

SHORT STORY

Clara Linden in Nijkolmohona

SHAHADUZZAMAN (translated by Sonia Amin)

Tying knot upon knot,  
Come, read the mother's womb, by this spell  
Add the name to the month of conception  
Divide by eight—and the future foretell

If the remainder is one or three  
Then a baby boy it is sure to be.  
If the remainder be six, two, or four  
A baby girl will be born for sure.

And if you should a zero behold  
A miscarriage is foretold.

It would be a boy, Kashmati Bewa had predicted. Divorce would follow, Abbas's father had declared, if after four daughters his wife did not give birth to a boy. However, the prediction held true—and Abbas was born.

A few moments ago Abbas has brought in some Glucose biscuits for Clara Linden and Mehjabeen Khan. Kashmati Bewa had sent him to fetch them from the grocery shop nearby. The three of them are sitting in the husking room: pale-skinned Clara Linden, almond-brown Mehjabeen and dark-coloured Kashmati Bewa. Quite a fetching sight in the room. Not a proper 'room' of course—a shed of sorts—a straw canopy over a tired old husking pedal with the wind blowing in from all sides.

After handing over the biscuits, Abbas goes and leans against the *Jaam* tree, then whispers something to his friend. He has seen on the VCR white women like Clara getting naked and doing all sorts of obscene things. This is the first time Abbas has seen one in the flesh. His knowledge about white women has been gathered from the porno movies that did the secret rounds in the village bazaar. The two friends begin to eye Clara from a safe distance.

Clara holds a pen and a notebook; Mehjabeen has a micro tape recorder and in Kashmati Bewa's hand a bamboo leaf trembles softly. Clara is waiting intently to hear the translation of the birth prediction mantra. But Mehjabeen is in a fix. She cannot quite make up her mind how to translate Kashmati's chants into English. Mehjabeen, a star student in English literature department, finds the task of rendering the words into English a totally novel and daunting challenge. Besides, being a full-fledged urban creature, she is not quite at ease in this husking shed. She had responded to Clara's advertisement for an interpreter in a newspaper. And here she was...finally she says, 'Clara, the mantra is stored in the cassette; why don't I work on it later on?' Clara, a little disappointed at being deprived of unraveling the mystery of the mantra right away, agrees.

Yesterday, a fish-catching contest had been held in Nijkolmohona. Quite a big event. And where the largest number of fish had been netted by Abbas. The very Abbas whose birth history is under discussion.

But before delving into that history, Nijkolmohona's oldest midwife is asked how many babies she has delivered over the years. Kashmati hesitates: should she include the birth of calves and goat kids, as well? Clara, through Mehjabeen, says no, human babies only. Reassured, Kashmati replies, 'In that case, very many. I have completed one Hajj, and am near to finishing another.'

Both Clara and Mehjabeen are somewhat puzzled at the Hajj reference—they ask Kashmati to elaborate. Instead Kashmati, saying 'Have some biscuits first,' rises and comes back with a jug of clear, cool water from the tubewell, setting it down in the husking shed. Then she fetches a long rope from the room inside. It is tied in countless knots. As Clara and Mehjabeen take a bite of the biscuits, Kashmati explains, 'Each of these knots is a birth. After each birth I tie a knot. I can't read or write, so this is my record-book.' Then goes on to elaborate that if a midwife delivers 101 babies, she attains the grace equivalent of one 'Hajj.' Kashmati counts 182 knots on the rope. She hopes to complete her second Hajj. Clara and Mehjabeen, distracted by her words, forget to eat and hold their biscuits in their hands.

Kashmati points to Abbas and says, 'That boy completed my first

Hajj.' Not only that, but Abbas's birth was a memorable one because it had been a dramatic event. On seeing Kashmati pointing her finger at him, Abbas, standing at a distance, starts up guiltily since he is still whispering about the sexual behaviour of white women. Though they shouldn't have been able to hear him inside the husking shed, still, Abbas turns and quickly takes off for the field where he starts to hoe.

Clara Linden has come a long way—from the United States, in fact. Her research on childbirth has brought her to the remote village of Nijkolmohona. Her goal is to collect data on the birthing practices, beliefs, and rituals surrounding women of the third world. As they sit in the shad talking, curious eyes peer from between the splits in the bamboo walls around them.

Kashmati Bewa recalls how anxious Abbas's mother had been. She had borne four baby girls already. Now what was needed was a male child—otherwise a grave calamity would descend on the household. Her husband would divorce her for certain, she was told. Abbas's mother began to bewail her fate, crying out, 'What will happen to me, Sister Kashmati?'

