

SHORT STORY

Turban

SYED WALIULLAH (Translated by A. Ahsanuzzaman and M. Kabir)

Sitting in the dusty drawing room by the road, Khan Bahadur Mottaleb Saheb thinks. That he is thinking is evident from his eyes, which have heavy bags beneath them. The big eyes look heavy, almost like marbles. And that too like motionless marbles lost in the corner of the drain.

He broods on his age. His whole head is covered with grey hair now, but age can't be blamed for that. It is the hard work he has put into building up his legal business over the years that is responsible for this white hair. Those who do not know about his age and the premature graying of his hair may easily take him to be old. Clients come to him because of that faded silver arrangement of hair. Furthermore, the sight of his grown-up children also misleads one further about Khan Bahadur's age. But the reason for the latter is that he did not wait even for a while to marry after finishing his studies. In spite of these signs of maturity, he is not really that old. He himself does not feel the weight of age, rather thinks of himself as possessing the vigour and virility of youth. The web of his physique is strong, his backbone straight. There is still strength in body, hope in his mind. The future is not hazy and shadowy in his eyes yet.

Beyond this Mottaleb Saheb does not think. He is a lawyer. Throughout his life, just as one memorizes the Quran, he memorized the books tightly pressed in the wall-almirah. Which is why he does not rest until he inquires of a thing or analyzes an issue from the beginning. He finally concludes that he is not that old in spite of the gray hair on his head and his grown-up children. Now he advances carefully towards the next step in his line of thought.

He thinks that, despite gray hair and grown-up children, when he actually is not that old, if he wishes to marry again then the verdict of age cannot be raised to oppose that longing. He reconsiders this matter, then goes towards the third step. Here his children reign.

And here Khan Bahadur Mottaleb Saheb comes to a stop. His children interrupt his line of thought. Not once but many times.

In the silence of the room, the sweet smell of the hookah spreads intoxicatingly, a light bluish smoke that coils up but cannot escape.

But he can't be still for any length of time, and soon begins to ponder afresh. He finds, that throughout his life he has wandered in the nooks and crannies of complex laws like a restless insect, delivered lectures in the court, had shouted sometimes, sometimes laughed, sometimes mocked, sometimes cried, and given time and opportunity had also never hesitated, though with honour intact, to go to the judge's private chambers to pay his respects. As a result his practice had flourished: he had built a two-storeyed house in the town, turned the ancestral mud house into a brick one, constructed a mosque, had a pond dug to alleviate the problems faced by his neighbours. He had achieved both name and stature for his generosity and honesty. Though the gossip-mongers say that he secured the Khan Bahadur title by hosting a dinner for a British regiment. That talk is baseless rumour, merely malicious gossip.

This is his outer life. His inner life, however, is different, a cruelly-deprived private life. And the reason is his wife's dementia. Just after the birth of their fifth child many years back, she became what she is now. It's a wonder that he could have kept himself normal amidst the insane cries and laughter of an abnormal wife. He never slackened in fulfilling his responsibilities, and had taken care of his growing children.

But has that life, whose source dried so quickly, really given him any satisfaction?

Khan Bahadur Mottaleb Saheb stands up. Going inside the house he calls his children. They are very surprised, as he has never called them in such a way—a summons to a meeting. When they come one after another and sit in a circle in the bedroom, their faces are anxious.

Khan Bahadur Saheb does not look at them. Fixing his gaze on the wall in front, he sits straight. That lost look in his heavy, marble-like eyes is gone now.

Breaking the silence Mottaleb Saheb suddenly starts talking. In an

easy tone he says that he has decided to bring a new mother for his children. While speaking, his deep voice does not ruminate, does not drift off. Why should it? Hasn't he considered the matter thoroughly before speaking? And why has he given the matter that much thought? Because he hadn't been thinking about his clients or competitors; he had been doing it for his near and dear children only.

