

SHORT STORY

SARAH JOSEPH (translated by Gita Krishnakutty)

The start of the journey was, naturally, very enjoyable. They were filled with expectations about the extremely beautiful part of the world they were going to. But scooters cannot be relied upon for long journeys to distant places. Before they had gone very far, a screw came loose and the scooter stopped on the highway!

The woman and child who were on the scooter got down first, then the man. He pushed the vehicle until it was in the shade. He examined it—cleaning down, bending to one side, straightening himself, standing up. A scooter that has a screw that has become loose puts human beings in a quandary.

The rider could not identify which screw it was that had come loose, as a mechanic would have done. He wasted a lot of time knocking on the vehicle, tapping it all over. As for the woman, she stood leaning against a tree, pursing her lips tighter and tighter as her displeasure grew. The child lay asleep on her shoulder. As she shifted the one-and-a-half-year-old burden back and forth from her left shoulder to her right and then back again to the left, her hands began to ache.

'Please carry him!' she appealed to the man who was lost in the complicated nerve formations of the scooter. Exhausted with his efforts to find the spot where the screw had come loose, he turned round and glared at her.

Their eyes met and blazed in the hot noonday sun!

She shifted the child again from one shoulder to the other and ground her teeth. Perspiration poured down his forehead and neck and dripped on his collar. As he worked hard, his face grew distorted. He was very selfish. He would distort his face like this even at the climax of the sexual act. She turned away in disgust.

The disgusting memory of her rough buttocks came to his mind as he tapped the engine cover of the scooter lying o its side. Thin, with protruding cheekbones and backbone, worn-out nails and cracked heels... she was growing less and less worthy these days to lie on a beautiful mattress! He wiped the grease on his lip with the back of his hand and spat out noisily. What could he share with her? Except turn her this way and that and enjoy her physically as if she were a scooter like this one, with a loose screw...

He lit a cigarette. He stood on the scooter's belly and gazed at the woman like a villain. She moved. Cramps had begun to creep up her legs because of the child's weight.

'You too could carry him for a while,' she said, her voice full of dislike. Disgustedly, she cursed the crores and crores of seeds he had planted in her at a moment when she had not wanted him.

Their eyes met and blazed in the hot midday sun!

A red Maruti car braked to a stop near the overturned scooter. The driver's puffy-cheeked friends put their heads out of the car and hooted. They slammed the doors and came out. Roaring like the evil spirits in sorcerers' stories, they circled the scooter. Two minutes later, she heard the scooter start up, turned and saw them shake the dust off their hands and get into the car while he straddled the scooter victoriously.

The scooter sped over a road shimmering in the noonday sun. As they flew, raising the dust over paths filled with black sand and crumbled horse dung, a vision of blue hills, green lakes and soft, cold mists descended into the travelers' hearts. Loosening their taut nerves, hope flew before them like a swarm of yellow dragonflies. The child dozed on the woman's lap, lulled to sleep by the sunshine, the gentle hum of the vehicle and the wind that blew against it. Thinking of the beautiful spot they were bound for, she raised her hand in a moment of tenderness and laid it seductively on his shoulder as if he had just begun the journey. He turned his head and rubbed his chin gently against her palm as if he too was within a dream of blue hills

The Scooter

into which the mists melted.

But scooters cannot be relied upon for long journeys to distant places.

As they roared through sugar-cane groves, cemeteries and villages and reached a steep slope, a screw came loose and fell out. The scooter swayed and zig-zagged. Hugging the child to her breast, the woman jumped off at a moment when it seemed safe. After spinning the man round for quite a while, the vehicle crashed against a tamarind tree on the roadside and hung down from it precariously.

The woman and the man looked at each other their faces dark with anger. After grunting meaningfully as if to suggest that she was the reason for everything going wrong, he began to search for the spot where the screw had come loose. She struggled, perched on the uncomfortable surface of the slope with the crying child in her arms, unable to maintain her balance in any position. She shifted the child from one shoulder to another many times, but he had still not found the spot where the screw had come undone.

'Please hold the child! Pulling the child away from her shoulder resentfully; she held it out to him.

