

SHORT STORY

Borrowed Sunshine

MEHRUNNISA PARVEZ
(translated from Hindi by S. Mahnowar)

As he struggled to get down from the rickshaw, his wife and his daughter Zakia rushed forward to lend him a helping hand. But he gently brushed them aside. Help? Why, he could certainly manage without them. Besides, what help could he expect from these mean, selfish people? He was yet to get over his anger.

'How are you?' his wife asked him.

'I'm all right.' He abruptly turned his gaze towards the garbage heap across the drain where a hen surrounded by her newly-hatched chicks was pecking at the garbage. The chicks' tender claws had got soiled with garbage. Their struggle for existence seemed to be grimmer than man's bid to hold on to life. No sooner had they emerged from their shells than they ran about, blindly pecking at everything in a desperate search for food.

'Abba, here's some tea for you.' He looked at his daughter Zakia in surprise. She had not even given him time to settle down in the chair. She had indeed grown a lot in one year. How true! Once girls started growing there was no stopping them. They grew like the garbage heap.

He took the cup from his daughter and slowly started sipping the tea. His left palm, as it rested against his chest, looked slightly twisted. His leg was still troubling him. But thanks to the *hakim* at Jabalpur, now he could at least hobble forward, dragging his leg behind him.

Last winter when his leg was paralysed he lay in the government hospital for many days but the treatment did him absolutely no good. He had thought it below his dignity to stay in a government hospital indefinitely and submit himself to free treatment. No self-respecting person would demean himself in that manner. So he returned home and lay in bed, stoically marking time.

His wife and sons were getting impatient. After a man retires from service he ceases to count in the house. He is cold-shouldered all the time and made to feel that he is living on others' crumbs. Feeling utterly out of place in his own house, he at last went away to Jabalpur to spend some time with his sister.

He was gone for full one year and during this long period he didn't hear even once from his family. It was as if he no longer existed. The only link he had with them was a monthly sum of twenty-five rupees, which they remitted him out of his pension, for his treatment. His sons' callousness did not gail on him so much as his wife's indifference. All women are like that, he would say resigning himself to his fate. It runs in their blood. A man may pamper and coddle his wife all her life and yet in his old age she turns her face against him.

'Arre, Dada!' his neighbour Behari stood there gaping at him in surprise. 'When did you come? Are you all right? You look so run down.'

'Come, sit down,' he said, making room for Behari on his string cot. 'Old age, you know. In old age the body only diminishes. In youth it's addition and multiplication and in old age it's subtraction and division. Such is the arithmetic of life. But Behari, let's talk about you. How's your buffalo? And your daughter--has she gone to her in-laws?'

'My buffalo will calf in late winter. It'll help me to pay off a part of my debt. I've still to send my daughter to her in-laws. She's now quite grown up. But traveling these days requires a bagful of money. Calcutta is not next door to us. It's a long haul.'

'That's what happens if one acts beyond one's means. Why did you marry your daughter so far away? Look, Behari, we're passing through bad times. Grown-up girls are a liability. One has to be careful. A girl is a girl. All are not like Lord Shankar to become all-seeing.'

'You're right, Dada. But why blame others? When the dice is loaded against you, you can't do a thing about it. Of course, you know my eldest daughter-in-law. The moment she stepped into the house she took possession of everything. In old age one develops a sweet tooth and hankers after nice eats. But who cares? Even when she gives me a cup of tea she makes me feel as if I'm cutting into her father's legacy. She misses no opportunity to tell me that it's her husband who breaks his back to earn money and keep the family going while we just laze

about and gorge ourselves with food.'

'Arre, Behari!' he laughed. 'You've lost heart so soon? Just wait. You'll get the real taste of things when you marry off your second son and he brings his wife to live in the house. Not to talk of a cup of tea, she won't even offer you a glass of water. When there are two daughters-in-law in the house one feels ditched right and proper. It's like two uneven wheels of a cart. A small jolt and the cart may snap in two in the middle. You must be prepared for the worst. A tree uprooted from another's land takes time to strike roots in your own.'