After announcing his decision, Mottaleb Saheb does not wait any more. As he gets up to go, his right foot misses the sandal. Keeping his eyes straight ahead of him, he searches for his sandal with his foot. But even after he locates it, he can't get his foot inside it. The second-born daughter thinks she should go forward to help him, but today, freezes instead. The elder daughter, with a sidelong glance, looks at her father's right foot still searching for the sandal-hole. There's been many a day she has wished to touch those feet, but never could gather up enough courage. She has looked at him from a distance, her eyes tinged with respect and devotion. But even she cannot move today.

Finally Mottaleb Saheb is able to get his foot inside the sandal. Then he goes out of the room with slow but steady steps.

Though he is not that old, the grey hair does matter, and for that reason it seems out of place to have a gaudy, drum-beating wedding. One should marry with pomp and circumstance in the blazing brightly-coloured day of youth, since otherwise there is no way to hide the naked, limitless delight created by the sudden touch of life. But the marriage of an old person is better done averted from men's eyes.

Khan Bahadur decides to marry on a barge. The wide Jamuna, with its desolate banks. It seems right to marry on the swells of a distant, flowing river far from a world endlessly trodden by human footsteps.

After all the arrangements have been completed, the auspicious day arrives. That afternoon, swishing his walking stick, wearing a bright white *sherwani*, after rubbing attar on his moustache, Mottaleb Saheb steps out of his house. But the costly turban from his first marriage, which had lain carelessly on the high almirah, is now hidden in its box. Though this marriage is not like his first one, he cannot think of marriage without a turban. He had once thought of buying a new turban. But due to a mysterious hesitation, it has not been bought. A sort of shame clings to the turban, as if it was a magnet for pomp, a strong symbol of fresh youth.

Riding in the carriage, Khan Bahadur Saheb now thinks of the turban. Noju Mian has got up on the tandem behind with the hand box. He thinks, do the children know what is in that hand box?

The iron-covered wheels of the horse-carriage move squeaking on the road of brick and brick-dust. After going a quarter mile and passing the court, the road near the river can be found. The carriage moves crackling, the horse lacks speed. Mottaleb Saheb looks straight. Memories of his first marriage arise in his mind, its intoxicating madness. He had ridden to that marriage in a palanquin. The muscles of the arrack-drinking palanquin-bearers had been strong, their movements speedy. And on the young Mottaleb's head had been a turban made of crystal-clear bluish velvet like the rain-washed silver star-engraved sky.

Star engraved? Khan Bahadur Saheb sits up straight. Star engraved? Yes, of course! He had forgotten that detail: today will the stars over his gray hair make fun of him?

But there is still hope. Those stars lack brightness today; some have even been lost in the current of time. Khan Bahadur Saheb heaves a

sigh of relief.

The carriage has arrived at the road near the river. Mottaleb Saheb looks towards the other shore of the Jamuna through the window. The afternoon's waning, pale yellow light over the outstretched sandy land arouses a feeling of emptiness. As he looks towards that unblinkingly, his eyes again become motionless like marbles. Even if a whirlwind rises over the sandy land his eyes will not move, will not blink. Then his eyes, weighty as marbles, become red; a bit of moisture is seen there. Why, he doesn't know. Nor does he want to know. He, who thinks so much, who weighs every detail like a restless insect, now never pauses to consider why his eyes are suffused with tears.

While he sways lightly with the movement of the barge on the Jamuna, a profound silence descends on his house. The sons are silent. Usually, reticent, today they are absolutely dumb. The youngest son had sown a bean-plant in the yard. Sitting on its roots he scratches the mud with a stick without any reason. The eldest son sits with a tough arithmetic problem, then opens a book of maps and follows the lines of a continent. Their two sisters sew with deep concentration; the third one pressing her face against the pillow sleeps deeply. In that deadly silent house, some sort of unnamed, unearthly substance casts its shadow.

Sometimes their insane mother regains her half-sense. Then she

looks at her children in such a way that she appears to be entirely normal, as if taking her fill of them after a long time. Today, perhaps because of this unworldly soundlessness, she regains this half-sense. At first, there still is a perplexed, restless something in her eyes. But when she looks at her second-born daughter, a normal, curious look arises in her eyes.

