

SHORT STORY

Shuvro, On A Distant River-Bank

SHAMSUL KABIR (translated by A. Ahsanuzzaman and M. Md. Kabir)

Sitting and waiting by the bank of the river for the ferry-boat, Shuvro recalled the day when they had first arrived at this village. That day the water had been knee-deep, and with him had been his parents and little sister. Today there was no one with him. Even the river had swollen. Even a few days back he could have swum across the river. Now he was afraid. Shuvro was dead tired from the fever brought on by terrible memories.

That day the village had been silent. The sun had set a little while back. A pale moon was barely visible in the sky. A few dogs, barking, had greeted the Shuvros. The biggest jotedar of the village made them welcome. The jotedar was a kind person. A calm smile on his face; a long, pressed beard, a light intelligence glittering in the harmless eyes. He wore a sleeveless punjabi and a lungi! A betel-leaf always in his mouth, spitting out its juice at every other moment. He gave them a room to stay in his house. The first few days, at every opportunity, the jotedar would tell Shuvro's father, how fortunate, how lucky I am, a man like you in my house! What good fortune! The first three days the jotedar had felt himself to be a changed man: His heartbeat quickened, his beard seemed to get whiter, his voice became sweet as a muezzin's, his usual temper melted like ice in deference and respect. There was hardly anybody else in the house, just the jotedar and his wife. Sons and daughters--none of them were home. A maid-servant and a handyman. During the day hens and pigeons kept the house noisy. At night, beneath the ruminating breathing and lowing of cows was the bleating of the goats, a foul-smelling suffocation. The Shuvros could not sleep well for the first few days.

Even during daytime, they did not step out of the house. Everybody stayed inside, and Shuvro was not allowed to go out.

On the fourth night, all of them slept well. A deep sleep, which was broken at midnight. By fierce shrieks of no no, yes yes. They did not know from whose throat such screams had come. In their sleep they all had felt as if someone was holding a sharp sword against their throats. They had lain side by side in bed, Shuvro at one end. With a sword pressed against his throat. And filling the whole room was a terrifying, gigantic, red half beast-half man who stood holding a sword pressed on his throat. The beast-man used to come clanking every night and interrupt their sleep. They would huddle, fearful and trembling, in the middle of the bed, doors closed, windows shut, feeling suffocated.

From the seventh night on the nightmare went away.

Awaking up one morning, Shuvro saw an egg-yolk yellowish light all around. Beneath the window was the shadow of the *babla* tree. He was alone on the bed, in the house, suspended amid that sweet sunlight. There was nobody else there. Parents, little sister--nobody. A stark desolation. He wanted to cry out aloud. His breast inflated with deep sighs. He sobbed. A lot. For a long while. Trembling and shivering, he cried himself to sleep again.

Wake up, brother. Brother. Sleep left him with a thud. His little sister stood under the shadow of the *babla* tree holding a goat by the ear.

It was hard to tell the real age of the handyman. After initially saying forty-two, he later changed his mind and said sixty-two. He was stooped, with a full beard, shaved moustache, sunken cheeks, reddish flecks in clouded eyes. Forever puffing away on a *biri*. While puffing and looking with pallid, frowning



artwork by th lisa

eyes, his attitude would become menacing.

Why do you smoke? Why do you bite pencils?

The charge was false. Shuvro did not bite pencils, had never done it; he used to write with a pen called Wing Sung. Though now it was true, however, that he practised smoking a *biri* by lighting and pretending to puff on a jute-stalk.

At the back of the house was the jungle. A few small ditches. *Ateswari, bhutraj, bet, koro, jungalee, shilraj, para, chhatim, hijol, shimoul* bushes crowded the place--an assembly of various disorderly trees. To Shuvro, it was forest, a wild forest. Clearing a path through the bushes with a stick, Shuvro roamed about it with the handyman. Wandering through it they stopped under the only tamarind tree. It was like an emperor of the forest. Under the shade of the thick leaves of the tamarind tree, it was always dark and eerie. Nobody knew how old

the tree was. In that shadowy darkness an abandoned wide-open grave stared up hungrily at the leaves, and then towards Shuvro's eyes. With a sudden panic, he wanted to grab hold of the handyman.

