

SHORT STORY

Curry Leaf*

VIMALADHITA MAAMALLAN (translated by V. Surya)

In the backyard stood a robust and lush curry leaf tree. Nobody looking from the street would guess that there could be such a tree back there.

The house had been given a coat of Snowcem cement paint. Mami kept a watchful eye on every inch of it, the way a mother does on her pubescent daughter. To discourage anyone from sticking posters on its outer wall, she had had it covered with a stucco of sharp granite chips, painted over with Snowcem. Despite Mami's vigilant patrolling, activists of every political party had scrawled their symbols on it during the elections. Even the independent candidates had drawn his bicycle on it. With tar. It made Mami extremely angry. She did not cast her vote in that election.

Mami sat rubbing gingelly oil into her scalp, and chanting the 'Haigiri Nandini' prayer. Mama sat in his easy chair in the front hall, reading the paper. It was a matter of great satisfaction to him that he finally had plenty of time to read the paper, now that he had finally retired.

A sporadic thudding sounded on the back gate. After the third thud, Mami stopped saying her verses. 'Coming!' she roared. She went and fetched the key form the almirah room. The thudding continued. Going towards the back gate she roared again, 'Coming! This time Mami's voice must have been heard beyond the gate. There was silence.

From the latrine near the gate came a sound of flowing water. 'Ei, di, why so late today?' Mami was saying as she unlocked the door.

A man wearing a headcloth was standing outside. 'Oh, it's you.' 'Yes 'ma.' 'I thought it was the latrine woman.'

Mami's son opened the latrine door and came out, bucket in hand. He stopped for a second and looked at the back gate. Seeing it was a turbaned man who stood there, he went to the well. There he filled a bucket, went back into the latrine and shut the door.

'Thought I'll come and pick the leaves, amma.' 'Not now. We'll see about it later.'

'But it is two months since the leaves were picked, amma.' 'Later.'

'Tree's all full of leaves, just see, 'ma!' 'You never pay what's agreed on. Go. Not now.'

'What, amma, you're saying such a thing! What do I want, amma, with your money?' 'That's what you say now.'

'How's ayya's health, amma?' 'Quite good. Come later.'

'And how is thambi, 'ma?' 'We're all fine, thanks to your blessings, I'm sure. Now you just get along.'

'Ei, 'ma, what's this? If a lady like you talks like that, how will we poor people stay alive?' 'Look here! Don't make trouble so early in the morning. I've got a lot of work left to do.'

'In two minutes I will pluck and go, 'ma.' 'Even last time you didn't pay what was agreed on.'

'Yamma! This time that won't happen, amma!' This interchange traversed the yard, went past the well and the

kitchen, and must have been heard in the hall. Mama came and stood, newspaper in hand, as though to convey that he didn't really have the time to stay and talk to the man.

'Ayyire! Talk to the lady, ayyire! So angry she is!' Mama held his tongue. Years had gone by since he had first taught himself not to overstep the boundary that had been drawn up for him, and to preserve within it as much of his manhood as he could manage.

'What's there to talk to ayyar about? I'm telling you, that's quite enough.'

'I'll give you the money you ask, amma.'

'Seven rupees.'

'Yammayamma! How will people like us live?' 'The tree isn't weeping and wailing that its leaves haven't been plucked. You get along now.'

'What, 'ma, if you refuse like this, what's to be done, 'ma?' 'Not one paisa less.'

'Ayyire!'

But ayyar had already gone back when she said 'What's there to talk to ayyar about?' and had seated himself in his easy chair.

'Why're you calling ayya?' she said. 'When I've said it, I've said it. By rights, I should be demanding seven and a quarter rupees. Last time you paid me a whole quarter less and went away.'

Peering past her into the house, he shouted, 'Saami! Have you got change for five rupees, saami?'

Mami turned and looked back. There was Mama rising from his chair and approaching...it was only when he came towards the kitchen doorway that he encountered her stare. He came to a halt and stood there, clutching the door frame.

Turning back to the man she said, 'Go and get it changed in the shop.'

When he left, she muttered to herself, 'First he'll say he doesn't have the exact change. Then he'll say, "I'll just pluck first, and then I'll pay you the rest." After he has plucked he'll say, "Next time I'll give you the change, 'ma!" And that will be the last of him...Shouldn't this brahmanan have enough sense to see through it?' She went into the bathroom and used soap-nut powder to scrub the back-door key to scrub the back-door free of grease.

Preventing he had not heard her, Mama moved away from the kitchen doorway in the direction of his easy chair.

'Yamma!' The turbaned character reappeared. At the sight of a five-rupee and a single one-rupee in his palm, Mami started shouting.

