over that magic power which is worth lakhs of rupees. Can the pursuer of this path ever afford to be mad about a woman? It needs strong will-power. If you make the slightest mistake, in no time it would take your own life. It is difficult to master the art. But it is more difficult to exercise it even after you have mastered it. You can cool the milk of a lioness only in a gold bowl--for it won't cool in an earthen pot. When the Ganges was brought down to the earth, was not the great Mahadev himself present on the scene in person?'

And at moments like these, *Ladhu*'s irrepressible ambition would begin to stir and whisper in his ears: 'Let your son fulfill the unfulfilled desire of your heart. Let the magic not be forgotten. Let your son do what you could not do and put to shame all the charmers of the entire area.'

Prompted by pride and ambition, he ordered Jakhra to remain a *brahmachari*. An ascetic's life is full of hard tasks and sacrifices. Right from his childhood Jakhra had been living the hard life of self-denial. He would not even look at a six-month-old female child. All women were looked at as a sister or a mother. He would not eat forbidden food. He would not drink the water polluted by someone else. He would keep his body clean. He would not slip his feet into his shoes without tapping them thrice to shake off the dust and reciting the ordained mantra. And if, even by mistake, he touched an 'unholy' man, he would promptly have a

bath. Jakhra grew up to be very handsome--graceful like a peacock. He was a well-proportioned mixture of his father's strength and his mother's grace. Rigorous training of the mind and a vigilant control over the senses gave a lustre to his handsome face. Every line of his body, and the dazzling expression on his face, spoke eloquently of his attainment in his art as so young an age.

He put to test his knowledge of the magic by experimenting on a pair of cobras. It was rumoured that the pair was living in an ant-hill in a field at Ujadia. Great snake-charmers had played on their flutes till they could play no more, but those snakes had not so much as stirred themselves. Jakhra went there and began to play his flute studded with white, pure shells. Two days passed but nothing happened. On the

held even a day more it will amount to harassing dumb creatures and God will punish us.' Guided by this counsel, Jakhra was aware that once the poisonous gland of the snake was removed even a child could safely play with it. Still, as one who was proud of the maddening melody of this flute, he felt that he could control the deadliest of snakes without pulling out their fangs. So Jakhra had not bothered doing this with the pair of cobras in the basket.

The wind carried the news of Jakhra's feat. The elders in the village sent for him. Jakhra set the stage for the play. The swelling audience was rapt in attention. All eyes were concentrated on the cobras as they swayed in ecstasy. But there was a pair of eyes that was fixed not on the flute or the swaying cobras but on the handsome player of the flute. To those eyes, the one who

However, when she saw Jakhra, she at once felt that he was the man she would most certainly like to have.

Jakhra, puffing up his cheeks as big as coconut shells, was swaying, and with him was swaying the pair of cobras. In the center of the hood of the male cobra was a lovely pale black mark. And that dark, beautiful hood on the bluish-white neck of the cobra was very charming indeed. It reminded one of the *chhatra* over the Shivalinga. And the female cobra, swaying by the side of her male, expressed her power through her majestic curve which was very much like the arch of Puradwar. Jakhra's eyes, ears and nose, his entire self, were now concentrated only on the snout of the male cobra and on the brightly shining eyes of his female. Jakhra had become one with his flute.

Those eyes that were lowered in that evocative silence--why didn't they rise up just once, just for a moment?

Finally, Teja Ba brushed her bangles on the door--so that those eyes would be diverted to her.

And at the tinkling sound, for a moment, yes, only for a moment Jakhra's eyelashes rose. And in that wink of a moment, just in

gradually slowed down. Instead, there was a sudden break--and that disturbed the absorbed cobras. And the result was terrible.

With a frightening hiss the hooded cobra struck Jakhra's palm, and its sharp teeth made a wound there. The flute slipped from Jakhra's hand. There was confusion in the crowd. But Jakhra was still alert. He somehow managed to get cobras back in the basket.

Very soon a glass-green round mark rose where the cobra had struck. The coins that the appreciative audience had thrown for him remained untouched, and Jakhra, resting his head on the basket in which he had just shut the cobras, fell into a swoon.