Even before being asked, he had informed Shuvro that the jotedar's *pir saheb* had come to the village before the disturbances. He had prophesied that the jotedar would die of snakebite on the coming 11th. The only way to avoid it was to undergo ritual purification, wear a shroud and lie down in the grave to battle the angel Gabriel. If the jotedar won the battle then he would live for a hundred more years. After which the *pir* had left with a heavy heart.

The grave was dug. Bricks and cement were bought. The mason was called. After bequeathing as *waqf* twenty-three *bighas* of land surrounding the tamarind tree, the jotedar also gave some secretly hoarded gold coins and said,

build a mosque in the name of *Sokha Baba*.

The appointed day rolled towards evening. After flooding everybody with tears, having tasted all the good and bad of the world, reciting the Holy Quran and blessing himself by blowing his breath on himself thrice, the jotedar climbed down into the grave and lay down.

The handyman cried in sorrow at the passing away of such a good man. His wife sobbed that one who had been but a youth yesterday was today no more. His eldest son wanted to cry but could not--it struck him that he would have to leave behind the big city and its politics and live in the village.

The night passed; first the first quarter, then the second quarter. Tamarind leaves fell. The jackal, the weasel, the squirrel, the rabbit ran to and fro. Insects flew and crickets chirped. The nut-cracking clapping of ghouls. Their bursts of laughter. Here is Gabriel now, here he comes.

Gusts of wind exploded with rage. Bolts of lightning amid the shaking and swaying and hurtling of leaves and branches and bushes. The to-and-fro and restless swish of dark bodiless ghosts and the sound of the approaching Gabriel. The jotedar sat up in the grave--his heart beating wildly, his breathing about stop: Where was Gabriel? With the comet falling from rainless skies lighting up the world and wild jungles below his stomach relieved itself of its contents and when he stood up in the grave in order to give chase to Gabriel's shadow he was flung about tumbling in all directions his body in pieces until he landed in the front courtyard of his home.

But thereafter the grave had not been closed.

The soldiers arrived. There was no time to escape. Shuvro's father was a fugitive officer of the town. He had not shaved his beard for fifteen days. On seeing the distant shadow and hearing the sound of the jeep, he quickly completed his shave, and after putting on his trousers and shirt that he had hauled out hastily from his trunk, stood to attention. He combed his hair.

There were seven or eight soldiers. Beside the house stood the mosque decorated with three domes. Its body painted blue and red. Some chairs were brought inside the mosque to sit on. The captain and Shuvro's father stepped inside to sit. The jotedar introduced them to each other and then made himself scarce. Four soldiers stood at the four corners of the mosque. Two more searched the place, poking and peering here and there.

Shuvro wandered about. The captain called him over. Asked what was his name. Patted his head. He tried to understand the conversation between his father and the captain. Listened carefully. But it remained unintelligible to him.

One of the soldiers conducting the search offered him two chocolates. What did the

soldiers want? So far their behaviour had been rather aimless. They seemed to be mute. Their eyes were big and round like their bodies--bull-like.

In the bushes behind the house the handyman was cutting and shaping a branch with a dao. A handle for a spade or axe. Shuvro silently stood watching him. He dispelled Shuvro's fear, murmured don't be afraid, my boy. His (the jotedar's) sons are with the military, and also with the Muktis. Don't you be afraid. That son of a jotedar will see it.

Chickens wandered in and out of the house. A goatish smell spread from where the large he-goat tied to a post. Not a single soul in the yard. Several pairs of pigeons were cooing in rhymes. A tamed mongoose was chasing a hen. The hen was fleeing, cackling loudly. Even if the mongoose caught her, he would not eat her.

The house of the jotedar's wife was locked shut. He himself had not been seen for some time now. Where had he gone? Where? Shuvro looked inside the room where his family slept. His infant sister was forcefully attempting to drink her mother's milk, while she scolded her. Shuvro didn't enter the room.