'And then? Will you repair this?' he asked, hitting the back seat of the scooter with his knotted fist. She curled her lips in deep contempt and laughed. Then she said, 'Yes, better than you're doing it!'

He stared at her, a spanner in his hand. He calculated: he could hit the right side of her forehead with just one throw. Or her protruding left cheekbone. Aiming a blow at the engine cover with the spanner, he overcame this thought.

Then he began to push the scooter up slowly. He found it difficult because the slope was really steep.

Deep satisfaction filled her as she stood watching him push the vehicle up, panting like a dog. This was the punishment of the dexterity with which he could do a variety of tasks on ordinary days, a revenge for the long hours of monotony when they had to stand or sit or lie down face to face in the closed flat, in the restricted space between the bits of wooden furniture, with nothing to say to each other. She could not contain her laughter and happiness when she realized this was an escape from the absolute boredom of having to see his face no matter where she turned. She suddenly burst out laughing.

He turned round as he pushed the vehicle up, finding it difficult even to breathe, and saw her break out over and over again into laughter, her head thrown back, pointing him out to the child as if he was a clown. The child too was pointing its little index finger at him. He shuddered, aware that all the suppressed cruelty in her had been unleashed.

He recalled that she smiled cheerfully only when he took home things he had bought on instalment schemes. He wanted to laugh too, in the pleasure of his secret: that it was to erase the unpleasantness of looking at her that he used to join instalment schemes, that he found

more pleasure now in paying an instalment than in making love to her. And when he thought of how he had registered each of the things he now possessed through instalment schemes—the scooter, the TV, the fridge, the almirah, the cot, the mattress—in his own name and put away the documents secretly, without her knowing, at the bottom of his box, he burst into mocking laughter. Pointing his finger at her and the child, he laughed aloud. Outwardly, they seemed a happy family rolling over with laughter so delightedly in the middle of the road that their mouths were full of mud, but the precariousness of the steep slope made them lose their balance. The scooter slipped from his grip and overturned and the child fell from her hands! The two of them looked angrily at each other.

Their eyes met and blazed in the hot noonday sun!

The child wailed loudly. Neither he nor she paid any attention. He was trying to lift the scooter with difficulty.

It was really hard to do so on that steep slope. She walked up to him with an arrogance that befit the occasion, lifted up the carrier and managed to stand the vehicle upright by herself. Then, her face twisted in a mocking laugh, she made an effort to push the vehicle up, doggedly trying to cope with the lack of balance on the slope.

artwork by aloc

Even her partial victory over the scooter maddened him. Pointing to the crying child stumbling behind her, she shouted, 'Carry the child, woman!'

She looked round arrogantly. The child was clinging to his leg, crying. Turning her head away sharply, she tried with even more obstinacy and force to push the vehicle to the top.

He suddenly pushed the child out of the way and obstructed her with all the strength he had. The scooter grated on the tarred road, unable to go even an inch backward or forward, caught between them as they exerted their strength in opposing directions, facing each other disgustedly. A crazy Bullet that was tearing down the slope at a thousand horsepower speed braked suddenly beside them. It was a priest wearing gumboots, faded jeans and a torn cassock. He had dark glasses and his hair and beard were windblown. He stared at them in astonishment for a couple of minutes. Then he leaned the Bullet against a tamarind tree, took the crying child and put it in its mother's arms without saying a word, picked up the scooter as if it were a flower and put it on top of the steep slope. In two minutes, he tightened the horse screw, got on to his crazy bike and roared away at a thousand horsepower speed!

The scooter tore over the level road. Although sunlight, dust and wind attacked them all the time, the hair that blew against her in the breeze, the crackle of her sari, the wild forest scent of the nape of his neck kept arousing her. While flying through the crowded streets of the city, she raised her arms and put them around his neck so that the girls would feel jealous. The expectation of the limpid lakes they were

going to reach seemed to him to waft mist into the blazing sunshine. He turned his head and rubbed his rough chin against her hands.

But scooters cannot be depended upon for long journeys to distant places!

Before their hopes could be realized, there was a severe petrol leak in the scooter. Dripping a trail of evil-smelling petrol behind them, the vehicle began to shake and sway. It was she who became aware of it first. She writhed with shame, seeing passers-by cover their noses, shudder and back away, while a pack of dogs, sniffing the dripping petrol, gathered behind them. The child began to retch, unable to bear the stench. She thought she would soon start throwing up as well. His condition was no different. His head was spinning with odor.