'Ei, 'ma, why are you yelling? Take this. I'll just get out the change from inside my "tousser".'

'Now look here, I don't want a word more of this story. Count out seven rupees and put it down right here. If it's even one paisa short, I won't touch it.'



artwork by Lh. Lisa

Screening himself with his veshti*, he reached inside his drawers, extracted an eight-anna bit, and placed it with the rupee notes. His eyes still fixed on Mama's face, he reached inside once again and added one more coin.

Mami bent over and took a look. Noting that the coin just put down was a four-anna bit, she said, 'But it's four annas short.'

'No money left except for tea, 'ma.'

'Take the leaves, sell them, then have your tea.'

He put his hand into his trousers, took out two ten paisas and a five paisa, and added them to what he had already put down. Stooping to collect the money, Mami cautioned, 'Now look here, you stand here and pluck. No climbing and breaking off branches.'

Knitting up the money at her waist, she stood leaning against the well. He unwound his veshti and spread it on the dusty, stony ground. The veshti was grimy and threadbare. Washing would have torn it.

He started to pick the curry leaves from the lower branches. It was not even as tall as two men standing one on top of the other. He gathered three quarters of the leaves as he stood on the ground. To pick the leaves from the branch tips, he leaned gently towards the strong, central part, standing on one foot, so that too much weight did not fall on it. A few leaves fell over the wall into the neighbour's yard.

'Can't you watch what you're doing? The next-door people will come and pick a fight with us, saying we are dropping rubbish into their yard. Pluck without scattering leaves,' she told him, as she helped herself to a handful of leaves from the heap on the ground.

Having removed his headcloth to wipe off his sweat, he now retied it around his head. Gathering up the four corners of the spread-out veshti, he tied it into a bundle and departed with it. The tree stood bald, with bare branches.

When Mami had locked the back gate and turned around, the door

of the latrine lay open. Wet footsteps made a track from the well into the house.

Muttering, 'At least twenty rupees he'll earn today,' she went into the bathroom.

Having performed her poojai with her hair wrapped in a towel, she announced lunch.

'The curry leaf chutney is good, di,' said Mama.

'And why not? What could go wrong with it, with that curry leaf... That fellow really got a bargain. At least twenty rupees he will earn today.'

'Amma, give me some vegetable from the sambar.'

She dropped some pieces of drumstick on her son's plate.

'A so-big bunch of curry leaves fell into the next-door people's yard, you know! She spread her hands out wide to show him.

'Couldn't you have told him to pluck carefully, di? As if she isn't already helping herself, we ourselves must give her even more, is it?'

'Day before yesterday she actually climbed the wall just to pluck leaves, you know! As soon as she saw me, she said, "Hee hee! I'm just tying a clothesline, Mami!" As though no one knows what a fine clothesline she is tying!'

Coming to the street to throw the chewed-up drumstick stalks, she took a look at the next house. Their small child was playing on his tricycle. No one else was around.

'Ganechu.'

'Yes, Mami?'

'Have you had food?'

'Mm.'

'What food was cooked today?'

'Onion sambar. Potato curry. Chutney.'

'What chutney?'

'Pudina.'

'Pudina, or curry leaf?'

'Pudina.'

'How was it?'

'Had a good smell.'

'Did it have a good hot smell, or a good mild smell?'

Hearing someone talking, the child's mother came out.

'Hee hee! Have you had food?'

'Mm...just finished.'

'That's what I was asking the child. Where did you buy the pudina? Because when Mama went to the market this morning, he came back saying there wasn't any?' She stared sharply at the neighbour's face to look for any change in expression.

'It was bought yesterday, Mami.'

'Oh, is that so? Well...! I've a load of work on top of my head...! I'll see you later, 'ma.'

Mama was lying back in his easy chair, eyes closed. Mami went up to him.

'Pudina, she says! Pudina! She's even taught the child to tell lies.' She went inside.

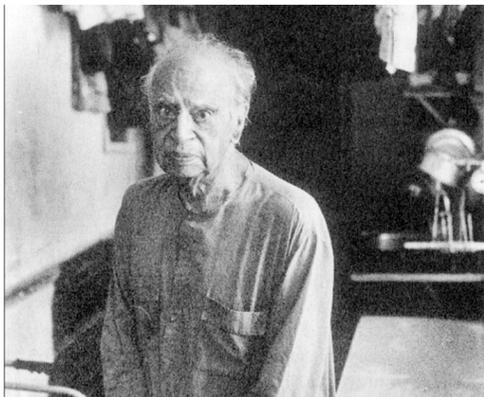
Easy chair and newspaper. Since the morning he had lain there, accepting it as his destiny. Now it looked like he had decided to remain thus the whole day. When Mami moved away, he opened his eyes drowsily once, settled himself a little more comfortably, and shut them again.