'You're right, Dada. Old age does not suddenly descend on you from the roof. It comes lingeringly, teasing you at every step.' Behari heaved a deep sigh and felt his pocket. 'Care to smoke a *biri*?' he asked.

'Yes, light one for me. My left hand is useless. If a man's hand becomes useless he's entitled to half a meal. Then I ate four *chapattis*. Now I eat only two. The house says, go. The earth says, come.'

'How you talk, Dada. It makes my heart weep.'

'My eldest son had gone to fetch me.' He took a long pull at the *biri*, keeping the smoke down for a long time. 'He must have thought that I had been away from home for more than a year and it was time that he looked me up. You know the adage--blood is thicker than water. How true! So he came to fetch me. "Abba" he said, "you can't stay that long with your sister. Let's go."'

'That's like a devoted son, indeed. It does one's heart good.'

'How's the crop this year?'

'Not bad, Dada.' Behari suddenly dropped his voice. 'The famine exists only in the newspapers. The other day the chief minister flew here in a plane. I'm told they have allotted a crore rupees for the relief of the famine-stricken people. Dada, can one really see a famine from a plane?'

'Behari, does it make any difference whether the famine is visible or not? Famine is just an excuse to line your pocket or mine.'

'Every day I wondered where all this money came from and in what rat-hole did it all disappear. Now I know.' Behari said, rising to his feet. 'I had come out in search of my buffalo and here I'm playing truant just to listen to your wise talk.'

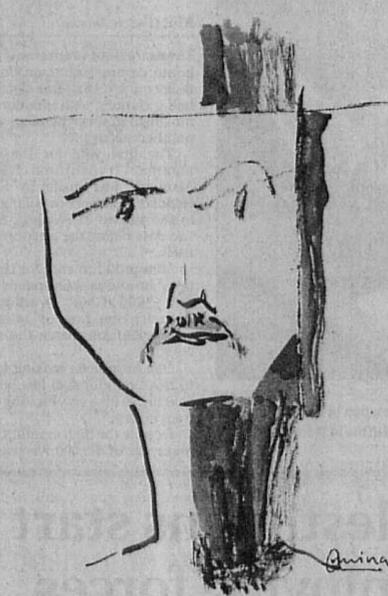
'Drop in again,' he said. 'I'll read the newspaper to you and tell you a lot of interesting things I learnt at Jabalpur.'

'Really! I'll be back soon.' Behari was already on the road. 'I'll give you time just enough to refresh your memory,' he looked back from the road.

'A simple man!' he mumbled as he watched Behari walking along the road. 'It's difficult to fill time in one's retirement. I wish I had more friends like him.'

He had returned after full one year and was enjoying it. One's own home, children and the land--they exuded a distinct pleasure of their own. He had a comfortable time at Jabalpur, lacking nothing and yet he seemed to miss something. At times he felt really lonely.

On the day his son came to fetch him he was away at the *hakim*. On



artwork by Gurina

his return he was pleased to see his son. 'Abba, I've come to fetch you,' his son said as he entered the house. And he had responded to the suggestion with alacrity. 'You can't go away like this,' his sister had objected. 'You're only half way through with your treatment.' But he did not agree to prolong his stay and started collecting his things. Can one under the water apart with a lathi blow?

He had seen the world. When he started life as a Patwari Bastar was not what it is today. It comprised twelve *tehsils*. One could buy twelve *paais* of rice for a rupee. And what rice! A *paali* too had not shrunk to the size it has today and it was of uniform size all over Jabalpur. One bought the rice at any of the shops but one had to come to one specific place to have it weighed. The man who weighed the rice was not paid any wages. The excess rice from each measure of weight was claimed by him as his remuneration. Hundreds of bags of rice were weighed each day. What times! Then they didn't have an assortment of weights and measures as they have today. Men were honest to a fault.

