

SHORT STORY

CYRIL WONG

"I love you," said Charmaine over the phone.
"I love you too," replied Krishnan, in a dulled and sleepy voice.
"How much?" she asked teasingly, knowing he was worn out from working the whole day. It was already eleven-thirty in the evening.
"Very very," he answered. She could hear the trace of a smile in his voice, and grinned herself.
"Alright, go and sleep now. I give you permission."
Krishnan simply grunted, too tired to laugh, and then issued a muffled "good night." She imagined the phone dropping away from under his jaw to fall beside him on the bed as he went unconscious with sleep.
She hung up with a sigh. She looked at the phone in its cradle a moment longer, before deciding to gaze at the wall beside her bed, watching the light slide across it in parallel lines as a car passed down the road just outside her house. She wanted to tell him about what happened today when she was giving tuition in the afternoon.
She had just finished her degree in Microbiology at the National University but had yet to find a job. She spent her free time now giving tuition to primary school kids like Syafarin who was sitting for P.S.L.E. this year and needed help with his English. She wanted to tell Krishnan what had happened at Syafarin's flat when she was there. But unlike her, Krishnan had already found a job at a public relations firm, and he was usually exhausted by evening when they met for dinner or spoke on the phone before either of them went to bed.
She figured she would tell him tomorrow evening over dinner. But she could have forgotten it by then. She was not even sure it was important. When it happened, it had felt significant, momentous even. But she could feel its importance pass as she got up to brush her teeth in the bathroom and then turn off the bedroom lights. It was likely she would forget about it by tomorrow morning.

This was what happened that afternoon.
After she had a late lunch by herself at the coffee-shop downstairs on her block, Charmaine went home and took a nap, hoping to wake up in time to take a bus to her student's place for his weekly, two hours of English tuition. She forgot to wake up, as she had embarked on a dream about Krishnan buying her the latest Swatch watch for her birthday at the end of the following month. When she did wake up, she realised she had twenty minutes left to get to her student's place. She quickly jumped out of bed, changed into a shirt and jeans, grabbed her wallet and her mobile phone from the bedside table, and went downstairs to hail a cab.
In the cab, she remembered that she had not only dreamed about Krishnan buying her a birthday present, but she had also dreamed briefly of something mother had said before about him. Something racist, no less. This was not good. Now she was even hearing her mother's comments about Krishnan in her dreams. The line her mother had said about how "Indian men beat up their wives" comes on unexpectedly like a bad infomercial in her head now and then, but never in her dreams before. This was a first. She tried to forget about it.
The radio in the cab was playing some old, Chinese song with a throaty, female singer. The car smelled of cheap cologne. She told the driver where she wanted to go, and sat back to stare out the window into the ghost of her reflection. She did not bring any stationery along with her, hoping that she would be able to use those at Syafarin's place when she got there. Syafarin had been improving

Silent Dreams



artwork by aminia

in the English assignments given to him by Charmaine since the day his parents first hired her. She was proud of that fact, and she was looking forward to the day when Syafarin would call her after his English examination results were out, to tell her he had an A for the paper. His parents were aware of his improvement and treated Charmaine with great politeness and warmth whenever she came over to their home.
"Go by ECP, can or not, huh?" asked the driver suddenly, turning his head slightly to the back in Charmaine's direction. He had greasy hair and a narrow face. She thought of an animal with a narrow face.
"Can. Go by ECP," she replied, as the singer on the radio sang a high note at the end of her song. She looked out of the window, and this time watched the couple in the shiny, red car beside the cab. The husband was at the wheel and telling something to his wife next to him, gesturing at the same time. They looked like they were arguing about something. The car drove off ahead of them.
She thought of Krishnan. They had dated during their university days together. He was probably the best thing that had happened to her in school. They hoped to get engaged at the end of the year. Their parents had objected at first, her parents more so than his. His parents had even invited her to their home for dinner. Before she came over, Krishnan had told her about how they had tried to talk him out of seeing her, even threatening to cut off his allowance. She remembered how he had held her hand in the park as he told her this, the brush of his breath so close to her face, followed by his tongue in her mouth after she had told him how happy he made her.
When she got to the front door, she heard shouting coming from inside. It was Syafarin's parents. They were fighting loudly in Malay. She did not recognise any of the words that came fully formed through the door. She hesitated before knocking politely, but loudly enough to be heard. The argument stopped and then she heard the shuffling of feet across the floor.