Promptly the news spread all over town that Jakhra had been bitten by the cobra.

One of the people in the crowd remarked: 'You may bring up a snake on milk, but it is a snake after all!'

'And then,' came another remark, 'however small, a cobra is always a terrible thing. Poison will always kill a person.'

And again: 'Is it not said that a mason would die as he is building and a pearl-diver would die in the stormy sea? the snake charmer too dies through his snakes!'

'Is it a joke, keeping such enormous snakes in such baskets? It is a task as difficult as walking on a razor's edge. One must do penance like the most austere yogis--and one must deny oneself lots and lots of things. Only with the power of such purity can these animals be kept under control!'

'Moreover, an elderly, experienced snake charmer may at least try to do something. This Jakhra is a mere boy. What could he do?'

'Believe me, this profession of snake charmers is an art by itself--and it is a very difficult art at that. You must look after the snakes as if they are your own children. You can't keep them in your basket longer than a fortnight.'

'Even within that limit, is it a joke to have a pair of cobras

dance to the tune of the flute! You must have a heart of steel. Their eyes must be always lowered. Even if the bracelets of the lady of the house jingle, the eyes of the snake charmer should never look up.'

'That is how you can go along the path of knowledge. And knowledge is like mercury. Only the deserving and the learned can digest it. It is easy to learn the trade of the snake charmers; but it is difficult to acquire real mastery of the art!'

The *Bhuva* of Vacchda, who was the greatest expert in the whole area, came to relieve Jakhra of the poisonous sting of the cobra. He chanted mantra after mantra, and he tried his very best, but he was still unable to bring any relief.

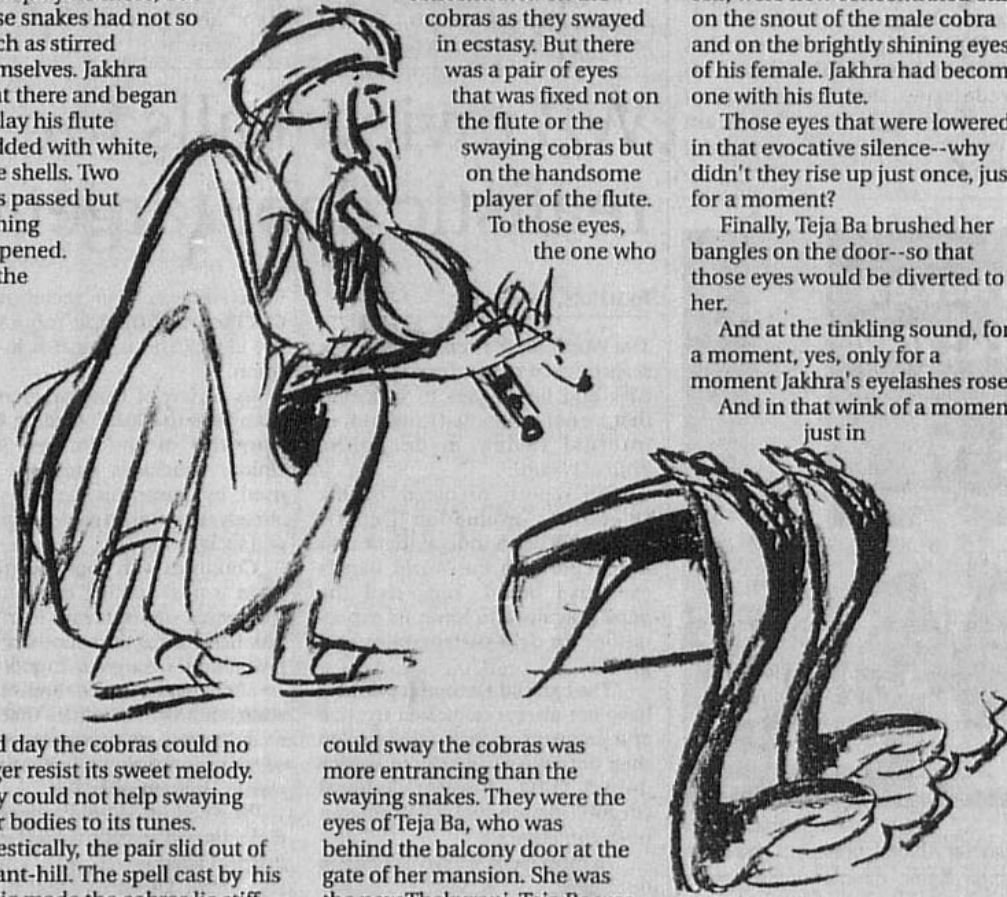
People were disappointed. Jakhra was lying stiff, as if in deep sleep. He seemed to have no consciousness at all!