'Which cursed pump did you buy the petrol from?' she shouted loud enough to pierce his ears.

The odor of the petrol unnerved him. He decided to stop under the shade of a tree on the roadside and examine the vehicle. Covering her nose with the end of her sari, she jumped off with the child.

He tied his handkerchief over his nose, lay prone on the ground and began his examination. An unbearable disgust and self-loathing took hold of him. The rotten, ulcerating womb of the scooter kept oozing fluid. Wherever he touched it, its limbs turned soft and the decayed skin kept crumbling in his hands. He nervously gripped its bent handlebar tight. It fell into his hand like a broken arm. Pale with fear, he flung it away. The dogs gathered in a circle around him and the scooter and howled.

She moved quite a distance away from him and sat on a culvert on the roadside. The child lay asleep on her lap. She thought of the dogs, of him, of the horrible odor as evil experiences in a bad dream.

Green lakes, blue hills, mist and the cold: these were the truth. She longed to snuggle into the green blanket that crept down the hills, enveloping them. She gazed steadily at the vehicles speeding towards them, raising dust. She was like a leaf spinning in a whirlwind of hopes.

She wished she could ask the young man tearing along on a gleaming Hero Honda to give her a lift to the land of the lakes. She thought, if he stopped his vehicle, she would put her hand round the Hero Honda fellow's shoulder in full view of her husband and fly joyfully away.

The scooter lay on the road like a rotten, stinking bandicoot. Catching sight of his frightening face in its shabby mirror, he shuddered and moved back. Walking backwards until he was quite far away from her, he sat on the roots of a tree, his head in his hand... The dogs began to lick the scooter and pull it apart with their teeth. Now, and then they looked up at the sky and howled mournfully.

People came out inquiringly from the houses and tea shops in the vicinity, their noses covered. Once they discovered that the rotten, decayed smell came from this bandicoot, they began to protest.

'Hey! You have to take this thing away!' they called out to him. He did not raise his head. He wondered how he had become the owner of this thing. The number of people increased. And they began to get very angry.

'It's not mine,' he muttered.

'Nor mine either,' she said, turning her face away in disgust.

'Then d'you mean it's ours?' The people were furious. They pushed the two of them towards the scooter. They lifted the decaying corpse of the scooter whose limbs were coming apart and heaved it on to their heads before either of them could escape.

Their faces grew dirty with the stinking fluid that dripped from the scooter's rotting flesh. They began to weep and retch. The dogs circled them, howling. The people laughed in satisfaction as they watched the man, woman and child turn and go away, crying and retching.

Sarah Joseph is a professor of Malayalam who has published collections of short stories and novellas. Gita Krishnakutty has translated many short stories and novels from Malayalam into English.

BookReview

The Hungry Tide by Amitav Ghosh

ASRAR CHOWDHURY

Ravi Dayal/Harper Collins, 2004; 403 pp.; 350 Rupees, \$31.95.

The Ganges flows from the Himalayas through India and Bangladesh before falling into the Bay of Bengal. 'Interposed between the sea and the plains of Bengal, lies an immense archipelago of islands... stretching for almost three hundred kilometers, from the Hooghly River in West Bengal to the shores of the Meghna in Bangladesh,' where salt waters and fresh water meet and create the mangrove forests known as the Sundarbans. Here during high tide the sea waters can surge thirty kilometers inland, then draw back, in a restless cycle of veiling and unveiling matter, constantly reshaping or devouring land. It is in this home of man-eating tigers, sharks,

geographically and conceptually circumscribed. While *The Glass Palace* sweepingly encompassed Southeast Asia, *The Hungry Tide* locates itself strictly within the Sundarbans in Bangladesh and West Bengal. *The Glass Palace* told us various stories all the way from Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose to Indian migrant workers in Malaysia, whereas *The Hungry Tide* has two basic plots. One addresses the displacement (a perennial theme with Ghosh) of a group of refugees from Bangladesh to West Bengal in 1979. The second constitutes new ground for him, although it is faithful to Ghosh's anthropological roots, about the co-existence of humans and man-eating tigers and dolphins in a volatile and dangerous eco-system.