It was Syafarin's father who answered the door. He was wearing a white shirt and a dark-brown sarong. His hair was slightly messy, as if he had just woken up, and he had a tired expression. He managed a weak smile and said, "Oh, Charmaine, come in. He is in his room."
"Hi uncle," she said, and stepped into the narrow living room. Syafarin's mother was at the table inside the kitchen. "Hi auntie," she called politely. The mother turned slightly with a distracted look on her face, but barely glanced in Charmaine's direction, then looked away again to stare at something on the table. She was not wearing her usual scarf over her head. She had long, curly hair that was longer than Charmaine had guessed.
She went to Syafarin's room and opened the door. It smelled of freshly ironed clothes. The boy sat at his table beside his neatly made bed with his head buried in a comic book. It was something about Archie and his friends. He closed the comic and turned around. "Close the door," he said, and smiled in an embarrassed way. He had a dark and chiseled face. He would grow up to be a handsome guy, she thought. She sat down beside him. She was about to ask if his parents had been arguing earlier, but decided against it. She thought it best to pretend as if nothing had happened outside in the living room. She said instead, "So did you do the exam paper that I gave you for homework?"
"Yah, I finish it already," he replied, and handed her a practice test paper for her to mark. They started the lesson proper, she sitting next to him and observing him as he answered all the questions in an English Assessment book. She noticed that the din was slowly starting again outside. His parents were starting to argue heatedly again in Malay. Soon, his mother's voice rose from the kitchen where she was probably still seated, which was then matched by a loud retort by his father. She peered up at the white wall above Syafarin's head and tried to imagine his father sitting on the couch and yelling in the direction of the kitchen. She wondered if her own parents had ever fought like that. But that was impossible. Her mother was a subservient woman who agreed to everything her father said.
Syafarin acted as if nothing was happening, but quietly completed each question in his assessment book as he was told. She felt strange and discomfited at first, then simply sad. He had always been a hardworking boy when it came to his studies, and he had a sweet and quiet, polite demeanour.
The fighting went on for about half an hour, then died down to a close, after which a silence came over the flat, so quiet that her comments on Syafarin's answers seemed almost too loud in the aftermath of their argument. Soon, two hours passed and the session was over. She was glad the fighting was over, so that she would not feel awkward walking out into the living room into the heart of a verbal storm. She said "goodbye" to Syafarin, who said "bye" with another of his shy and embarrassed smiles, as she stepped out of the bedroom.
In the living room, she was surprised to see Syafarin's mother sitting on the sofa, as her husband stood behind her with a hand on her shoulder. She was staring into the blank screen of the television, while her husband was looking at the back of her head. They did not

see her as she walked behind them to head for the front door. They seemed to have made up during the course of her lesson. The moment lasted for only a few seconds. He finally turned around and saw her. "Oh, finish already," he said, lifting his hand off his wife's shoulder. The woman with curly hair-- slightly brownish, Charmaine realised-- turned around too and offered her a warm smile now, although she did not say anything.
Charmaine smiled back, wondering what had just happened. Before they had fought like a couple on the verge of divorce. Now something had happened to change all that. "Come, I open for you," said Syafarin's father, as he unlocked the front door and showed her out. "Bye," she said to both of them and left the flat, hearing the door click shut behind her as she walked down the corridor to the lift, thinking at the same time about what she had seen. Syafarin's mother on the sofa, staring into the depths of the television. Her husband's hand on her shoulder. In that moment, silence, like an invisible third person in the room, smiled benevolently over them.