While biting off a thread, the daughter looks towards her mother. The moment she does, she becomes still. She wants to cry out, but controls herself finally. Her heart trembling, she inwardly says: Ma, do you know me?

The mother's eyes do not move; she looks hypnotized. The daughter sits still, her sewing in her hand. Yet an unruly hope rushes through her mind like a storm. She wishes to rush towards her mother's lap where she will lay her head down in joyful reunion. But she doesn't have the strength to move. At the same time her mother erupts in laughter, the sound cutting fiercely through the silence. Though the laughter is very harsh, its selfconsciousness makes it seem otherworldly. The daughter listens mutely; only the colours of her eyes change. Tears do not come. It would have been better if it had...

Clouds gather in the sky during the evening. Then those clouds advance calmly, slowly, shading the earth before breaking out in a heavy downpour, as if it could not tolerate the painful journey. Leaving that bean-plant, the youngest son steps back into the house; the eldest son perhaps would lie flat on the bed feeling the lack of light for arithmetical problems and maps. Only the daughters stubbornly continue sewing in the dim light. Today, in the kitchen, the old maid-servant rules. She inwardly rages, after cooking rice and *dal* ties up her bundle. The eldest girl, the real mistress of the family, does not feel the urge to go to the kitchen today. When the darkness thickens the two girls go up to bed leaving behind their sewing. But sleep does not descend, only a sleep-like fatigue. The second-born girl presses her face cautiously against the pillow; one corner of the pillow gets wet. But because of her immobility, it does not seem as if the pillow is wet with her tears, it seems that the continuing rainfall outside has somehow got it

Introducing South Asian Poets in English: Kasiprasad Ghosh

KAISER HAQ

An exact coeval of Derozio, Kasiprasad Ghosh (1809-73) became the second Indian to publish a volume of English verse. Titled *The Shair and Other Poems* (*shair* of course is Urdu/Hindi for "poet"), it appeared in Calcutta in 1830 and was noticed in both local and British periodicals; the latter (the *New Monthly Magazine*, the *Athenum* and *Fraser's Magazine*), unsurprisingly, were patronizing. In Calcutta of course Ghosh became a significant figure in the so-called Bengal Renaissance.

Born into a wealthy zamindar family, Ghosh was one of the earliest batches of students to be educated in the Hindu College (now Presidency College). He excelled in his studies and was chosen to present an essay at a prize distribution ceremony. Titled "Critical remarks on the first four chapters of Mr. Mill's *History of British India*", it evinced a nascent awareness of national identity, and was subsequently published

in the *Government Gazette* (14 February 1828) and later reprinted in the *Asiatic Journal*; clearly, it made quite an impact.

Ghosh began writing English verse in 1827 at the encouragement of the Orientalist H. H. Wilson, and a couple of years later started publishing prose pieces of a critical-scholarly or historical-narrative nature, e.g., "On Bengali Poetry" and "On Bengali Works and Writers" in the *Literary Gazette*; and "Sketches of Ranjit Singh" and "The King of Oude" in the *Calcutta Monthly Magazine*. In 1846 Ghosh launched a weekly paper, the *Hindu Intelligencer* from his own printing press. It appeared regularly till the Sepoy Revolt, after which a law passed by Lord Canning to suppress the native press ended its illustrious career. Besides pursuing his literary activities Ghosh undertook various civic responsibilities: he served on the management board of the Bethune School, on the Calcutta Supreme Court Jury, and as an Honorary Presidency

Magistrate and Justice of the Peace. He died in 1873.

Kasiprasad Ghosh's poetry, like Derozio's, is enmeshed in an intertextual network involving Orientalism, the great tradition of English poetry (which, as Raymond Schwab has demonstrated in *Oriental Renaissance*, registered the impact of Orientalist scholarship), and British versifiers living in India. These connections have been examined in considerable detail by Rosinka Chaudhuri in her book *Gentlemen Poets in Colonial Bengal: Emergent Nationalism and the Orientalist Project* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2002). No one has a very high opinion of Ghosh as a poet, but his historical significance cannot be denied. "To a Dead Crow", interestingly reflects self-critical awareness, while his other poems ("To a Young Hindu Widow", for example) were characteristic of the social criticism that was the hallmark of "Young Bengal."