Then the British took over. But even in their times, dishonesty which became rampant later had still to take roots. One glance, and they knew the worth of a man. They put great premium on diligence and loyalty. The British administrators went out on tours on horse-back, their tents and other paraphernalia following them on bullock carts. They halted at any place they took a sudden fancy to and pitched their tents. They were not averse to the pleasures of the flesh. In no time a goat was slaughtered for the table and bottles of liquor uncorked. There was merry-making and dancing and there were girls for the Sahibs' pleasure. The Sahibs would go away thoroughly pleased.

We have now watered-down versions of the same Sahibs who are so stiff-necked that even if you prostrate yourself before them it does not tickle even a single hair of their moustache. They had lost their old ideas and were surrounded by flatterers and do-nothings who climbed the rungs of the official ladder through questionable means. It was because of his rectitude that he had kept marking time in the same place till he retired. It was a stigma whose ignominy he had felt with every breath of his life.

He sat ruminating over his past when his wife, holding a *paandan*, came to sit in the sun. 'Do you know Ramji's son passed away the other day,' she said, sitting down by his side. 'His wife is pregnant. She's in her fourth month.'

'Is Kaushik gone? Don't tell me that. He was such a fine young man. I had seen him growing right from his childhood. It must be that wretched habit of his that carried him away.'

'Yes, it had riddled his lungs. But he was his father's main prop. And what a funeral procession! *Bap re bap!* The street was filled to overflowing. Afterwards his mother had sent the customary rice, *daal* and salt, etc. to every home. These people make a token gesture to all who go to the cremation ground. They don't want to carry the debt into their next lives. And they have another queer custom. They bathe the bride and the bridegroom together at the time of marriage and

again at the time of death. They bathed Kala, Kaushik's wife, within sight of his dead body. Oh, how she wailed! Care to have a *paan*? 'Yes, give me one.' He looked at his wife. She had a big row with him the day he left for Jabalpur. Oh, how she used to go at him! But now he didn't discern any trace of bitterness in her. He was surprised at the change. Could a leopard change its spots?

His mind turned to Kaushik's death. These days even dying had become a costly affair. A man could afford to die only if he had the wherewithal for it. While alive one could go about in rags but one must have brand-new covering for the coffin and that cost money. If he could have his way he would like to time his death so as to have it in the beginning of the month when he had come by his monthly pension.

How long could he carry on like this? In the beginning he used to go out for a stroll with Behari. This was an old habit of his. Walking along the road skirting the hospital he would pass by the church, ending up at the railway station. He knew at what time of the year which flowers would grow in the church compound. This was one of his pet whimsies he indulged in privately. On the way he would enlighten Behari with his comments on the current political situation. But now he felt so weak and drained out that he felt no urge to engage Behari in discussion.

'Go and take your bath,' his wife said. 'I've filled the buckets and places them in the bathroom.'

He again looked at his wife in surprise. Such promptness was unknown to her. He had to remind her again before she cared to arrange for his bath. Maybe she had relented because of his long absence of one year.

When he came out of the bathroom he found his eldest son waiting for him.

'Abba, would you like to have your meal now or on your return?' he asked. 'It may take us quite some time to finish our job.'

'Are we going somewhere?' he asked in surprise.

'Yes. To draw your pension for this month.'

'My pension?' he looked at his son stupefied. 'Haven't you got it already?'

'Not yet. That's what we're going out for.'

They got into the rickshaw and went to the government office where they disbursed pensions. There were already a number of people sitting on a long bench in the verandah waiting for their turns. His son found a place for him on the bench and then went away to buy a *paan*.

Time and again, a little sparrow would fly into the verandah, and, sailing down, hop up to him and start twittering as if it was asking him where he had been all this time.

When his turn came, the Babu behind the counter carefully adjusted his glasses over the bridge of his nose, scrutinized his face, surveyed him from top to bottom and smiled.