Now, lying in bed and waiting for sleep to arrive, she thought of Krishnan. She had wanted to describe what had happened that afternoon to Krishnan, so that he could help her figure out why it had occupied her thoughts until evening, when she had dinner with her parents at home, chewing on rice and imagining what could have passed between Syafarin's parents in that moment when his hand was on her shoulder. Was it love? How long had Syafarin's parents been married? She had looked across the table at her parents eating in silence. Theirs was a different form of silence: one of resignation and an unspoken compromise, with only the shadow of an affectionate bond between them. She did not want Krishnan and her to be like them after they were married. When she saw her parents, she asked herself if this was what most marriages became at the end of the day.
What did it mean to love another forever? Could one truly love another for that long? Or did one simply surrender to the rhythms of living together, long after love had flickered to dimness, because it was easier and it was something you were used to?
She recalled the brief scene again. Syafarin's father staring into the back of his wife's head, his hand on her shoulder. There had been a peace in that moment. A peace that must come from love made richer, more profound even, through time. That even though a couple could fight as terribly as they had fought, they could still return to that shared silence, that intimate peace, after so many years.
She turned in her bed and looked at the phone. She wished Krishnan was not tired, and that he would talk about this with her. She wondered if one day Krishnan and her would share that kind of peace. She loved him. And he loved her, she was certain of that at least. She thought of the years ahead. She thought about how they would live together. He had not asked her yet for an official engagement, but she knew he would soon. But still the questions came on like light bulbs inside her head, one by one: Would it last? Years into their marriage, would they sit, say, at the dinner table with that wordless stillness like an unseen halo around their love? The phone seemed to glow in the dark. She swung her legs off the side of her bed, sat up, and stared at it, willing it to ring. She felt her vision getting clearer. She was becoming more aware of the feel of the bedsheets against her legs, the slight breeze coming in from the open window. She would ring him. He would be annoyed about being woken up from sleep, but he would be patient and listen to her. He would listen to what she had to say.

Cyril Wong is a Singaporean poet/writer. His two collections of poetry are Squatting Quietly (2000) and The End Of His Orbit (2001).

AT A MAD DREAMER'S "SAARCUS": The 11th Saarc Writers' Conference, 7-9 Oct 2004

KAISER HAQ

Let me first apologize for the bad pun in my title-- before the reader can respond with a grimace! Also, I should make it absolutely clear, I have used it without any malice, purely in a spirit of mischievous chaffing. Indeed, it is impossible to harbour even a simple grudge, let alone malice, against the "Mad Dreamer". Not for long, at least.
Ms Ajeet Cour is a phenomenon, more like a force of nature than a real person. Diminutive for a sardarni, she is a bundle of manic energy, which is directed with ruthless determination in the service of her hobby horses. At seventy she possesses more vigour and vim than a pair of healthy thirty-five year-olds.
Part of Ajeet-ji's energy has gone into writing, making her one of the most celebrated and productive Punjabi writers of her generation: nineteen books of fiction; a travelogue; an autobiography, "Khana Badosh", that won her the coveted Sahitya Akademi award (the Indian equivalent of our Bangla Academy award).
The writer in Ajeet-ji is complemented by the conspicuous persona of a cultural activist. In 1975 she became Founder-Chairperson of the Academy of Fine Arts and Literature; then, under the aegis of her academy she set up the Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature, and became its president. A fairly regular event on the Foundation's calendar is the SAARC Writers' Conference, of which there have been eleven so far. It was quite by chance that I became an invitee to these remarkable jamborees.
When a SAARC Writers' delegation visited Dhaka early this year I was introduced as "a poet and professor" to Ajeet-ji and her aide-de-camp Dr Reena Marwah (besides being Programme Co-ordinator at the SAARC Writers' Secretariat Reena is a Reader in Economics at Delhi University). Soon after I got an invitation to the forthcoming 10th SAARC Writers' Conference in Lahore. A series of frantic phone call from Reena followed: could I co-ordinate the air passage of the Bangladeshi delegation? Could I send her the