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To a Dead Crow

Gay minstrel of the Indian clime!  
How oft at morning's rosy prime  
When thou didst sing in *caw*, *caw* numbers,  
Vexed I've awoke from my sweet slumbers,  
And to avoid that hateful sound,  
That plagues a head howe'er profound,  
Have walked out in my garden, where  
Beside the tank, in many a square,  
Sweet lilies, jasmines, roses bloom,  
Far from those trees within whose gloom  
Of foliage thick, thou hadst thy nest  
From daily toil at night to rest.

Now lifeless on the earth, cold, bare,  
Devoid alike of joy and care,  
The offals of my meal no more  
Attract thee as they did before.  
There's rubbish scattered round thee, but  
Thy heart is still, thine eyes are shut.  
No more that blunt yet useful beak  
From carcases thy food can seek,  
Or catch the young unheeded mouse,  
Which from the flooring of my house stray  
Urged by its hapless luck, would stray  
And bask beneath the solar ray.

Gay minstrel! ne'er had Death before  
Its dart destructive, sharpened more  
To pierce a gayer, mortal heart  
Than thine, which ah! bath felt the smart!  
Though life no more is warm in thee,  
Yet thou dost look as though 't may be  
That life in thee is full and warm;  
Not cruel death could mar thy form;  
Thy features, one and all, possess  
Still, still their former ugliness.  
They are in truth the very same  
The Indian Crow hath, known to fame.

Oh! may when death bath closed these eyes,  
And freed from earthly bondage, flies  
The spirit to eternity,  
Stretched at full length I lie like thee,  
On mother earth's cold lap, so ne'er  
To spin such verses out I'll dare,  
And please the public ear again  
With such discordant, silly strain,  
As thou didst once delight to pour  
At morn or noon, or evening hour.  
In sooth I promise this shall be  
My last line in addressing thee.

Arun Kolatkar (1932-2004): of coups, Quest and the letter

KHADEMUL ISLAM

When I sat down to write this tribute to Arun Kolatkar, the well-known Marathi and English poet who died on September 25 (as did a couple of days later the grand old man of Indian-English letters, Mulk Raj Anand, in a crowded week of death), I had no idea that the piece would take on a life of its own.

The trouble began when I opened Bruce King's *Modern Indian Poetry in English* in order to refresh myself on Arun Kolatkar and came on the following quoted lines:

i want my pay i said  
to the manager  
you'll get paid said  
the manager  
but not before the first  
don't you know the rules?

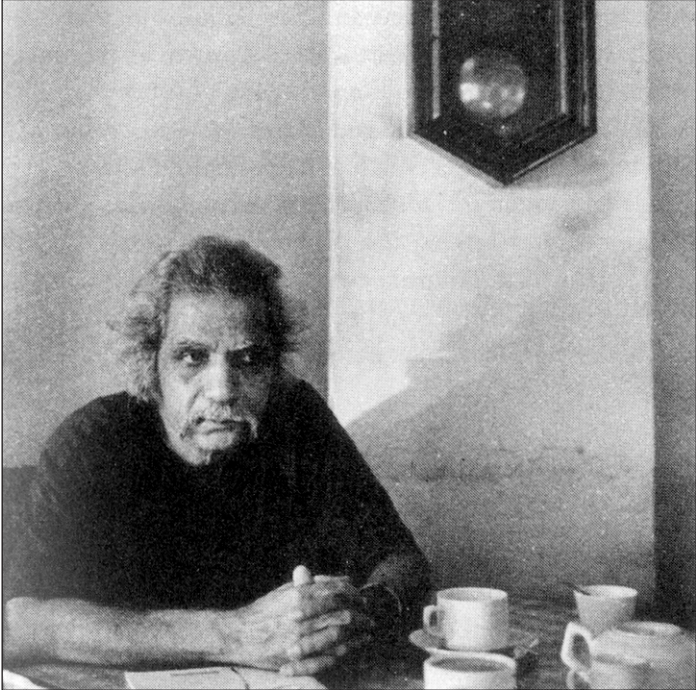
Good God, the *letter!* I thought. While over the intervening decades I had remembered the poem, titled 'The Three Cups of Tea,' I had completely forgotten that it was Arun Kolatkar who had written it.

