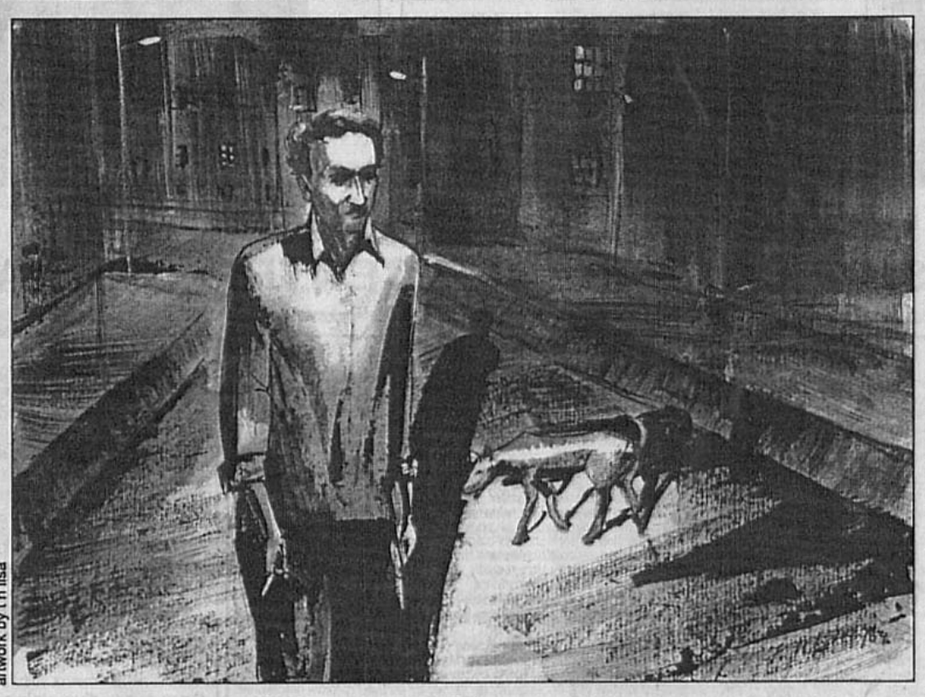
SHORT STORY

# The Match Box

BALRAJ MANRA *(translated from Urdu by K. Wahid)*



artwork by t h lisa

He did not know what time it was when he woke up.
Extending his right hand he reached out for the packet of cigarettes from the table by the side of his bed and extracting a cigarette from it held it between is lips.
Throwing away the packet his hand again groped for the match box. It was empty.
He flung the match box into the air.
It hit the ceiling and fell down on the floor.
He switched on the table lamp.
Four or five match boxes were lying on the side table.
He looked into them one by one.
They were all empty.
Throwing away the coverlet he got out of bed and turned on the room lamp.
It was two o'clock.
The floor was cold as ice.
It was only two. He had no idea of time. He thought morning was approaching.
What made him wake up before his time?
Once one is up it is difficult to sleep again.
He rummaged through every possible place in the room--the bookshelf, the wastepaper basket, his trousers and coat pocket. No matches.
He shook each and every book. Not a single matchstick.
He had turned the entire room topsy-turvy. The books were lying in disarray. And so were the clothes. His trunk stood with its lid open.
If someone dropped in at that time!
Two o'clock in the morning and the room in such a mess!
What would the visitor think? The cigarette between his lips shook.
Indeed, a lit cigarette and a beating heart were so akin to each other.
But where could he get matches at this unearthly hour?
And if he didn't?
Oh, hell!
He thought his heart would stop beating.
But what would make him come at this odd hour?
He didn't know what time it was.
And once awake he couldn't fall asleep again.
But the matches! Where could he get them at this hour?
Throwing a *chaddar* over his shoulders he came out of his room.
It was a cold December night, bleak and silent. And so dark.
For sometime he stood undecided in the middle of the road, not knowing in which direction to go.
Then he started walking , not caring to know where he was going.
A dark and silent night. He peered into the dark distance ahead of him without being able to see anything.
The dim light of the street lamps only accentuated the darkness and the silence of the night.
He stopped at a road-crossing.
The light here was brighter. The milk-white fluorescent tubes glared down at him. But the silence still held its sway. All the shops along the road were closed.
He walked towards a sweetmeat shop.
Maybe he could find a live coal in the oven. Or at least an ember on the verge of extinction. That would as well serve his purpose.
There was someone lying huddled up on the plinth of the sweetmeat shop. Looking like a bundle.
He had bent down to look into the oven when the bundle suddenly stirred. 'Who are you? What are you doing here?'
'I'm looking for a live charcoal.'
'Are you mad? The oven is dead.'
'So?'
'So what? Go back home.'
'Do you have matches?'
'You mean matches?'
'Yes, to light my cigarette.'
'Are you mad? Be gone. Don't disturb my sleep.'
'So you don't have matches?'
'Only the shop-owner has them. The oven will only get going when he comes. Now scuttle off.'
He regained the road.
The cigarette between his lips shook.
He resumed his walk.
The lamp-post. Another. Still another. They were left far behind, their dim light only accentuating the darkness of the night.
Suddenly he stopped walking. There was someone coming in his direction.
The man barred the way as he came up.
'Have you got matches?'
'Matches?'
'Yes. I want to light my cigarette.'
'I'm sorry. I'm immune from this accursed habit.'
'I thought…'
'What did you think?'
'Well, that you might have matches.'
'But I don't. I've told you I don't smoke. I have not cultivated this vice. I'm off to my home. You also go home.'