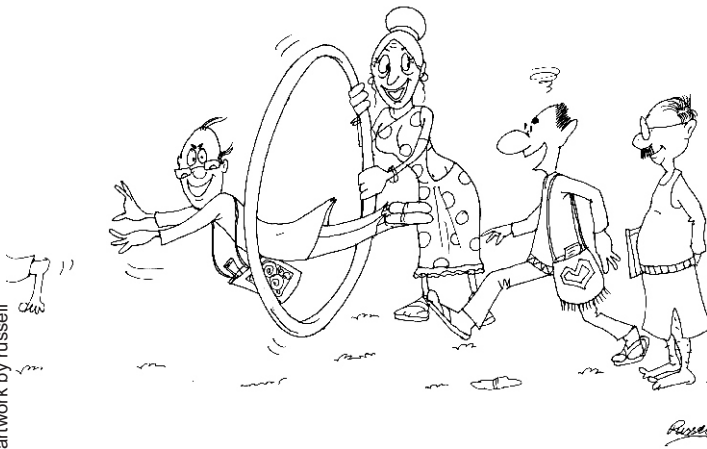
flight details a.s.a.p.? Could I get any funds from local sources to buy my ticket? Could I get my fellow-delegates to email their conference papers without further delay? I began to suspect there was something quixotic about Ajeet-ji's operations. Coincidentally, the tension in the wake of the attack on the late Humayun Azad prompted me to cancel my trip.
A few months later I got another invitation--to the 11th SAARC Writers' Conference, scheduled for September in Delhi and Chandigarh. Later the venue was restricted to Delhi and the time changed to October. More frantic phone calls from Reena followed: they had wanted to invite the Vice Chancellor of Dhaka University but as he was out of the country could I get in touch with the Vice Chancellor of Jahangirnagar

in a booklet. Also, could I get in touch with Actionaid, the local NGO, which had generously agreed to pay for five tickets, and fix our flight schedule? We had a fifth delegate, Syed Shamsul Huq, who, Reena informed me, would buy his own ticket. Then one of us, Tasmina Hossain, decided not to use the Actionaid ticket as she would be going to Delhi anyway in connection with some other do, and it was suggested that her ticket could be given to Syed Shamsul Huq instead. But since his name wasn't on the list sent to Actionaid they couldn't transfer the ticket unless requested by the conference organisers. In the end the transfer wasn't made, nor did Syed Shamsul Huq buy his own ticket. É
Four of us, then, Profesor Anisuzzaman, Syed Manzoorul

neck. It took us forty-five minutes to extricate ourselves; at least in that corner, we decided, India wasn't shining.
We had been given to understand that delegates would be put up in rooms at the conference venue, the India International Centre or I.I.C. We were taken to the YMCA instead and told to be ready for our pick-up by 9 am. But we didn't want to be rushed and asked to be picked up at 9:30. Then we delayed a little more since we were sure these things never started on time: the inaugural session was scheduled for 10 am. When we finally went in, led by Professor Anisuzzaman, resplendent in a flowing kurta, we found that it has started on time.É
Ajeet-ji was in full flow, describing herself as a "mad dreamer" like Pablo Neruda, a comparison that The Hindu would characterize as unrealistic. On the dais sat V.P. Singh, the former Prime Minister; S. Jaipal Reddy, the Minister for Culture and Information and Broadcasting; the leaders of the delegations from the seven SAARC countries. Suddenly Ajeet-ji turned and asked the culture minister to shut up. Well, not in so many words, but with a schoolmarmish locution that was just as sharp and made the poor minister colour. When the Iron Lady of SAARC letters had finished the session was running out of time. "Five minutes!" she commanded one speaker. Then "Four minutes!" she commanded the next. And kept inserting her voluble comments between these truncated speeches.
The inaugural session set the tone of the whole conference: bureaucratic or diplomatic turns of phrase, clichés, unrealistic sentiments abounded. One didn't have to be a writer to play a prominent role; the Sri Lankan delegation was led by an agricultural engineer, but then he was also a Vice Chancellor, and Ajeet-ji definitely has a soft spot for the species. Though time was in short supply, from time to time distinguished members of the audience (i.e. bureaucrats, diplomats, U.N. officials) were cajoled or commanded to go on stage and share their thoughts:

they turned out to be just like the thoughts already shared by many. As for the stuff one would expect at a writers' conference, they were decidedly of secondary importance. Poets queued up to read one poem each; there was no time for short stories; and the 3000-word papers we wrote had to be summed up in eight-and-a-half minutes each.
And yet, so much more could be done for writers and literature. There should have been sessions where writers could talk shop, where writers could meet publishers and discuss possibilities of cross-border publication, or the prospects of translations between South Asian languages as well as from a South Asian language into English.
As for the conference brochure, it didn't carry the biographical notes we emailed urgently, nor the synopses of our papers. But it did spell out, in bold font and in a somewhat New Age idiom, the noble aims of the Academy of Fine Arts and Literature: "CULTURAL CONNECTIVITY IN THE SOUTH ASIAN REGION, FOR PEACE AND TRANQUILITY AND HARMONY IN THE AREA." Amen, is all one can say!
In keeping with these aims, the valedictory session adopted a resolution demanding relaxation of visa rules to make intra-SAARC travel easier for writers. Amen again!
Our peace and tranquility was threatened when we were checking out of the YMCA in the small hours in order to catch an early flight. The desk clerk looked at his register, shook his head and declared that we would have to pay the bill before we could leave. But we are guests of the Academy of Fine Arts and Literature, we riposted; they will pay our bill. There were no instructions to that effect. It was a stalemate. We produced Reena Marwah's cell phone number but the clerk had enough gallantry to desist from rousing a lady at that unearthly hour. And the superior he did phone had the good sense to order our release.

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University, Professor So-and-so, and ask him if he would like to come? Since I didn't know Professor So-and-so I suggested she ask the leader of our delegation, Profesor Anisuzzaman, to act as go-between. It transpired that Professor So-and-so was no longer Vice Chancellor, so they decided to invite a writer instead: my good friend Syed Manzoorul Islam.
Then I was asked to send-- and to ask my fellow-delegates to send--an updated biographical note and a synopsis of the conference paper (I had already emailed my complete paper). This was very urgent because the material would be published

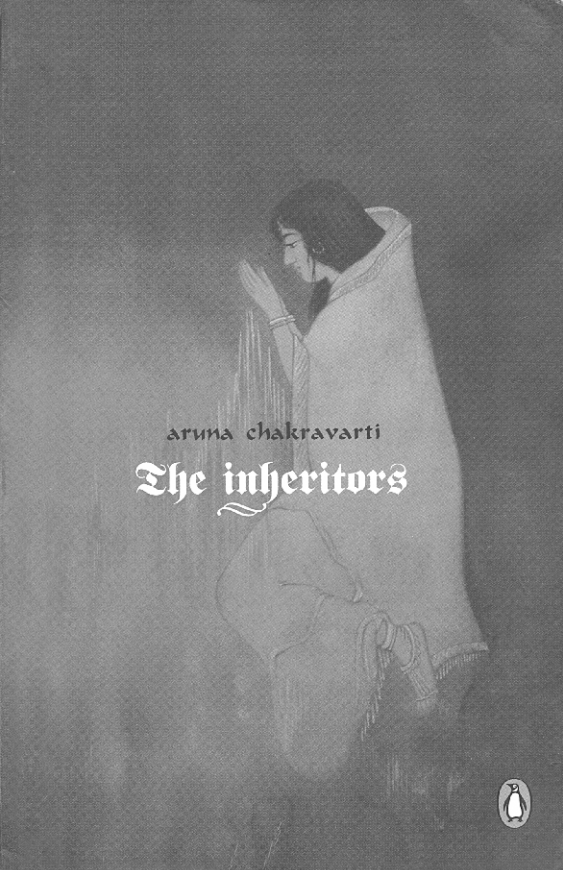
Islam, the novelist Selina Hossain and I, hopped on Biman to Kolkata, and took the Sahara flight to Delhi, where we were met by a man from a travel agent. His list included Syed Shamsul Huq's name and he didn't seem to believe that Huq wasn't coming. There was a note of suspicion in his voice: was he thinking that we were responsible for Huq's non-arrival? It was with marked reluctance that he finally escorted just the four of us to the parking lot and loaded our luggage on the rooftop rack. In ten minutes or so the bags were secured with twine and we were ready to start. But there was only one exit, where the parking toll had to be paid: quite a bottle-