And even though Kashmati had predicted a son after her reading, fear did not leave Abbas's mother. So in the seventh month of the pregnancy Kashmati had arranged for the seven-month ritual song to be sung—the song that was to produce a son. Several women had circled Abbas's mother and sung the song. Clara's curiosity is very aroused: 'Could we hear the song?' Kashmati feels embarrassed, explains that her voice is not melodious. But Clara is insistent. She has to collect all the data she can. So Kashmati summons Ambia, who has a good voice. The two women move to the center of the husking-shed, a bit bashful. They place their hands on each other's shoulders and start their song—a low lament—as they put one foot forward, then one foot back:

Champa is in her seventh month, mother, oh dear!  
Champa wants a drink from a stream cool and clear, oh dear!  
Champa wants a drink from a stream cool and clear, oh dear!  
Where shall I find now a stream cool and clear, oh dear!  
Where shall I find now a stream cool and clear, oh dear!  
Time rolls on, time flies fast, as we speak, oh dear!  
And Champa is in her ninth month now, oh dear!  
And Champa is in her tenth month now, oh dear!  
And Champa is lying dead tired and all spent now  
Oh call the midwife from her father's land for her  
Where will I find that midwife here, oh dear  
And Champa gives birth to a baby boy at last, oh dear!

As the song ends, Kashmati and Ambia break out in giggles. Clara claps her hands. The tune was melancholy, and both Mehjabeen and Clara had felt a certain desolation within themselves. The song is not too difficult for Mehjabeen to translate. Clara is overwhelmed by its sweet simplicity, how each line paralleled the phases of pregnancy. Especially by that one line, 'Oh call the midwife from her father's land for her.' She discusses this with Mehjabeen, that the pregnant woman is remembering her father's home in the midst of her labour pains. Now that is indeed significant, thinks Clara. In the friendless environment of her husband's home, the woman invokes the warmth of her paternal abode. One can feel the vulnerability of the girl at this juncture, the secret pain of a woman in a patriarchal society. Mehjabeen appreciates this analysis.

At this point in the proceedings, an elderly man with a salt-and-pepper beard, slickly oiled hair, clad in white kurta pyjamas comes across the courtyard towards them. His gaze is both curious, and anxious.

'Salam Alaikum. I am Abdul Quddus, the Union member,' he says in Urdu, standing close to Clara and Mehjabeen. Kashmati draws her sari as a veil over her head. Quddus's Urdu sounds dissonant in that little shed in Nijkolmohona. Clara of course is a foreigner, and seeing Mehjabeen seated beside her he thinks so is she. He figures Bangla won't do here and the only foreign language he knows is Urdu. So Urdu it has to be. However, when Mehjabeen replies in Bengali, he is a bit disappointed. He has been deprived of a rare opportunity to show off his linguistic skills.

