

SHORT STORY

Tree

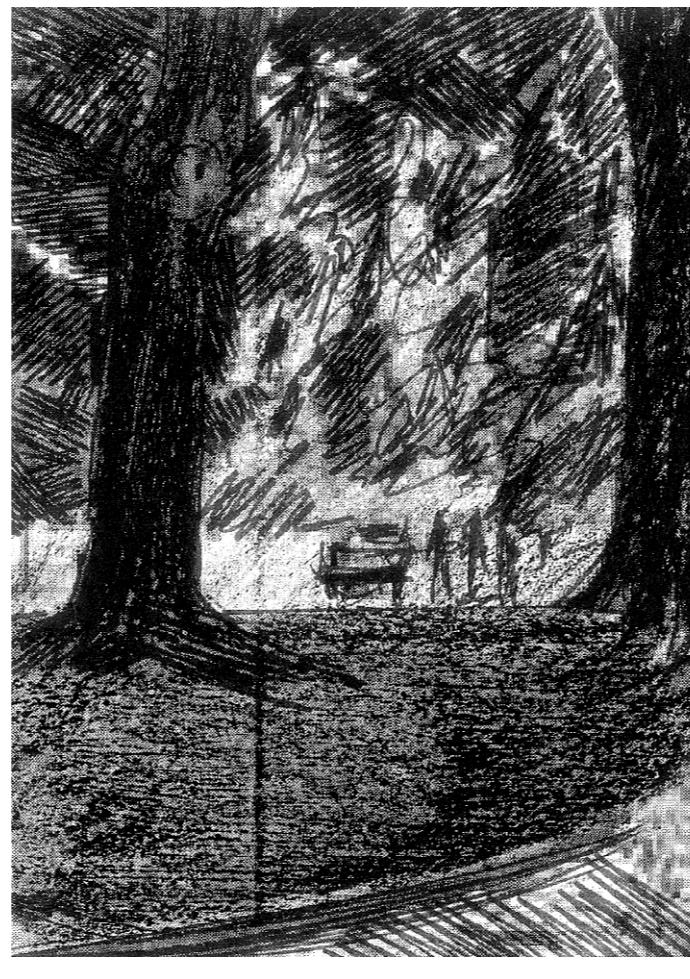
TASADDUQ SOHAIL
(Translated by M. U. Memon)

like solitude. Nobody visits me, nor I anyone. In the morning I set out for wherever fancy strikes me and stop wherever I feel like stopping. I don't want anyone to reply to anything I say, nor expect a reply from me. This is why my acquaintances are not my neighbors but rather their cats. These houses, I know them by the cats that live in them: Suti lives in No. 9, Libi in 7 and Suzie in 2. I have never tried to find out who owns these cats. My only interaction is with the cats. Perhaps you wonder how anyone can possibly live like this? Surely one needs others, surely one must need to say something to someone. Of course such thoughts frequently assail me, especially during winters, when the sky is covered with dirty, drab-looking clouds and rows upon rows of gigantic leafless trees stand listlessly staring up into it. Then it becomes terribly difficult to stay indoors all alone. At such times I try to keep myself busy. Sometimes by painting, sometimes by reading books, or by listening to Mehdi Hasan or Musarrat Nazir. Sometimes I let myself be carried far away by the melody of their songs or ghazals to the narrow lanes of Pakistan, its neighborhoods, villages and towns, thinking that it must be 11:00 in the morning there. Kites must be sailing in the crystal blue sky; simple, ordinary folks must be on their way to work. Thinking thoughts like these and sipping wine, I often doze off. But that day I was feeling terribly depressed. I felt that my mind would soon explode if I didn't find someone who would relieve my tension. I sat holding my head between my hands for quite a while. Then I grabbed my overcoat and dashed out to the park. The park was murderously