He move on. The cigarette dangling between his lips shook. He walked wearily on, feeling utterly fagged out. He had even lost count of time.
A lamp-post shedding anemic light. And darkness again. Another lamp-post. Light. And darkness again.
The cigarette between his lips. He wearily dragged his feet.
The urge to smoke had become pronounced. He must fill his lungs with smoke. His body seemed to be disintegrating.
The cold was seeping though his clothes and the *chaddar*. He was feeling chilly.
Then he started shivering as he dragged his feet. He even lost sense of time and stopped taking notice of the lamp-post.
He suddenly stopped short.
He could see a danger signal ahead of him.
There was a bridge under repair. A lantern masked with red cloth was hanging from a wooden board right in the middle of the road as a warning signal.
He had just advanced to light his cigarette from the burning wick when a voice rang out: 'Who's there?'
He did not answer.
As if emerging through a sheet of darkness a policeman came bounding towards him.
'What were you up to?'
'Nothing.'
'Aren't you hearing me? What were you doing?'
'Have you a match box?'
'I'm asking you what you were doing and you ask for matches. Who are you?'
'I want to light my cigarette. If by any chance you have matches…'
'I know you were up to some mischief.'
'I was going to light my cigarette. From the flame of the lantern. If you have matches…'
'Who are you? Where do you live?'
'I…'
'I'm asking you: where do you live?'
'At Model Town.'
'So you want matches? And you live in Model Town. Where's Model Town?'
'Model Town?' He turned round and pointed in a direction where the place was supposed to be located. But he found he was surrounded by a thick mass of darkness through which he could see nothing.
'You'll have to come with me to the police station. You know Model Town is ten miles away from here? And you're looking for matches, aren't you? You'll get them in plenty at the police station.'
The policeman gripped him by his arm and walked him towards the police station. The police station was located at the end of the same road but the road seemed to be unending.
The policeman pushed him into one of the rooms of the police station.
There were several people sitting round a big desk.
They were all smoking.
Packets of cigarettes and boxes of matches lay scattered on the desk.
'Saheb, I found this man standing near the bridge. Says he lives in Model Town and has been going about in search of matches.'
'You, what are you up to?'
'With your permission may I use your match box? I want to light my cigarette.'
'Where do you live?'
'At Model Town. Please, may I use your match box?'
'Who are you?'
'A stranger here. May I use your match box?
'How long have you been living at Model Town?'
'For three months. May I…?'
'Matches! You son of a match box! Call yourself a stranger? Don't I know the likes of you? Go home. Or do you want me to clap you into the lock-up? Matches, indeed!'
When he came out of the police station he was feeling very tired.
He slowly started walking down the road. The road seemed to be unending. His nose had started running and his body seemed to be going to pieces.
Smoking is a vice.
Why didn't he ever try to give up smoking? And if he did not get it? Then?
He did not know what time it was. He was oblivious of the street lamps. Even oblivious of the road. And of his body too.
He lurched forward as if drunk.
The dawn began to break, making him stop for a moment.
He stopped to regain his breath and to compose himself.
After collecting himself he planted his foot forward. Then he saw a man walking unsteadily towards him.
The man stopped in front of him. There was a cigarette dangling from his lips.
'Do you have matches?'
'Matches?'
'Don't you have a box of matches?'
'That's what I myself am looking for.'
Taking no further notice of him the fellow moved on. The fellow was going in the same direction he had come from, and kept on his course.