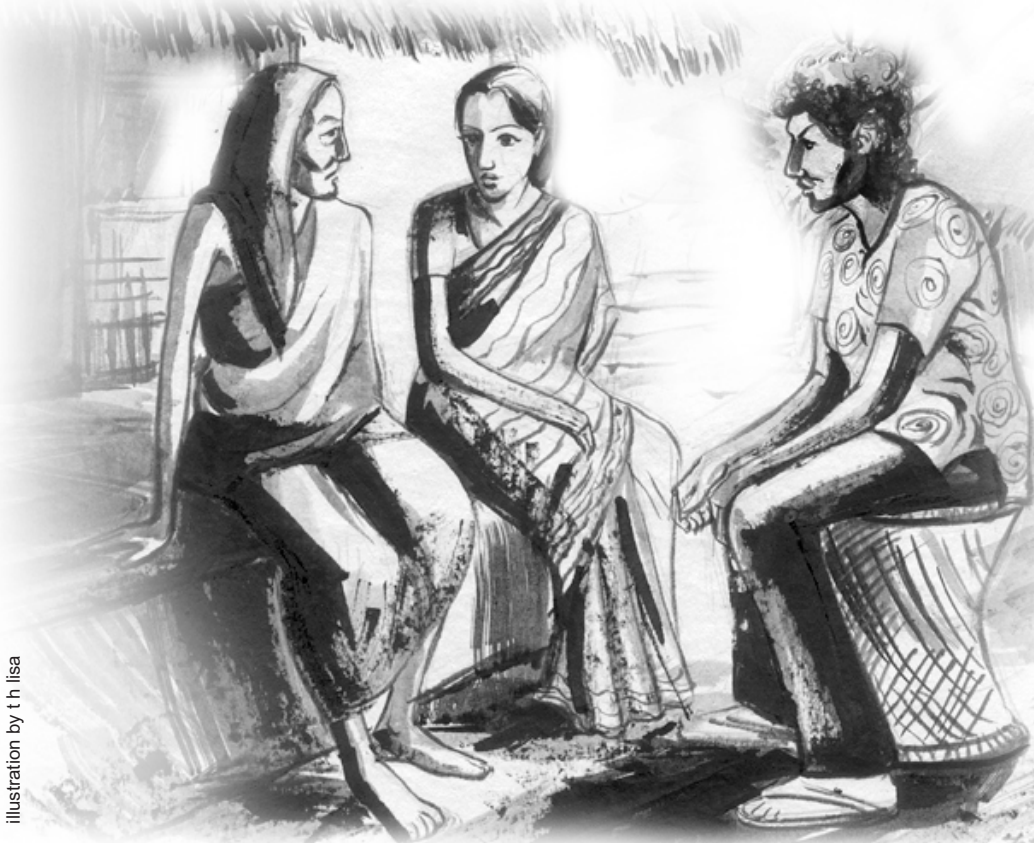


illustration by th lisa

As the elected representative of the area, Abdus Quddus feels it is his responsibility to keep track of the goings-on in the village. So he's come to see if something's the matter here. Mehjabeen explains their presence in Nijkolmohona. Kashmati adds with a smile, 'They want to know how I relieve women of their rapsallions.'

Quddus is relieved, and says, 'Ah!' feeling lightened with the knowledge that this visit has nothing to do with relief work, debt, foreign aid, or a police investigation. He has no interest in such trite, female matters. However, unable to suppress his curiosity he points to Clara and asks, 'Which country is she from?'

Mehjabeen supplies the answer. With an ingratiating smile passed on his lips Quddus then takes his leave, all the while stroking his beard.

Clara, after enquiring about Quddus, turns back to the topic of Abbas. Mehjabeen turns on the cassette player.

Kashmati informs them that Abbas's mother's labour started in the late afternoon. Kashmati was summoned. Resorting to her traditional midwife expertise, she proclaimed midnight as the birthing hour.

'What kind of expertise?' she is asked. Kashmati elaborates. According to the ancient manuals, a lock of the mother's hair is laid across her face along the nose. A few drops of oil are then scattered on the hair, which will roll down to the rounded stomach. If the oil reaches the navel, the baby may be born at any time. If it falls to the left, the baby is due in a few hours; if to the right, the hour of birth is a long way off. The oil on Abbas's mother had fallen to the right.

Mehjabeen translates for Clara. The latter takes notes. Kashmati continues: she had been sure that the mother's water would not break before midnight. So she set about her preparations. She placed a piece of old fishing net and a lump of iron in the birthing room—a long-time practice with her. The net would guard the mother from evil winds and the iron was protection against jinns.

The water broke much after midnight. And almost immediately things started to go wrong one after the other. As soon as the baby began to slide out of the mother's body Kashmati saw that the umbilical cord was wrapped around its head. Very speedily Kashmati used her skillful hands and unwound the cord. Then everybody broke out in smiles when they found out that the baby was a boy. But the smiles faded just as quickly when the baby refused to cry out.

Despite her best efforts he refused to take his first breath of air. And there was more: the minutes ticked by but there was no sign of the placenta. Kashmati panicked. Quickly she resorted to two measures: first, she rushed out and told Abbas's father seated outside, puffing on a cigarette, to turn over his lungi twice and put it on again. Secondly, she instructed another woman to bring a copper bowl and clang it close to the baby's ears. According to the ancient lore if the husband reversed his garment, the act would have a magical effect on the placenta. So Abbas's father quickly did as he was told, and a woman started to beat a copper bowl near the baby's ears. Gradually, the placenta came out. But the baby still showed no signs of crying out. The clang of the copper bowl grew louder. Fear gripped everyone. The baby lay still on the mat—something had to be done, and quickly. Kashmati now resorted to her next move. A cooking pot was sent for, and heated in the birthing room. She started to fry the tangled and bloody placenta in the pot. At the

other end of the cord lay the motionless baby Abbas. Kashmati went on with her ritual; at one point the baby stirred and uttered a loud cry. The tension in the room evaporated. Kashmati cut the umbilical cord with the *boti* used for gutting fish—freshly dipped in boiling water. And that is why each year Abbas's net catches the largest number of fish at the fish-catching contest.