The story of the dispossessed begins when a century back, when in this tide country a

visionary Scotsman, Sir Hamilton, built a utopian settlement so that people could live together irrespective of their caste and creed. The story of the eco-system also starts from there, but gathers force when in modern times two of the principal characters of the novel—Kanai Dutt and Piya ('Piya') Roy—make their appearance. Kanai is a successful, cosmopolitan Bengali businessman who runs a translating firm in New Delhi. Piya, an American of Bengali descent, is a scientist who has come to the Sundarbans to study the extremely rare, endangered Irrawaddy dolphins. Kanai and Piya meet in the

clear waters of the open sea the light of the sun wells downwards from the surface in an inverted cone that ends in the beholder's eye. The base of this cone is a transparent disk that hangs above the observer's head like a floating halo. It is through this prism, known as Snell's window, that the oceanic dolphin perceives the world beyond the water; in submersion, this circular portal follows it everywhere, creating a single clear opening in the unbroken expanse of shimmering silver that forms the water's surface as seen from below.

Rivers like the Ganga and the Brahmaputra shroud this window with a direct curtain of silt: in their occluded waters light loses its directionality within a few centimeters of the surface. Beneath this lies a flowing stream of suspended matter in which visibility does not extend beyond an arm's length. With no lighted portal to point the way, top and bottom and up and down become very quickly confused. As if to address this the Gangetic dolphin habitually swims on its side, parallel to the surface, with one of its lateral fins trailing the bottom, as though to anchor itself in its darkened world by keeping a hold upon its floor.

before, as a child, to 'trim down' his overweening pride. Little seems to have changed as Nilima describes him to Piya as 'one of those men who likes to think of himself as irresistible to the other sex.' Kanai is going to Lusibari again, this time at the request of Nilima. Her late husband Nirmal has left a notebook for Kanai that was recently discovered, twenty years after the former's death.

In their youth, Nilima and Nirmal (teacher and 'leftist intellectual') had fled from Kolkata to the Sundarbans because of their revolutionary ideals. They had stayed on, with Nilima founding a self-help cooperative and Nirmal becoming the headmaster of the local school. There is also Kusum and her son Fokir. Kanai had met Kusum on his first trip and she became, and remains, his childhood sweetheart. The notes give the impression that Nirmal (also known as 'Saar'), too probably fell in love with her in his old age. It is Nirmal's notebook that provides an anthropological account of displaced people attempting to form a new society in the island of Morichjhapi, provides the link between the past and the present, presents the shifting yet constant ecological picture of tide country.

crocodiles and dolphins, of an shifting reality, endlessly disappearing and appearing, that is the setting for Amitav Ghosh's latest novel, *The Hungry Tide*. This book, unlike its predecessor, *The Glass Palace*, is both

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Blind Country Blind Times

AMITAV DASGUPTA

(translated by Khaderul Islam)

Gimmicky, stuffed with slyness
A couple of clever lines
Thus the young whet their prose—
As if love were the non-stop coitus of sparrows.

And beside them swaying their waists
A fistful of arse, leg
The cries of wanton dance and song
As the Bangla band plays on.

What boys want they want it right now—
Tingly booze, car with AC,
A heavy-weight credit card
A woman hot off the stove.

No matter how much they change 'C P' to 'K P'
'Calcutta' to 'Kolkata'
Ill-luck dogs the forehead
Of the clerk from Bibadi Bagh,
And wingless independence
Hangs from a rope in memory's courtyard,
Blind country blind times
Favicol-sniffed eyes
No matter how much Premen Mitra screams—
'Joy joy joy'

There are tigers on the land and crocs in the river
So tell me, where do I go?

Khaderul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.

Not Playing

RUMANA SIDDIQUE

Must be a male thing
This search for a universal idiom
Like the rolling of the universe
Into a ball kind
Well, if it's a ball game
I'm not playing
Accidental sharing
I don't much mind
But this contrived pairing
This subtle, gentle,
camouflaged coercion
to mould my voice
to an authoritative 'we'
not for me
Oh, and no apologies
To any
Who don't agree.