The audience expressed its disappointment in various ways. They were like a challenge to the *bhuva*, who now started chanting his mantras desperately. But his efforts were futile. He tried the final remedy against snake-bite. He took a long piece of cloth and recited some more mantras, his last warning to the snake. Now everybody expected the poison from Jakhra's wound would come out. If not, the *bhuva* would start tearing that piece of cloth from end to end, and the snake too would get torn like that!

People sitting beside Jakhra's body heard him mutter something in his semi-conscious state. They thought he said: '*Bhuva*, why are you harassing those dumb creatures in the basket? Had it been only the poison of the snake, it would have gone long ago. But with it is mixed that other poison which is sweet and yet sour--and there your magic won't work.' And, even before the *bhuva* could properly try his last trick, Jakhra lay lifeless.

But those two eyes, glistening bright behind the balcony door, remained fixed on Jakhra's body.

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Brick Lane in New York

MUNJULIKA RAHMAN

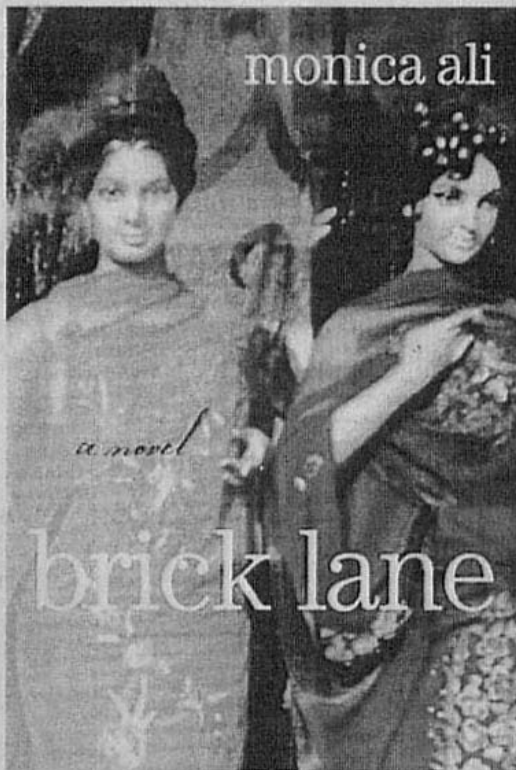
6 p.m. on the 24th of May my sister and I headed towards Barnes and Noble bookstore located at 66th Street in Manhattan. Monica Ali was going to read from her book *Brick Lane* and I was really excited about seeing her. We had to push and shove our way into the crowded subway train, and were squashed between men and women in suits returning home from work. I had heard about Monica Ali more than a year ago from a newspaper clip my dad sent to me with his letter. I was very interested in English writing by South Asian writers, but invariably they were almost always Indian authors. Finally here was a book that would be about Bangladeshi! I wasn't going to miss Monica Ali's reading even if somebody gave me a free ticket to a Broadway play...well...maybe I would rethink that...

We reached the huge bookstore half an hour early and rode up the long escalators to the third floor. There were quite a few empty seats and I sat right up on the second row so as to get a good look at the writer. The old American lady beside me was flipping through a book of dazzling photos of Bollywood heroines Madhuri in *Devdas*, Rekha, and Madhu Bala in their sparkling costumes. I looked over at the copy of *Brick Lane* on her lap and the two women on the cover wearing red and orange kameezes looked more like Bollywood actresses than Nazneen or Hasina--the two principal characters in the book. I had an exact picture of Nazneen in my head: a distant cousin of my dad's who I saw only a few times when we visited our village home. What picture did this lady have, I wondered, of Nazneen and her mother, of *saris* and *dals*?