quiet and a wretched silence hung over the atmosphere. I sat down on the roots of a tree, leaning against the trunk. I had a strange feeling that the tree hugged me, as if it were alive. This tree has been standing here for centuries. God knows how many people had come and sat down beside it like me. I have known this tree for the past thirty years. I used to bring my girlfriends here. And today it's witnessing my old age. If only I could understand your tongue!—I said, looking wistfully at the tree in utter despair. Sher Khan, my tomcat—who used to listen to my ravings at such times, who was my intimate friend—had been dead for a month. He was a wise cat. We each knew every single habit and gesture of the other. I had seen smiles dance on his lips, and despair in his eyes. Cats talk, but they talk with their eyes. The times when I'd be particularly melancholy, he'd sit near me and listen to me without blinking. Well, where Sher Khan is concerned, it's understandable that a person would talk to him because he was a living being, one who ate and drank, and who was endowed with the faculty to observe, to listen, and to understand. But talking to a tree?—That, surely, was sheer madness. And although for years I had often sat down on its roots I had scarcely ever imagined that a person could also talk to it. The tree is alive—I told myself—but is it also as full of life as Sher Khan? What difference does that make—I said to myself, feeling irritated. All I want is to vent myself a little after all. I'll leave after I've eased myself a bit. I looked around. There was no one near or far. Grabbing the chance I draped myself around its trunk and broke into inconsolable sobs: God, at least give me enough courage to kill myself! How long will I have to endure this torture? God only knows what else I spewed out in one breath. Surprised by the words

"Oh, sod off from here," I flew and fell a few yards away from the tree. Who had spoken these words? I scanned the area with my eyes wide open. There was no one anywhere in the vicinity of the tree. "You idiot!" the voice echoed again. It was the tree speaking. "What? You're talking!" I said to the tree in a crackling voice. "What did you think? That only you know how to speak? The noblest among creation? My foot!" he said in a rage. I quickly withdrew my foot from the root. "Thank you," the tree said, and continued, "It's true that we trees aren't in the habit of talking. You know why? Because talking breeds enmity. In bygone days, though, we did use to talk. But when these descendants of monkeys started to shoot off their mouths, we trees stopped talking. Let's see, we thought, what all man can achieve by blathering that we can't by keeping quiet. But now, today, after centuries, your utter stupidity has compelled me to break my silence. A few days ago cold weather and there you go having fits of depression! For God's sake, have you ever bothered about anyone other than yourself?"

The tree paused for a brief moment and resumed: "You've no idea how fortunate you are. You can jump from a bridge and drown yourself if you like. Or put an end to your miserable life by hanging yourself with a rope. But me, I can't die, even if I want to. God hasn't even given me the right to call it quits at a moment of my own choosing. Do you realize I've been stuck in the earth right here on this spot for the last five hundred years? Don't you think I sometimes feel like taking a stroll up Golders Green Road? Or go to Brighton, strip off my leaves and loll about on the Nude Beach. But I have never, I repeat never, allowed myself to shed a single tear. Why



by a lone

do you humans think that we have no feelings? On cold wintry nights when you snuggle under the comfort of heavy quilts inside your homes, I stand out here, with my bare branches, shivering in the dark."

"From the cold?"
"No, from fear," he blurted out in a rage.

"What have you got to do with fear?"

"Why? Am I made of stone?" He paused, and then said, "Well, I shouldn't say 'stone.' Because that stone, there ... he too is afraid."

"Why?"
"He's allergic to dogs. The other day he was saying that dog piss gives him rashes. But

you wouldn't know about that." After that day I often went to the tree and talked to him. Some of our thoughts were quite similar and we also enjoyed a kind of mental affinity. I'm not very religious, and he was not at all. He put absolutely no faith in religion. One day he said, "The entire park is religious except me. All these tiny medicinal herbs you see are religious. And that weeping willow over there, he's the limit. In perpetual prostration. I've never seen him so much as lift his head a smidge."

"So you think there's nothing after death?"