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Letter from HIROSHIMA

# A Harvard professor on 'Peace'

MANOSH CHOWDHURY

I went to *Satake* Memorial Hall, the university auditorium, to hear a Harvard professor speak on the topic of peace. Though it had been just a week since I arrived here on a study program, I went because I was very interested in hearing a Harvard professor speak. Smiling volunteers were distributing Japanese and English versions of his paper. I of course took the English one. They also offered a translation device. I looked at Ichi, my Japanese classmate. He replied in Bangla: "Take it. It is easier to take one than to refuse it in Japanese." So I took one. The Harvard professor claimed in his introductory lines that he had something new to offer, which was that a university curriculum should adopt peace studies in its academic programs. No wonder then that he had been giving lectures for the last few days in different auditoriums of Hiroshima and had been traveling to many countries to spread the word.

Everywhere in Higashi-Hiroshima you find the expression of "peace", "peace" and "peace". And wherever you look, you see small, green hills. Which are changing to reddish and maroon, then later perhaps to brown, and then towards... who knows what! Maples are the ones the color of flame; so many shades -- yellow to orange, brown to maroon, and a series of red: scarlet, crimson -- you need a color chart. The place reminds one of those hill scenes in the '60s and '70s Bengali films where doctors sent their rich patients to recuperate, and where the camera would zoom in on the ailing hero talking emotionally with the heroine. The only element missing is a beach and the sound of the sea.

This is not Hiroshima proper. This is Higashi-Hiroshima, designed to be a small university town. Higashi's topography has more natural curves and colors than Hiroshima. For the people who live in Hiroshima and commute to some office at Higashi-Hiroshima, the latter is meant to be a comfortable place. It's 1500 Yen for a round-trip bus ride of 40 minutes each way, not a huge amount by Japanese standards. The Japanese run from the bus stops to the offices they work at almost without a word to anyone in the mornings; then do the same in the evenings, from office to bus stops. And unlike chattering Bengalis, once on the bus, they sit silently looking out of the windows at the hills.

Set amid this natural beauty, Higashi-Hiroshima is essentially a university town. Because of Hiroshima's history, there is a continual emphasis on peace curriculum and peace studies, on related subjects and what they call international cooperation. From the very first day, one feels a pressure to visit the peace museum located in the main town. Yet I did not go, did not attempt the 40-minute bus ride to the city -- it would happen sometime in the future, so why force it? Also, I just couldn't understand why Hiroshima museum was named as peace museum and not museum against US aggression or nuclear-bomb museum. But that must be my problem. Here at the university nobody talks about US aggression during World War II. Or now. Instead, everybody seems to be supportive of current Japanese foreign policy.

Regardless of their disciplines, hardly any professor displays any kind of academic interest in colonialism, imperialism, or even in global trade-imbalance. It was shocking for me. It's not that the Bangladeshi situation is very different, yet there are people within and beyond academia you can search out interested in such issues. When, later on, I heard about some British student researching on post-Iraq trans-national relations, I hurried over there to listen to the presentation. The presiding professor, Dr. Yoshida, had clear observations about present-day power politics.

A few days later, when I found out about a literature professor working on Japanese colonialism I e-mailed him expressing my interest in talking to him. He invited me over. My new Pakistani friend, Abdur Rahman, drily suggested that I should not get too excited: "Look, here the people all of a sudden close the door. You can find them very enthusiastic in the first few meetings. And then when you begin to think you have a relationship, you find them disinterested."

However, I disregarded this and arrived at the professor's office two minutes before the scheduled time, after asking with difficulty for directions from eight different persons. Knowing Japanese is a necessity here. The professor knew three languages: Japanese, English and Chinese. His main thesis was about how Japanese scholars portrayed China in general, and Chinese literature and paintings in particular, as their "Orient". He found this characteristic to be an influence of Western Orientalism, of French and other European 'study' of non-Western societies and cultures. He is presently examining Japanese paintings, and investigating Japanese mimicries of Western styles and genres. It was an interesting session with him. We both agreed that we would keep in touch. But I think I need some tips from Rahman about how I should proceed with the second phase of a 'relationship' with a Japanese since I feel inadequate to the task.

But all these came after the Harvard professor's speech on a peace curriculum. Mostly Japanese graduate students, and a few international students -- male and female. And some Japanese professors and officials -- practically all male. Except for a handful of international students, everybody was wearing a suit, which is the unwritten dress code. Everybody was busy trying to set the translating device. I also struggled with it, then gave up. Then the professor came.