Once upon a time back in the mid-Seventies in Dhaka there chanced into the hands of the five or six of us who seriously followed such arcane stuff, one signal copy of *Quest* magazine, the whole issue of which had been devoted to Indian poets and poetry in English. To me it had been godsend, acquainting me with a more complete range of poets than was available in Dhaka. While I knew about P. Lal and his Writers' Workshop in Kolkata, about Kamala Das (now Kamala Suriaya), Dom Moraes, Nissim Ezekiel and Ramanujan, a lot of the others were new to me. One of these was Arun Kolatkar, whose 'The Three Cups of Tea, an 'anti-poetic' according to King, published in that issue, I instantly liked for its parody of brusque, American tough-guy speech.

Those were bad days for a very young Bangladesh: it was the morning after, 'party over, baby', the revolution felt like a waste what with memories of a famine and political bloodshed, a time of coups and counter-

coups, with the slow, bitter-tasting collective realization that freedom and liberation were hollow jokes, of sad, hopeless days filled leaden skies and psychotic evenings. And in those days one wanted poetry that fitted the times. Anything else, any poetry about butterflies, summer romances, waterlilies, ponds, tender skies, nautch girls, exquisite displays of feeling, was nauseating. All poetry was suspect, even Bengali poetry, of which I didn't read much in those days. But I do remember looking beadily at Buddhadev Bose's poem 'Frogs': what was that slimy thing hopping out of its lines, *beauty?* Aargh! And so this poem by Arun Kolatkar, something about its attitude, with its hints of a way out of this stinking heap of leaden skies and psychotic evenings, with its hard voice and tat-a-tat rhythms (hey, get laid, get paid, I'm just a working stiff, I need a drink, screw everything else...) was immensely appealing.

I lent the *Quest* to a woman acquaintance who read English poetry extensively, and also had evinced interest in this branching tendril known as Indian-English poetry. With a hearty recommendation of Kolatkar, and I think a couple of other poets. A week later, she called up to say she hadn't enjoyed reading him. Whereupon—yes, dear readers, I know, it made me squirm, too but what can I say, back then questions of literary taste in the context of Bangladesh aroused fire—I opened up with both barrels: the bloody bourgeoisie and their sickening rites of tastes in English poets and poetry, their rancid sensibility harping on roses and dewy dawns, never in touch with nitty-gritty, forever divorced from reality, enclosed within gilded metaphors. She heard me through, then quietly rang off. A week later, I got a letter from her, five pages, front and back, real ink. It conceded that I had a perfect right to my own tastes in poetry, then went on with what used to be called equanimity to define her own, on the delights of traditional English poetry—little things, for example, about Houseman's 'A Shropshire Lad', a bourgeoisie poet if ever



there was one—paused to ponder, obliquely, on limitations imposed by categories of class and race, then ended by detailing why she liked Nissim Ezekiel (again, almost preternaturally bourgeoisie!), in terms which made me realize that she read him far more closely and thoroughly than I had ever done. Or could, at that time.

And though shreds of former beliefs clung on, that letter altered my poetry reading, made me reach for Hardy, for Old English meters...

As I said, throughout the years I remembered the letter, I hadn't forgotten the poem either, I even remembered the cover of that *Quest* (orange and white, with scribbles on it), but I had somehow completely forgotten that Arun Kolatkar had written it. And so today, I write these lines to acknowledge his part in an episode that nudged me forward on the long, rocky road from provincial formulations onto something both wider and truer.

Arun Kolatkar—reclusive, enigmatic—is the poet all other Indian-English poets like to read. Like his friend and fellow Mumbai-based poet Dilip Chitre, he wrote poems both in Marathi and English. His output in English was defiantly slender:

wet.

It is the dead of night in the mufassil town. The house is suddenly startled awake by loud knocks at the door.