Kashmati Bewa pauses, then resumes. Mehjabeen translates: 'I picked up the baby into my lap first, before his mother did, from a pool of rotting blood. By the grace of Allah, and my own skills, I saved that baby from many a danger...and now he is a young lad living in the fields.' Kashmati Bewa gazes in the distance where Abbas is working in the fields. Her mind fills with peace. She is enjoying talking to the two women. Somehow, it makes her feel light-hearted. No one had really wanted to know the joys and sorrows of her chequered career. So what if they were from the city, or from some distant foreign land—they were women too.

And on the other side of the room Clara Linden is quite delighted: 'Wow, what exotic data. My thesis is beginning to take shape...Ah Abbas, what with predictions, songs, cymbals and fire, your birth is so colourful. And beside that the white apron, gloves, forceps, and monitors surrounding our births seem so drab!'

And Mehjabeen, a bit unsettled and amazed, is thinking something quite different. What strange phenomena! What is this land hidden within the land I know—strange, distant. Who is she going to translate for, she needs an interpreter herself!

Noon descends on Nijkolmohona. The wind blows through the husking room where the women, white, almond and dark, are each lost in their own thoughts.

Shahaduzzaman writes short stories in Bengali and teaches at BRAC university. The above story is taken from his book Poshchimer Meghe Shonar Shingha. Sonia Amin teaches history at Dhaka University.

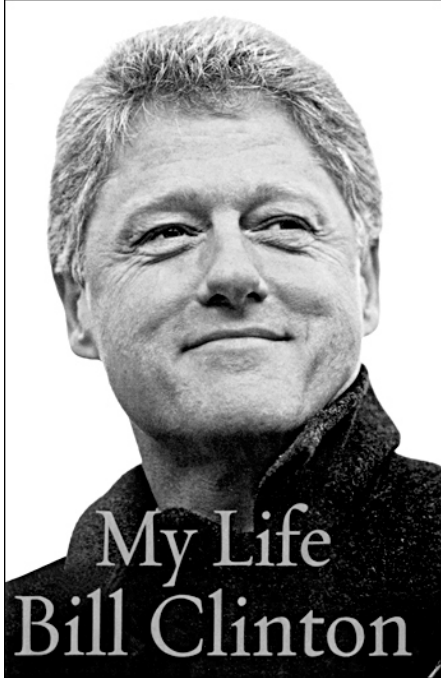
Letter from  
SAN FRANCISCO

SALMA RIDHAK

In answer to the question of the title: generally, no; in the case of Bill Clinton, toss out your commonplace assumptions.

The title of this article—this trotting out of the shopworn twist on a phrase from William the Avon Rapper—got your attention, didn't it? The eye roves over the page, fastens on the article header, you can almost hear a little click in the mind, and then, swiftly, out of a combination of habit and practice, the reader makes up his/her mind to either read the piece or boogie on by.

The same psychology is behind book covers. Book covers prick the senses. Like those old Egyptian seers, we can divine the fleeting notion of a book with a quick glance if the designer was skilled enough and the publisher willing to see through an aesthetic vision. And of course, there are desperate calculations behind all of this: Why did the publisher put a naked, nubile girl on the cover? What expectations does a gun and car on a paperback arouse? Why is Romeo, and not Iago, on the covers of all those Shakespeare editions aimed at the popular market? All of this hoopla is, of course, to make the potential buyer stop and pick up the book. Once the buyer picks it up, the selling function of the cover disappears; now the battle is between need, discretionary income, writer's popularity, and book marketing, which includes reviews, and in the case of the West, the all-too-vital television chat shows and author signings.



Ironical that the medium, television, which is responsible in the first place for the decline in reading habits, is now harnessed in the cause of print!

The making of book covers is now ('now' meaning roughly the last twenty years, an eon in West Coast time, which I inhabit) big business. Ever since book publishers—just like newspaper and magazine editors hip to headlines with a twist—got wise to the basic principles of modern marketing, book cover design industry went King-Kong big. What's as plain as the spinach in Popeye's mouth, the biz gurus said, is that cover 'art' is what draws the eye, that the right book cover in a looks-driven culture can make the majority of books sink or swim—and the publishers listened. It is a

phenomenon that is not entirely confined to the West either, what with creeping globalization, something evident in, for example, Penguin India publications, whose cover designs have become increasingly slick and design-sensitive. It also means that the aesthetic of book covers are also worthy of attention and a proper subject of criticism. Oscar Wilde would nod his head in agreement with me.