By this time, very delicately, leaning heads onto their chests, half of the audience had fallen asleep. So it was for the other half the Harvard professor delivered his talk. I had already taken a look at the paper. It claimed to introduce some new approaches to contemporary peace studies. That is, as he saw it, current peace studies tended to define peace negatively, as the absence of violence and terrorism. So peace concepts had been associated with concepts of violence and so on. What he wanted to promote, on the contrary, and which he had been promoting everywhere, was to conceptualize peace in a positive manner -- prioritizing international cooperation as the first step. I am enrolled in IDEC -- Institute of Development and Cooperation, and around me IDEC students were eagerly waiting to take notes. Then, the professor, in his prelude to the talk, mentioned that it was a very significant tour for him since Japan had been seriously involved in the campaign against 'weapons of mass destruction.' So this was the case! The invasion of Iraq was simply a part of the campaign against WMDs! And this Orwellian statement was being made by someone who was proposing a 'new' approach in peace studies! Now I knew the intent of his speeches around the world. And the professor, supportive of the Bush-led war couched in terms of banishing nuclear weapons, is considered as one of the leading advocates of UN peace initiatives. Not surprisingly, he was a non-white American. With each passing day I am amazed by the loyalty of these 'minority' figures to the Bush regime. It is now understandable why Colin Powell, even with all his attempts to justify the aggression, was considered not loyal enough. The present US regime sets the standard of loyalty, specifically for non-white Americans, firmly. And what could be a more appropriate place for such a demonstration than Hiroshima? I just couldn't stop thinking about it, a Harvard professor covering for the Bush war by justifying it as a campaign against WMDs! It kept haunting me. This is particularly crucial at Hiroshima University, where the Japanese government is spending a huge amount of money for overseas students, who come mostly from South-east Asia, China and Africa. The Harvard name has such authority that it superimposes on everything else. He could be quoted for the next few weeks in almost every department. That was where his power lay.

The experience was bitter. Two weeks later, when I was invited to another 'peace' lecture at the *Satake*, I searched for some excuse for not attending. It was not possible, though. Our professor was quite eager that we should be there: the event was for celebrating the 10th anniversary of IDEC. Faced with this prospect, I tried to think of some positive aspects of the anniversary. The peace-related speech was to be given by the director of UNITAR-Hiroshima [United Nations Institute for Training and Research]. An Iranian woman. I also came to know that cultural programs would also be performed by the international students. This sounded better, I thought; an opportunity to meet students from different countries. Graduate students here hardly ever venture out of their offices, or 'laboratories' as they are called here. Cultural performances along with a speech from a UN official from the South? It got me a little more enthusiastic.

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BookReview

# A tale twice told: Wayne Ashton's *Under a Tin-Grey Sari*

SYED MANZOORUL ISLAM


The title of Wayne Ashton's (an Australian with 'British and Pakistani family origins' according to the author bio) book is suggestive, inviting comparisons with the salacious song '*Choli ke niche keya hai*,' but alas! the sari in question is the heavy, grey monsoon sky that hangs over Chittagong before emptying itself on the denizens below. The denizens are a mix of the elite and the subaltern; but the elite seem strangely disempowered, while the subaltern surrealistically empowered--to the extent that they guzzle foreign beer like water. The novel's two main characters, Khalid and Zeythi, are the cook and ayah respectively of a rich household whose men are rarely seen and heard. Khalid and Zeythi, between themselves, have pretty much the whole run of the house. While Khalid controls the kitchen where sometimes he chops vegetables between sips of beer, Zeythi controls Khalid's imagination and that of the eight-year-old Minisahib, the precocious grandchild of the master of the house. Yet Khalid is only 19 and Zeythi 16. Ashton must have a world of sympathy for the (very) young and the restless--for he allows even the Minisahib to have regular sexual gratification from his many encounters with Zeythi. She for her part arrives at the household with more than a job seeker's intent--she also wants to pry into the sex lives of the employers. Once she creeps up to a window 'to watch a sahib and memsahib making love. To confirm the rumour that these sahib types moaned differently' (15). In case one wonders if it is the same Chittagong where at least a dozen pairs of eyes should be registering every move a woman and a man--or a boy--make, even in a remote part of a household, Ashton nods reassuringly. It is Chittagong indeed, but circa 1967, a colonial time in Ashton's reckoning, when hand-pulled punkahs were as common as people with names like Mookerjee or Aranthi, and when rich households drank enormous amounts of lychee juice while an Englishman controlled the elite club of Chittagong with the unquestionable authority of a *chota lat*. And yes, the house--'ten-ten Zakir Hussein Road'--had a forest edging its backyard, so that Zeythi's frolics with the little master were screened by dense vegetation. The club's swimming pool, at night, was a second site of Zeythi's frolics, yet not even the night guard notices anything amiss. Lucky girl!