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Yet Another Farewell: Remembering Mulk Raj Anand

KAISER HAQ

In the world of Indian English letters this seems to have been a season dominated by Lord Yama. First Dom Moraes (died 2nd June), then Arun Kolatkar (died 25th September), and days later Mulk Raj Anand (died 28th September). Each of them is a link in a glorious chain, an image that comes to me from Moraes's beguiling story of the handshake. Giving a valedictory handshake to the young poet Jeet Thayil, Moraes commented:



"Well, this handshake goes all the way back to Shakespeare. Just as you're shaking my hand, I shook Eliot's hand, he shook Yeats's hand, Yeats shook Tennyson's hand, Tennyson shook Keats's hand..." All the way back to Shakespeare.

Like Moraes, the older Anand was a great shaker of hands: "He visited D. H. Lawrence shortly before he died. He worked with Leonard and Virginia Woolf as an amanuensis at the Hogarth Press. He lunched many times with T. S. Eliot, knew W. B. Yeats and G. B. Shaw, and wrote a book of reminiscences called *Conversations in Bloomsbury*." This is an article by Alastair Niven, who also wrote a book on Anand, *The Yoke of Pity*, and is typical of the openings of many essays and articles on the writer. Others mention the fact that he studied under Bertrand Russell, travelled to Vienna to talk with Freud, went to Spain to fight for the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War, was acquainted with Herbert Read, Henry Miller, William Empson and H. G. Wells.

I had a chance to see Mulk Raj Anand at close quarters at the 1986 Commonwealth Writers Conference at Edinburgh. He was frail but intense, as he went about organizing a protest against apartheid South Africa. I did not go up to shake his hand, but that does not make me feel any less connected. Moraes's charming fancy offers a touching metaphor for the role of literature (and the arts) in our lives. Writers shake hands, literally

and figuratively, not only with each other but also with their readers, thus connecting all who are interested to our creative heritage. That is why the death of a loved and respected author like Anand strikes us as a personal loss.

Anand belongs to the remarkably long-lived generation of writers of the 1930s and '40s with whom Indian English prose attained maturity—Nirad Chaudhuri, R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao (still with us) being the others. But it was undoubtedly Mulk Raj Anand's voice that dominated the fiction of that period. Born in Peshawar in 1908, he graduated from Punjab University, then studied at Cambridge and London universities finishing with a Ph.D. in 1929. From 1932 to 1945 he taught at the Workers Educational Association in London, but kept visiting India frequently. During the war years Anand also worked for the BBC as a broadcaster and scriptwriter; his friend George Orwell was a colleague. After the war he returned to India, and started *Marg*, the celebrated art journal, in 1946. From 1948 to 1966 Anand taught at several Indian universities and was associated with the Sahitya Akademi and other cultural institutions, but it was always as a novelist that he was best known.

Anand's career as a novelist kicked off in 1935 with the

publication, after it had been rejected by nineteen publishers, of *Untouchable*. Gandhi became as potent an influence in him as the Western socialist tradition, and went a long way in shaping his social conscience. In his early novels, as, in fact, in the works of his compatriot Raja Rao, Gandhism is as large a presence as the principal human characters. The story goes that upon his return to India with the manuscript, he turned up at Gandhi's ashram at Gujarat dressed to the nines in a corduroy suit, silk tie and suede shoes. Agnost, the Mahatma (and author of *Hind Swaraj*), told the young man that he looked like a monkey. Afterwards, Gandhi advised him on the novel: "Your untouchables sound too much like Bloomsbury intellectuals. You know an untouchable boy wouldn't talk in those long sentences." Anand took the advice to heart and rewrote the novel, which was subsequently published with a laudatory preface by E. M. Forster. A moving critique of the caste system, the book was provoked by a family tragedy: a beloved aunt committed suicide after she had been ostracized by her Hindu community for having had a meal with a Muslim. A number of other novels followed in quick succession, all exploring the lower depths of Indian society in the classic social realist mode: *Coolie* (1939), *Two*

Leaves and a Bud (1937), *The Village* (1939), *Across the Black Waters* (1940). One aspect of Anand's social realism is the adaptation of the Indian (Punjabi and Hindi) idiom into 'pidgin-English'—and in doing so awkwardly anticipated Rushdie by four decades. Later in his career he delved into the upper echelons of society in *Private Life of an Indian Prince* (1953), and produced several volumes of an autobiographical sequence, but never again matched the achievements of his earlier work. Mulk Raj Anand remained a socialist to the end: Despite the existence of a master cottage on his verdant five-acre plot in Khandala near Pune, where he had shifted residence from his modest flat in Cuffe Parade, Mumbai, the writer preferred to live in one of the outlying houses on his property. He also left his property to the Sarvodaya Trust, a charitable non-profit organization devoted to the promotion of Gandhian ideals.