"At least I think there isn't, brother. And even if there is

something, it certainly isn't what these trifling herbs imagine."

In the days that followed I became ill and left for Pakistan. I had intended to stay there for a month, but I became so absorbed in setting up an exhibition of my paintings and in other matters that I scarcely felt the passage of time, until a whole year had rolled away. On the return flight to London the passenger in the seat next to mine told me how a terrible wind storm in England had uprooted some half a million trees. I recalled having read something about it in the papers, but I was finding the number of fallen trees hard to believe. I remembered the "Tree" with concern. How I wish I hadn't abandoned him! I thought about that for a while: even if I hadn't abandoned him, what could I have done? I couldn't have saved him. At most, I could have spent a few more days under the shade of his thick foliage. Then again, it was possible that it hadn't been felled, that it still stood there swaying happily in the breeze.

When I approached the park, the tree was not there. Its place was occupied by a flower patch in the middle of which gardeners had planted a spindly young tree and secured it with a thick bamboo prop. Overcome by sadness, I roamed aimlessly around in the park, looking for all those trees the stormy winds had obliterated. The entire park looked radically different. The soaring wall of stout white trees, which formerly stood behind the bandstand and seemed to pierce the clouds, had been completely wiped out.

One of the gardeners started telling me about the devastation caused by the storm as he turned over the earth with his shovel. He described how they had just removed the small, insignificant trees to one side

and burned them and how the really big trees had been bought by furniture-makers and hauled away to be stored. "But your tree," he said, "I remember vividly, was purchased by a small Birmingham company. I remember that well because I had myself had it loaded onto a truck. I doubt if anyone can locate it." I thought to myself that the gardener was talking about a matter scarcely two months old. I made a note of the company's Birmingham address and returned home. I thought about the matter for a few days.

"Look," I tried to reason with myself, "it's madness." But my craze didn't abate. On the contrary, it became oppressive, until one day I found myself standing in front of that timber-yard. "O.K., sir, now what are you going to tell them?" I asked myself. "That you want to look at the face of that dead departed tree? They'll nab you and put you into the loony bin any day now. Suppose they asked you 'Why?' What possible answer would you have to give them?" And then, as if in a flash, I seemed to stumble onto a suitable answer. "I'm writing an article about that tree: the different stages it had to go through and how it ended." The thought had barely hit me when I dashed into the office of the timber-yard.

"Oh," jerking back a golden curl the blond receptionist said after I told her that. She then opened a register. "Lot 17 ... We sold the biggest chunk of the tree to Mr. Collin Turner the sculptor." The next day I visited Mr. Collin Turner in his studio. He was busy sculpting a nude. I asked him about the lot. He scratched his bald head and said, "I think we made a Christ figure with Lot 17 and sold it to a church." He scribbled the name and address of the church on scratch paper and handed it to me. I thanked him and left to look for the church.

It was a small, beautiful town. A lovely church stood some distance away from the residential area. The evening Mass had already ended. Although the last of the sun's rays were still stretched out on the church's roof, the shadows under the neighboring trees had darkened. I walked through the main door and entered the hall. I dipped my finger into the font of holy water, bent my leg ever so slightly and crossed my heart as my eyes looked straight ahead at the Christ. Picking my way along in silence, I approached the massive figure. Again I crossed my heart and then straightened up and stood next to an old woman. A little while later she bowed her head, then rose slowly and left. I raised my head for the first time and looked at the Christ. With his half-opened eyes he seemed to be staring at the spot on the floor where I was standing.

The church was empty now except for the two of us. A dim light spread out around us. The glow of the lighted candles surrounding the Christ gave him an added aura of mystery. I extended my arm and placed my hand on his foot.

"So you've come," he said. A heavy base voice crashed against the walls inside and then silence returned.

"Yes, my Tree."