But to be fair to Ashton: *Under a Tin-Grey Sari* is not a historical or realistic novel which has to pass the test of verisimilitude. If anything, the novel is a postmodern tour de force in which no formal schema holds sway, where time appears as fluid as the thought processes of the protagonists and the margins between reality and unreality, action and contemplation, disappear. The key word here is *indeterminacy*. So what if the plane from Chittagong to Dhaka flies over the Sundarbans, or the president of the club arriving from London to Chittagong via Dhaka has his luggage custom-checked!

These are small matters indeed, especially if one considers the breathtaking sweep of the novel that ranges an esoteric mix of people with their plans and perspectives against a grim landscape that offers no respite. Then there are the narrative voices and narrative frames that create their own layered texture. Indeed, as one reads on, the novel appears to be less about verisimilitude or purpose or design than about an infinite play of imagination where the disjunctive nature of experience creates its own discursive patterns. As the sudden appearance and disappearance of The Shadow--the mystery of which is never explained--suggest, *Under a Tin-Grey Sari* is basically about the imponderables in our life--the happenings and presences that one doesn't always see or feel, and can hardly predict but which silently and relentlessly hold on to their place, upsetting even our best laid plans.

Thus, no one would probably raise any question about the *authenticity* of the sometimes improbable and bizarre experiences of the young crowd--including the Minisahib--because the characters, in the end, appear to be part of a pageant that simply keeps happening without forcing a conclusion. The fact that the setting is Chittagong--which is consistently rated by the narrator above Dhaka or Calcutta--lends an enchantment to the view, but one realizes that the limited space the city provides only makes the action that takes place in it all the more intense, and at times, anarchic. Chittagong is both esoteric *and* specific; these qualities do not cancel each other out: if anything, they reinforce each other.

The story of *Under a Tin-Grey Sari* is not out of the ordinary, although some of its twists and turns are. Zeythi arrives from the hills (she is a Chakma) in a household where the old master with (west) Pakistani connections lives with his British-born wife and their children, and the young grandchild, and where Khalid the cook looks after the kitchen and dreams of Dhaka and a new and improved tandoori oven which will bring him luck. Khalid has friends, Iqbal the letter writer and Mohendra the chickenwalla, among others, while Zeythi pretty much keeps to herself and the Minisahib. Chittagong has a Anglo-Bengali and English crowd with expat Australians thrown in who find the club a good place to meet and drink and while away the evenings. There is a (west) Pakistani crowd and a Bengali-speaking crowd as well, yet surprisingly, the focus is squarely on the bunch of bearers in the club (the chief bearer Akram and the spitting bearer Mahfouz being the two more prominent ones). There are temptations for Khalid in the shape of women he meets at the Polytechnic (yes, he is quite a literate fellow) but he is firmly given to Zeythi, who meanwhile is attempting to come to turns with the vacuum left behind by the death of both parents. Khalid does invent the tandoor, but the president (referred to as 'President-bastard') steals the design, leaving Khalid distraught. After disillusionment in Dhaka, he falls sick and dies. He is buried at the Zakir Hossein Road graveyard with a headstone announcing that he was 'A wise friend educated in the simple and the difficult things in life.'

The novel's story ends there, but it indeed begins from there too, as the dead Khalid *is* the narrator of the story. And as if a dead narrator is not enough to unravel the story's many mysteries and puzzles, Ashton presses into service Khan the Sabjantawallah as a super omniscient commentator, whose musings--as reported by Khalid--add to the novel's postmodernist narrative frame. The short (sometimes one and a half page) chapters, with elaborate titles, do a similar job. All told, *Under a Tin-Grey Sari* is a bravura tale told with gusto, and with a lot of empathy. It is a story that, despite its sometimes long-winded passages, amply rewards a close involvement by the reader with all its characters.

Wayne Ashton will have won over many a reader with this novel, except perhaps the die-hard Jatiyatabadi sort, for he mentions the unthinkable fact that it was Sheikh Mujibur Rahman whose voice first proclaimed the independence of Bangladesh, and that Ziaur Rahman's proclamation came a good two days later, on 28 March, 1971.

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