Khan Bahadur Saheb has returned drenched. True, Noju Mia has held the umbrella over his head, but he got thoroughly wet standing in front of the door. The bride is behind the closed window of the horse-carriage by the road. Even in the darkness she sits with her head bowed under her veil. The horse is getting wet in silence without any movement.

There is no response in the house. The youngest son has some sort of scabies. He stops itching on hearing the knocks on the door. The eldest son had thought of lighting a lantern in order to follow the lines of another continent, but now lies still. The daughters, though, feel their pulses quickening, but remain motionless like the sleeping princesses of fairy-tales.

The knocks on the door get louder. Then the sound of something breaking catches the ear. It seems as if the handsome walking stick had broken. The eldest daughter thinks in anxiety: why isn't the servant boy, or the maidservant, opening the door? But that servant boy is dead sleep, if pushed he will roll but not awaken. The maid can hardly hear.

Then a shadow stirs in the house. A figure comes out in silence from the room beside theirs, halts for some moments, then advances. In the blinking light of the lantern beside the bedstead, a gigantic human-shaped shadow arises on the wall. Then that shadow wavers, and again becomes small. Though the knocking on the door doesn't stop, the shadow is in no hurry, its movements slow.

The mad mother opens the door. She appears to look out at the rain falling in the darkness, then lets out an absent-minded laugh. Finally turns and goes inside, her mouth hanging open, without having even having taken note of who has come.

The girls have gotten up by that time. The boys, too, in the other room.

The girls rush out rubbing their eyes, feeling somewhat shameful. They whisper in a low voice: fie upon us, what a sleep we slept! Such a rainy day! They repeat the same thing as if they were reciting benedictions and salutations. The sons scratch their heads without saying anything. Though the scabies are on his buttocks, yet the second-born son scratches his head only. The eldest son, tall and slender, is overcome with shame and repentance.

At last, their new mother enters the house. A girl from a poor family. The shock of the wedding seems to have broken her. She, like broken glass, glitters inside the shattered pile of ornaments and clothes. Except for a portion of her chin, her face is hidden by the veil. Then the daughters one by one touch the feet of their mother nestled within the heap of broken-glass clothing. First the quick second-born daughter, squatting down to touch the feet and then her own chest, and then the others. The new bride doesn't look at anyone. Even though these grown-up children have come with her marriage, the new bride will not lift her eyes to stare immodestly at them.

During this time, Mottaleb Saheb's first wife observes the honouring ritual with gravity. When it is over, the eldest daughter bites her lower lip, afraid that her mother may suddenly burst out laughing. She shudders when she thinks about the harsh, mocking peals of laughter. Anxiety makes her pray: Allah, please don't make mother laugh.

Remote from all, Khan Bahadur Mottaleb Saheb stands rigidly straight. Wet splashes of water on the front of his dress, while his back is fully drenched. Even the *kisty topi* on his head has not escaped the rain. Of course, everybody had gotten wet. Even the bride's costly sari could not be saved. Not to mention Noju Mian, who seems to have taken a bath in his clothes.

But one thing was not wet. That is the costly *marshadi* turban of Mottaleb Saheb. It has returned the way that has gone, hidden in the hand-box.

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An Old Woman

from JEJURI

An old woman grabs  
hold of your sleeve  
and tags along.

she wants a fifty paise coin.  
She says she will take you to  
the horseshoe shrine.

You've seen it already.  
She hobbles along anyway  
and tightens her grip on your  
shirt.

She won't let you go.  
You know how old women are.  
They stick to you like burr.

You turn around and face her  
with an air of finality.  
You want to end the farce.

When you hear her say,  
'What else can an old woman do  
on hills as wretched as these?'

You look right at the sky.  
Clear through the bullet holes  
she has for eyes.

And as you look on,  
the cracks that begin around her  
eyes  
spread beyond her skin.

And the hills crack.  
And the temples crack.  
And the sky falls

with a plateglass clatter  
around the shatterproof crone  
who stands alone.

And you are reduced  
to so much small change  
in her hand.

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