And as I said those words my eyes involuntarily spilled their cargo of tears. I grasped his foot tightly with my trembling hand. "But, didn't you use to say that there was no hell or heaven after death?" I said. After some time, when the tree didn't respond, I lifted my head up and looked at it. A strange, mysterious smile was breaking on his lips ... the same smile found on Mona Lisa's lips.

Tasadduq Sohail is a well-known modern Urdu short story writer. 'Tree' was written in 1997. M. U. Memon is an editor and translator of Urdu writing.

BookReviews

Uncovering Traces

ASIANS IN BRITAIN 400 Years of History



Rozina Visram



KAISSER HAQ

Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History by Rozina Visram (London: Pluto Press, 2002).

In 1986 Rozina Visram published *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes* (Pluto Press), a pioneering study of the Asian presence in Britain. She has since been periodically reporting fresh findings on the subject in books and research papers: *Indians in Britain* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1987); "The First World War and the Indian Soldiers," *Indo-British Review*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 1989; *The History of the Asian Community in Britain* (Hove: Wayland, 1995); "Kamal A. Chunchie of the Coloured Men's Institute: The Man and the Legend," *Immigrants and Minorities*, Vol. 18, No. 1, March 1999. The book under review is the latest and most comprehensive investigation of the subject. *Ayahs, Lascars* had opened the account in the eighteenth century; *Asians in Britain* pushes back the beginning of the story by over a century.

In 1616 an Indian was baptised in London with a name (Peter) chosen by King James I. Peter had been brought to Britain two years previously by a missionary and put to school. Soon after his baptism he was sent back to the East as a missionary. Three letters that he wrote in Latin have survived.

Peter of course was a visitor but there were also Indian settlers in seventeenth century Britain. A parish register records the marriage in 1613 of "Samuel Munsoor a 'Blackamoor' to Jane Johnson." Visram speculates that the man was probably Indian. If so, was he the first Indian to step on Albion's shores? I do not know, but the English literary imagination had already claimed acquaintance with India and Indians. For instance, in Shakespeare's comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, written in 1594 or 1595, the Fairy King Oberon comes "from the farthest steep of India," and he and his consort Titania, fall out over a lovely Indian boy; Titania has made him her attendant ("my young squire"), but Oberon wants him to be "Knight of his train, to trace the forests wild."

The boy is only mentioned, not shown on stage, which may indicate that he was a product of fancy and not drawn from life. But even if such was the case, reality eventually caught up with fancy, at least in a manner of speaking, as we can see from a painting by Peter Lely titled "Lady Charlotte Fitzroy," (circa 1672). It shows eight-year-old Charlotte being offered grapes by a lovely boy who has been identified by Professor J. D. Stewart as an Indian. Judging from the reproduction in Visram's book, the boy gives the impression of a well-looked after mascot.

Most Indian servants, though, had a tougher life. Some were brought over by India hands returning home because they could be paid an eighth of the wages for English servants; others merely for their service on board ship. The latter were supposed to be sent back to India at their employers' expense, but in fact were often abandoned on arrival in England. Some servants from both categories ran away and were hunted down with the help of "hue and cry" advertisements in the press.

Another group of Indian settlers in Britain were lascars who jumped ship. By the eighteenth century London had a sizeable number of vagrant Indians, which makes their elision from standard histories down to the recent past all the more lamentable. One looks in vain through, say, the pages of Trevelyan's *English Social History* for any mention of Asian immigrants. It is a measure of Visram's success that her work has prompted a rectification of the record. Close to hand on my bookshelf is Peter Ackroyd's best-selling *London: The Biography*; Visram is an acknowledged source for a plangent paragraph in the book on the miseries of vagrant Indians in the eighteenth century. It would be fitting if an imaginative postcolonial writer were to tackle the subject; a new *Beggar's Opera* with Indian characters would be a plausible revisionary exercise.