BookReview

The Inheritors, Penguin India, Delhi, 340+xvi pp., pb, Rs. 295

MANISHA GANGOPADHYAY

An examination of the social and family life during India's modern history, Aruna Chakravarti's novel, *The Inheritors* is as complicated as life itself. Beginning in 1897, it traces the lives of a 'Vaidic' (the author's preferred spelling) Kulin Brahmin family through five generations.
The prologue opens in 1996 with a scene of Mono, a young Indian writer, visiting her cousin, Abhishek, in Germany. Abhishek holds his mother Alo's diary - the key to Mono's project - untouched since her death over 20 years before. Using the diary, Mono will trace their family's history. Chakravarti helps us with the rest.
"There's insanity in our family, Alo," warns her brother Himu Dada, when another brother, a freedom fighter in pre-independent India, succumbs to severe depression. "It runs in the blood of Vaidic Brahmins of south Bengal.... one or two of us go mad in every generation. Our grandmother Radharani Debi lost her mind at the age of twenty and jumped into a well and died when she was only twenty-six."
And so the story is revealed, gradually demystifying the social constructions and roots of this insanity through the deeds and conflicts of the Brahmin family.
It's strange how stories of abuse, pain inflicted, molestation, or incest capture our attention. Critics complain that modern writers are capitalising on these issues, placing them in a Third World context to create a selling point of exotic faraway misery.
The Inheritors is unique in that it deals with these issues without pandering to the 'problems' of such a Third World audience, narrating a genuine and compelling story to well-informed readers. The book openly covers the range of horrors against women of a conservative society/caste without reservation. There's none of that 'we must make our stigmatized culture look good in the western world' attitude directing its exposition.
The writing itself is refreshingly different, though perhaps for some it may prove to be somewhat esoteric and annoying, in that it makes few concessions to the culturally uninformed. It seamlessly uses the vernacular of Bengali Hindu culture, rarely stopping to explain obscure traditions. The novelist seems to be writing to an exclusive audience of South Asians or those in the know.
Among the slew of South Asian writing in English, this one is less explanatory, giving the impression that it is how a South Asian book would be written in its native language, a direct story telling without pause for explanation, one of the most obvious examples being the liberal use of family terms - such as 'Mashi, Pishi, Dada, Boudi'- and Indian culinary delights:
"... *She lifted the chapattis, soaked in ghee and smooth as silk, stack by stack and placed*



them on the plates. Fried brinjal came next, long crusty wedges with the stem attached, of which Shashekar and the oldest boy got two and the others one each."
The narrative alternating between different time periods is a reflection on the struggle between personal choice and the limits on that choice imposed by societal traditions. Each generation strives to liberate itself from the deadwood of the past, setting the stage for the age-old conflict between tradition and change. The outcome of this equation forms the course of history.
Though Alo's diary is the vehicle from which the story unravels, the novel does not focus on one particular generation or one hero, but concentrates on the experiences of the Kulin Brahmin women collectively as they are affected by a legacy of conservative, and often oppressive, traditions. The women in the book are the 'inheritors' of that legacy.
This intricate and complex narrative about the lives of a 37-member family, for the most part, is deftly woven by Chakravarti, an academic/translator (this is her first novel). Fortunately, a family tree is provided at the beginning that is vital to following the plot. Though at times it can be confusing, the consistency and layering of events create a very convincingly authentic story.

Manisha Gangopadhyay is on the editorial staff of The Daily Star.