'Dada, where have you been all this time?' he asked. 'We thought you had gone on a pilgrimage to the next world and your people were still fattening themselves on your pension. So I told your son the other day, "Son, no one would mind picking up a dishonest rupee here and there, if one can. You'll do it, so will I. We all do it. But there are ways and ways of doing things. It should not amount to open brigandage. This time before I pass on the pension to you I must have a good look at your father. Good that you've come. We were getting suspicious and were on the point of stopping your pension.'

The Babu's remarks gave him a jolt and his happiness suddenly crumbled into dust. So he was no better than a non-entity, a useless appendage for the family. It was his pension they were interested in.

'Here, have a *paan*.' His son held out a *paan* wrapped up in tinsel.

He put the *paan* in his mouth, crumpled the tinsel and got lost in deep thought.

Mehrunnisa Parvez has written four novels and five collections of short stories in Hindi. S. Mahnowar is an occasional translator from Hindi and Urdu.

Book Review

The Strawberry Patch

RUBAIYAT KHAN
Penguin Books, India; New Delhi; 224 pp; 2004.

Nonda Chatterjee's *The Strawberry Patch*, consists of a collection of stories depicting the lives of eight different women, set in separate periods in time. What is perhaps most appealing about these short stories is a portrayal of women as not simply two-dimensional feminist crusaders striving against male oppression, but rather, as women with real human stories to tell and the struggles that characterize them. The short, seemingly scattered tales are woven together by a common theme of stoicism and survival.

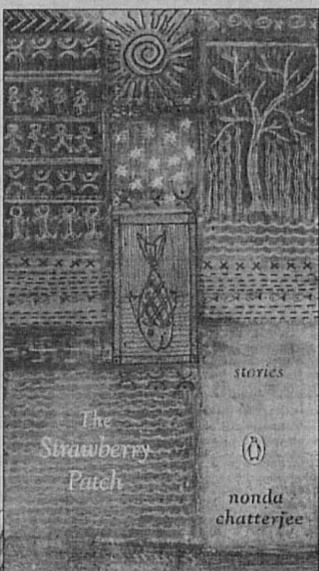
Against a backdrop of political and sometimes religious disarray, shrouded by an almost sinister play of Fate, one is struck by how Chatterjee's women assert themselves in ways that are unique, awe-inspiring, and even shockingly unorthodox. There is an endless struggle between liberalism and education, and traditional cultural values. The women are initially trapped within societal boundaries, yet somehow find ways to fight, and inevitably transcend, the oppression.

Dulari--in the fourth story entitled 'The Trial'--uses her female sexuality as her greatest weapon. At first it might appear as though she succumbs to the stereotypical notion of a woman as a seductress, but one realizes soon enough that she does so in order to gain a larger freedom. And so, what was/is considered a weakness (femininity), is ultimately transformed into strength. Heeriyaa in 'Motherhood' is perhaps the lone protagonist who chooses to destroy herself. It would seem that she does not have the vision and clarity to look past the product of sin, the child that had formed in her womb as the result

Nonda Chatterjee, author of 'The Strawberry Patch'. Mrs. Chatterjee was born in Allahabad, India, in May 1933. An eminent educationist, she taught in the Calcutta International School for well over 20 years and retired after serving as Principal of that school for several years. She is now Consultant to The Cambridge School, Kolkata. Her passions include gardening, cooking and music.