A third group of "subaltern" Indians were the ayahs brought over by nabobs in the nineteenth century. Most of them were required only for the duration of the voyage and many, like their male counterparts, were discharged on arrival. Victorian philanthropy created an "Ayah's Home" as well as the "Strangers' Home for Asiatics, Africans and South Sea Islanders," both of which seem to have mitigated the ordeal of "coloured" immigrants at a loose end. Those hungry for exotic found the ayahs fascinating; they were gaped at and asked to sit for painters or captured on celluloid by the new technology of photography.

The servants, male and female, and the lascars were silent subalterns: they left no autobiographical record

(although the lascars did agitate for their rights and thus can be said to have represented themselves). A different class of Indians first appeared in Britain in the second half of the eighteenth century: Mirza Sheikh I'tesamuddin, whose memoir *The Wonders of Vilayet* (translated by Yours Truly) is available from Peepal Tree Press, Leeds; Sake Deen Mahomed, whose *Travels* has been reissued by the University of California Press, expertly edited and introduced by Michael Fischer; Mirza Abu Taleb Khan whose travel memoir, in Charles Stewart's translation, is quite well known; Raja Ram Mohun Roy, whom everyone in Bangladesh knows about.

From the nineteenth century onwards the records of Indians in Britain becomes a vigorous stream if not a veritable flood. Visram provides an eminently readable account of the achievements of Indians in varied fields—business and commerce, the law, politics, sports, literature, music, science. She gives probably the first account in a book addressed to the common reader of the contribution to medical science made by Frederick Akbar Mahomed (1849-84), grandson of Sake Deen Mahomed. An outstanding physician, Frederick Akbar Mahomed served on the staff of Guy's Hospital in London, and—more importantly—pursued original research, whose value is only now being adequately recognized. He was the first person to recognize that high blood pressure was a primary condition, and provided the first clear clinical description of it. Evidently he also had the talents of an inventor: while studying at Guy's he won a prize for modifying the sphygmograph, an instrument for measuring blood pressure.

One could almost claim that Visram has not left anyone significant out, but then she makes no mention of Michael Madhusudan Datta, perhaps because she seems to have relied entirely on English-language sources. Now that Ghulam Mursid's biography of Datta is available in an English translation, alongside his edition of Datta's English letters, one can hope that a future edition of Visram's book will include this eminent Asian.

Visram's bibliography is commendably exhaustive, especially the section "Books, Articles and Memoirs." The numerous memoirs should be valuable primary texts for researchers in literary and cultural studies. I was delighted to note one published in our corner of the subcontinent: Rakhal Das Haldar's *The English Diary of an Indian Student, 1861-62* (Dacca: The Asutosh Library, 1903). It's a pity one has to travel to London to be able to read it today.

Visram's account may give the impression of being innocent of theory, but in fact she is guided by laudable intellectual and political principles. Her book, as she explains in her preface, "documents and analyses the economic, political, social and cultural lives of Asians in Britain largely through the experiences of various groups, individuals and their descendants, within the context of colonialism, race, gender and class. The record of their lives challenges accepted notions of migration and settlement patterns. The book also examines the anti-colonial struggle by Asians and their allies in Britain, Asian contributions to British society as well as their role in two world wars." And as she sums up in her last paragraph, it shows that "British culture has never been a homogeneous product of indigenous origins as some nationalist ideologues would have us believe."

Woman Reads the News

TOMIKA PONDASHETH
(translated by Khademul Islam)



Lapel on breast a woman reads the news
Accident-murder-casualties-political tugs-of-war
Glowing cricket star along with playing field lofts
into the drawing room

Then finally the weather--

Bad weather
Yet the launch ferries had been open
A sudden storm, a steamer overturned in the
Ganges floodwaters
The unmoved newsreader informs us--
One hundred fifty missing--twelve bodies
recovered
Among them nine women-children-old

A woman reads about women
And in this age of lapels
Synonymous are women-children-old.

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.

The Lighter Side of Literature



"We are interested in a cultural exchange. We will give you one of our writers, and you will give us Salman Rushdie."