Among major Indian English novelists Anand is perhaps least known today in the West. This is partly because his progressive politics and social realist aesthetics have gone out of fashion, and partly because his idiom lacks the finesse and flair of some of the other Indian writers. But in India readers will always warm to his simple, moving, humane narratives. His characters, like Bakha the untouchable or Munnoo the coolie, have become immortal. They are both types and sharply realized individuals. Whatever the aesthetic limitations of Anand's prose it nonetheless, with its close attention to the surface of life in pre-Independence India, affords the reader a clear view of his characters and their world. One could say that his works will remain memorable because like all authentic realistic writing, they show the triumph of the signified over the signifier.

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From Maid to Bestselling Author: with a little help from Taslima Nasreen

An Indian woman who used to sweep and mop other people's floors found her life transformed overnight when she became a bestselling author.

Baby Haldar worked as a maid in a home in Gurgaon, in the state of Haryana, before turning her attention to a more creative passion. Her first book, *Aalo Aandhari* (Light and Darkness), was published last year in Hindi. Since then, two editions of the book have been printed. Recently the Bengali edition of her book was published, with the release party hosted by Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen.

Ms. Haldar's fortunes changed when she ran away from an abusive marriage and went to Gurgaon to start a new beginning. She started working as a maid to support her three children. Among those she worked for was Professor Prabodh Kumar, the grandson of one of the greatest literary figures of the Hindi language, Prem Chand. The professor noticed she spent a lot of time dusting his large collection of tomes, especially those written in Bengali.

"One day he caught me handling one of the books and asked me to read out the title," Ms. Haldar told BBC Hindi Online's Alok Prakash Putul. Baby Haldar, it turned out, had been to school intermittently until she was married off at 12 to a man 14 years her senior. "I was a bit hesitant. The book was Taslima Nasreen's *Amar Meyebela* [My Girlhood]. It was as if I was reading about my own life."

Professor Kumar gave her the book and asked her to read it when she had time. Other books left Prabodh's shelf in rapid succession: novels by Ashapura Devi, Mahashweta Devi, Buddhadeb

Guha. That was when Prabodh went out one day and bought her a pen and copybook. "Write," he told her, an order that made Baby almost weep with frustration. For Baby Haldar, putting pen to paper was a great trial—confronting the past that she had run away from. "It was nearly 20 years since I had ever written in a

finishing her daily work and would continue late into the night. She wrote in the kitchen, propping her notebook between the vegetables and dishes, she wrote in between sweeping and swabbing, after the dishes and before, and late at night after putting her children to bed. She wrote about her uncarving father, an

"Professor Kumar would read my writing, make corrections and photocopies. And I continued to write and write. I think I wrote for months."

The professor showed her writings to his friends who were moved by the memoirs. He then translated her writing into Hindi and one of his friends, a Calcutta-based publisher, decided to risk printing it. There was a surprise in store: *Aalo Aandhari* began selling from the first day of its launch. "Everyone from the sweeper to the retired headmistress next door wanted to buy a copy." As noted above, it subsequently ran to two more editions.

Ms Haldar has now completed her second book. "My new book is about the sea change that took place in my life after *Aalo Aandhari* was printed. Earlier society just saw me as a maid and did not even look at me and then suddenly everyone was eager to talk to me."

Ms. Haldar gets hundreds of letters every day. Some are interested in translating the book into other languages and she has also received an offer to turn the book into a film. Her life and the book have become a talking point in newspapers and on television.

Ms Haldar was taken aback by all the attention. "I am not a writer, I am just a maid. I still cannot understand why my life story is causing such a stir," she says.

But one thing, she says, has changed. "Earlier my children were ashamed to introduce me. But now they proudly say, 'My mother is a writer.'"



Baby Haldar



Taslima Nasreen

copybook. I had forgotten spellings. It was very embarrassing, especially when my children wanted to know why I was writing in a copybook instead of them."

As Sheela Reddy wrote in *outlookindia.com*, that "push in the 'write' direction...unlocked gritty, dark memories." Baby Haldar started writing after

ex-serviceman and driver, of the mother who abandoned them, the night when the man she married climbed into her bed and raped her, the sister who was strangled by her husband, the terror and pain of delivering her first child at 13, searing memories she had never confided to anyone, didn't even realise she had.

Compiled from BBC News online and outlookindia.com