By the time it was seven, the room was filled with people, *desis* and Americans, in almost equal numbers. A Barnes and Noble personnel came up on stage to introduce the writer. She talked about the book being Monica Ali's first, and kept pronouncing the name as *Moniker* Ali. Keeping up with the casual spirit of New York, the writer was dressed in a pleated denim skirt and white t-shirt with a denim jacket. She wore transparent plastic sandals and strode up to the stage in long easy steps. Her hair was dyed a lighter brown than the dark color that appears in the photo on the back of the book, and she was slim and tall.

She started the evening describing how being a mother played an important part in the writing of her novel. One has to have restrictions in life in order to write, and for her taking care of her two young children took up a lot of time so that she could only write late at night when her children were asleep. Many journalists have asked her before who the character Nazneen is based on, and Ali said she had thought of her British mother's journey to Dhaka after her marriage to her Bengali father, and reversed it to imagine how it would be for a woman to come from Bangladesh to England. Much of the information about Bangladeshi village life that she describes in her book is from her father's stories, but she also interviewed many Bengali people living in the East End of London to form the picture of Bangladesh.

Monica Ali first read an excerpt from the beginning part of the book where Nazneen ventures out alone by herself in Brick Lane and gets lost. She read about the film posters on the way, and the steel and glass buildings, the men in dark suits, and the busy people on the streets who seemed to be on 'private, urgent mission.' I remembered my first time in Times Square, and that was exactly how intimidating and new



Manhattan felt to me.

The next excerpt was the village scene where a fakir comes to rid Nazneen's mother of a jinn. It's one of my favorite parts of the book because of the humorous descriptions and I found myself laughing as she read flawlessly in her British accent, changing her tone to fit the somber booming voice of the fakir, or the thin, nosy voice of the jinn. I could totally relate to her description of our *gram-bangla*'s gatherings and people's 'scratching of noses and back-sides' as they watched the fakir with attention. She pronounced the Bengali words with a British twang, and in spite of myself, I felt a bit disappointed.

When I went to hear Salman Rushdie speak in Sweet Briar College last year, he had pointed out that it's very strange people come from distant places to hear writers *speak*, and there is no reason why writers should be able to speak well in public. Yet, with all the readings and discussions successful writers attend, they become well rehearsed. Monica Ali spoke confidently on stage and it seemed to me that she had chosen her excerpts carefully to match the setting--a description that could be of any busy metropolitan city like London or New York, and a look at exorcism, which is a present in all cultures, but the process was unique to Bangladesh. The audience was able to relate to both the excerpts.

After the reading, during the question-answer session, one member of the audience (obviously not of Bangladeshi origin) asked who the 'Sylhetis' were and why Chanu was prejudiced against them. As Monica Ali explained that majority of the Bangladeshis in England were from Sylhet, and Chanu was talking about the stereotypical characteristics of the Sylhetis, I smiled and nodded my head knowingly. For once, I understood the reference and somebody else was left out! Another member of the audience asked the writer how she felt about the character Chanu because although he is quite an annoying character, he is never shown in a bad light. Monica Ali said that Chanu is definitely not a bad person, and she cared about all her characters, which is why she was able to write about them.

When I was reading *Brick Lane* the inclusion of the parts in Bangla language reminded me that the story was about ordinary people, and the familiarity created a sense of connection to the characters. Considering that Nazneen's thoughts and conversations would be in Bangla in reality, I asked the writer how she decided when to put in Bangla and when to go on with English. She said it depended on the situation, like it was used to show intimacy between Karim and Nazneen when she asked him why he liked her.