of the man that violated her. However, murdering her own child, then drowning herself is possibly a twisted assertion in itself, a way of revolting against the injustice dealt out to her. Rama in 'The Quilt'--spirited, highly intelligent with "an insatiable appetite for knowledge"--has been dealt a similar Fate as Heeriyaa. She is raped into submission; her regression is acutely painful and the quilt she weaves serves as her only mouthpiece which recounts the horrific events of her life. Rama succumbs to social pressure, and the quilt continues to be a visual landscape of her disturbed mind, where nothing thrives and everything wilts. But, Rama finally meets Parvathi and Renu; the three women form an unbreakable bond of sisterhood that nurtures her, and ultimately restores her strength. Some feminist dictums and



boundaries are disregarded within these short stories, while other traditions of feminist writers are followed. An instance of the former would be the aesthetic appeal of most of Chatterjee's women. Boruna is a woman of immaculate beauty, while Chandni Debi is a handsome woman, and the epitome of a majestic "Ranima". These women do not in any way lack in intelligence, moral conviction or wisdom (unlike Bronte for instance, who has divided beauty and brains in *Jane Eyre*, and where her protagonist, Jane, is quite plain faced). Chatterjee has no qualms in combining the two 'qualities', so to speak, in her female characters. However, in certain cases, it seems as though some such characters are too flawlessly picture-perfect to be believable ones.

The landscape plays an integral part in *The Strawberry*

Patch--it either serves as a prelude to an event about to occur, or as an extension of the minds of the female protagonists. The language is infused with symbolism--the strawberry patch itself (sensual, the "pride of [the] Eden"), the banyan tree (a recurrent motif, depicting strength and fertility), the flaming gulmohur (a symbol of transformation and regeneration), all embody the spirit of womanhood.

As the stories progress, the writer tends to grow more and more didactic, with her messages of love and peace. The visual, symbolic union of man and woman in 'The Quilt' is too 'in-your-face', and Chatterjee becomes lazy with regards to subtleties, especially in the last story, 'Birthmark'--where the mad woman under the Bauhinia tree drinks her own urine, declaring that "all is one"--and with statements such as "religion is not the dividing factor; greed and avarice are". The writer's political commentaries are perhaps the only drawbacks to her story-telling, and the prose overall is rich without being wordy.

Chatterjee's world portrays women as healers, nurturers, caregivers and ultimately creators in their own right. Life is alluded to as a notoriously fragile cup, which, intermingled with Fate, determines the course of these women's lives. And yet, it is their resilience and ability to survive both natural and man-made forces that Chatterjee applauds within these short chronicles. Finally, it is the bewitching ambiguity of prose and the realistic portrayal of women as multi-dimensional characters that lends *The Strawberry Patch* its charm and poignancy.

Rubaiyat Khan is on the editorial staff of The Daily Star.

Tele-Com

NABANEETA DEV SEN
(translated by Khademul Islam)

Those cloud-headed girls of Joy's
I saw one the other day
at our bus-stop
unchanged from the old days
bag on shoulder, hair in twin braids
wearing a school uniform
sweat on nose, forelock flattened on brow--

There she'd be around the phone
the girl who furtively, secretly stalked it--
waiting for when it'd be free from Uncle's guard!
In the morning when he stepped out for his walk--
as if by magic the boy too
would call right then
Barely would Uncle get past the *paan*-shop--
when the phone would ring
and be snatched up at once
--"Who was it just now?"
--"Wrong number, Mother" ...

The night deathly still
after everybody had gone to bed
twelve-fifty by the clock
tip-toeing into the room
the girl would call him
since he too was awake and studying--
and no sooner would it ring back
she would leap to pick it up
at fifty past twelve
then a hunch-backed disheveled cooing
seconds would drift by timelessly
counting out the heart's love sounds
beads of sweat garlanding her entire body

Unchanged that very girl--
that bag, those braids, that skirt-blouse
talking with phone in ear, mind elsewhere--
in the blazing noon at Rashbehari's corner
with Uncle and Auntie walking on
that girl, with untroubled eyes, on her own time
on her very own phone
talks about things utterly her own--
the crowded bus-stop
an unruly forelock flying on her brow
sweat on nose, eyes and hair
ring-a-ding-ding
unchanged, everything the same
as before, only...

Girl, don't you know
your cell-phone
has snatched away the cloud over your hair.



artwork by th. lisa

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