*My Life* by Bill Clinton  
Knopf  
Jacket design by Carol Devine Carson  
Jacket photographs courtesy of the Clinton Presidential Materials Project

So let's take a look at the cover of Bill Clinton's *My Life*, something, the editor of this page informed me, which is well-known to the readers of this newspaper by virtue of pirated copies being peddled on Dhaka's streets. Here in the United States, it landed in the stores this June with all the grace of a twenty-ton rhino crashing into a supermarket deli, a veritable Kansas twister of pages. You should have seen the lines for it at the Barnes & Noble I frequent—only the Trekkies camping overnight in front of movie duplex in the Castro beat them, and that too only by the thin margin of a Klingon's decency. The book is

big and as larger-than-life as its creator, sprawling in its focus and physical heft, as noted by almost every critic who had to review it, but it's too bad the cover is a sadly enervating affair. Carol Devine Carson, a seasoned professional at Knopf, designed the cover, but we shouldn't blame the poor woman who was obviously pressed for time. It is not a huge secret—unlike the Bush IQ number—that Bill Clinton was feverishly working to complete the book and trying to wrap it up well before the Democratic National Convention swamped all the print and electronic news outlets. In consequence, the book production was a most hurried affair; 'a one-night stand' commented my friend Rupert (otherwise known as 'Rupe the Snoop'), who's actually taken a college course in the stuff. So we can just imagine what happened in the Knopf offices when the project was finally placed on Carson's in-tray. Carson has designed many fine and excellent covers through out her fruitful career at Knopf, but we can guess that this particular cover is not a personal favorite.

Quite honestly, on first glance, the book cover looks like it was a two-minute QuarkXpress rush job, pressed out in-between resumes and a reproduction of a poster for Conan the Barbarian. The front and back images were provided by the author himself and nothing more should be said about them except that they are wholly pedestrian. The front picture of Bill Clinton looks like a hastily taken photograph and rather cheap-looking too —emphasized by the fact that he

appears to be wearing one of those generic fleece jackets you can buy at the Gap clothing store. What has he done? Just come back from a run to the nearest McDonald's? The placement of the title and name has no 'anchor' to it. They are placed there, on that particular spot, because, where else could she put it? Money and time, or lack thereof of the latter set the parameters of the design, and instead of bookmaking, we have a cookie factory churning out something routine. "There's not a grain of salt in that big dish to stir the appetite," as Ovid once said.

But here's the twist that makes life interesting, when the results go against the grain of conventional wisdom. In Clinton's case, the cover of *My Life* has not deterred the reading public who snatched it up like free ice cream on a July day. Clinton's book acted like gravity's force field bending all heads towards it, a placement beyond the conventional calculations of cover aesthetics and market design. Goes to show that the pull of Bill Clinton's charisma is just as strong as when he was the leader of the free world. But still, shouldn't we have expected a beautiful, crafted, and magisterial book cover for a former president—albeit a president with a scandal-filled term? Instead of getting magisterial on the cheap?

But don't blame Carson. You want a rush job, you get a rush job.

Salma Ridhak is a journalism student in San Francisco.

## This Sight

SUNIL GANGAPADHYA  
(translated by Khademul Islam)

Chin on knees, you sit  
A blue-striped sari, dream hair flowing down your back  
Countless butterflies in the air, or cloud-forms all, is it?  
Chin on knees, you sit  
Eyes famously remote, red glaze on toes  
Your right hand, on the forefinger a tiny ink stain  
From writing a short while back



illustration by th aloke

In the air a sweet scent, the hint of an evening somewhere  
Night travels to us from a different country, it will arrive late today  
Chin on hand, you sit  
In the artist's veins courses excitement, magic burns in his eye  
Around us like fireflies, like quick glances the lies that enchant  
That there ever was sadness in life I cannot recall  
Chin on knees, you sit  
Time does not stop I know, one day you and I will pass into it  
Time does not relent, one day death will come to take us away  
Wishes not granted, small joys, all these will vanish  
beyond the horizon  
New men will come forth to build a new society  
Fresh winds will blow away old sighs  
Yet today  
This sitting, this hair flowing down your back  
Ink stain on a finger  
This sight is for ever, with it will join immortality  
Chin on knees, you sit...

Sunil Gangapadhyia is a leading Bengali poet and novelist. Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.