When Monica Ali was signing my copy of the book, she asked me if I was Bangladeshi. I told her that I had grown up in Dhaka and was studying communication and creative writing in college. She looked at my name and said 'My father's best friend in Dhaka...his wife's name is Monju. Good luck with your writing. Hope to see you published soon.' I hope so too, I thought. During the evening Monica Ali said when she started with the novel and was doing research for it, she absolutely felt she had to write about *Brick Lane* and the lives of these characters. I went away from the bookstore with the comforting feeling that one day I would also find a situation that I would be compelled to write about.

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Book Review

Where on Earth am I? Confusions of a Travelling Man, by Jug Suraiya; Penguin Books India, New Delhi; 2004; 158 pages + xii.

ZAFAR SOBHAN

Being a travel writer must be the best job in the world. Think about it. You get to travel to all sorts of exotic places around the world at your publisher's expense and all you have to do in return is turn in your travel journal when you get home. Nice work if you can get it.

It is therefore always nice to read a travel memoir penned by someone who truly seems to appreciate the astonishing opportunity laid before him or her and who has the talent and the wit to make the most of the opportunity.

Jug Suraiya, winner of the Pacific Area Travel Association gold medal for travel writing, is just such a travel writer, and his travel memoir *Where on Earth am I?* makes for delightful reading.

The memoir takes the form of twenty-six essays, some barely a couple of hundred words long, about twenty-six memorable places Suraiya has visited together with the charming Bunny, who I take to be his wife (or girlfriend) and photographer. It's a perfect read because it allows the reader to dip in and out of it, reading as little or as much as one wants each time.

The first ten essays cover journeys in India from Nagaland and Jilling to Goa and Kashmir. The first thing I noted was that Suraiya had an excellent choice of destination--almost all the places he has chosen to visit and write about in this memoir are places that I would love to go myself.

But the best thing about Suraiya's writing is Suraiya himself. He comes across as a good-natured and humorous traveller and we are happy to be allowed to come along for the ride. It really feels as though we are his travelling companions as he shares his confusion and wonder at the lands through which he travels, and it is the

agreeableness of his companionship that is the book's best feature. It might be interesting to read about the beauty and culture of faraway places--but who wants to go anywhere with someone who is no fun?

The book is filled with his amusing and off-beat observations and hilarious transcriptions of his attempts to communicate with the locals wherever he might find himself. The joke is most often on Suraiya and his ability to laugh at himself makes for fun reading.

But he is not just a comedian--his insights into cultures and mores and his ability to capture the essence of a place in a few moving sentences explain why he is an award-winning writer. With a few strokes of his pen he can bring a place to life with an immediacy that makes you yearn to go there yourself.

He has sixteen chapters on destinations outside of India that cover sixteen destinations that are on every traveller's wished-for itinerary. We follow him and Bunny from Bali to Havana to Rio to Acapulco to the plateaus of Tibet to the plains of the Serengeti.

It is an unforgettable whirlwind of a tour that leaves one breathless and a little envious, but it's not everyone who can write as charmingly and insightfully as Suraiya.

I'll leave you with just one example of his unforgettable prose. His piece entitled 'Cuba Libre' begins:

'If cities were people, Havana would be Don Quixote. Ragged knight errant, driven by hopeless chivalry to tilt against the windmills of his madness, riding a broken-down nag, forever in love with the raddled seductress of revolution. If cities were music, Havana would be jazz played on a scratched record, the needle of time skittering across the

grooves of past and present in random riffs...'

and ends:

'Stuck like a jaunty cigar in the mouth of the Caribbean, Cuba continues to confront the US Goliath. Come on, hombre. Make my day. Mano a mano. For sheer machismo, it's an unparalleled act. Forty-three years on, Fidel's revolution is on its last legs. But like Hemingway's Old Man it remains a testament to an unyielding truth: I can be destroyed; but I can never be defeated.

In the amber afterglow of dusk, I take a last walk along the Malecon and raise a toast to Cuba libre: Salud to its pride, its passion, its poverty. Salud to the revolution. To its glorious triumph. And to its even more magnificent tragedy.'

That's what I'm talking about. If I could write like that I'd be travelling the world on someone else's rupee too. If you want more, you'll have to read the book. Believe me, it'll be well worth it.

Zafar Sobhan is assistant editor, The Daily Star.