Shuvro again walked towards the jungle. The bleating of the goats could be heard. It sounded as if it was coming from the direction of the tamarind tree. Had a jackal caught it? Shuvro proceeded quickly towards the sound. In a little while he could see a goat and the jotedar. The jotedar was chasing the goat. Once, with a big leap, he almost caught the rope trailing from the goat. But as the goat too jumped and got away he reached out and steadied himself from falling down on the ground, then began to run again. It ran around in circles. This time the goat ran by Shuvro, brushing his body. And even though he touched it, because of the goat's sheer speed he could not firmly grab hold of it.

Just as he was about to set off in pursuit of the goat, the jotedar fell on him. He noticed that the jotedar's lungi had slipped down. And then the jotedar fell back flat on his back. Swear words flowed freely from his mouth. For the first time, he addressed Shuvro roughly:

"Who told you to come here?"

And even attempted to beat Shuvro with a branch broken from the *bhutraj* tree. Shuvro, humiliated and with tears bursting inside him, ran towards the house.

Then he saw the jeep climbing onto the road. A cry floated up into the air mingled with the sound of the jeep. At first he thought of running after the jeep but then changed his mind and searched for the door to the house. He circled the house repeatedly but could not find the door. Sweating, he saw only darkness in front of his eyes, his eyes throbbing. The sound of the jeep was lost in the distance.

The yard was flooded with blood. The rope-torn goat, its bleating forgotten, was staring around with mute eyes. Shuvro fainted.

Now Shuvro was sitting by the riverbank waiting for the ferry. A man surrounded by a pack of dogs was coming towards him. He wore a shirt and trousers, a tie around his neck, bare-footed, hair disheveled, his face stubbled--all plastered with oil and dirt. With maddened eyes, talking to himself all the while, the man walked holding a piece of bread in his hands from which he tore off chunks and threw to the dogs. None of the pieces of bread reached the ground. He came near Shuvro and stopped.

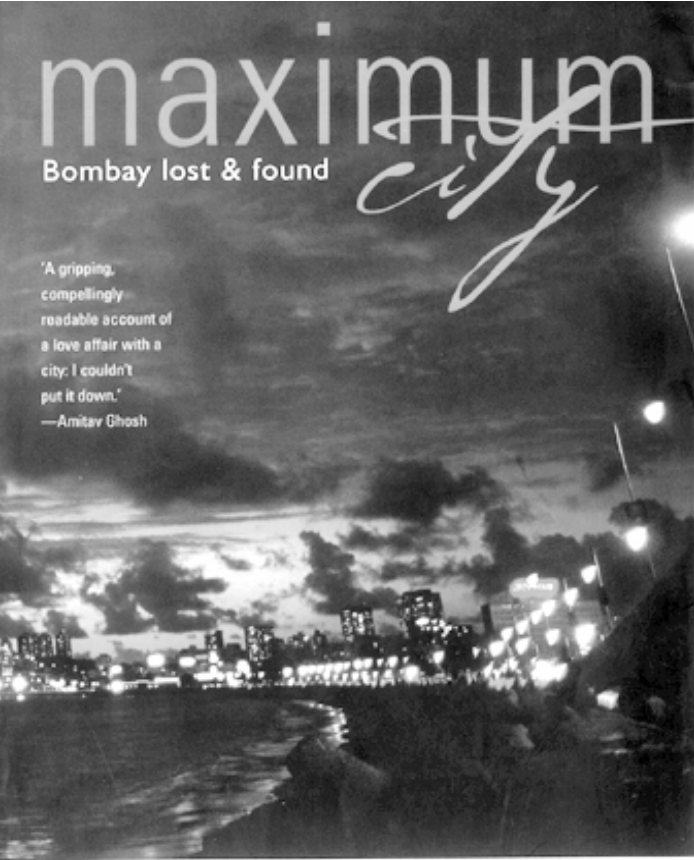
Shamsul Kabir is a Bangladeshi short story writer. The above story is a translation of his Bangla story "*Shuvro, Nadir Sudur Paare*". Ahmed Ahsanuzzaman and M Md Kabir are teacher and student respectively of English at Khulna University.

BookReview

REVIEW

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Bombay Lost/Regained/Left Behind



FAKRUL ALAM

Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found. New Delhi: Viking Penguin, 2004, 584 pages.

Like the city that it focuses on, Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* is a big, sprawling book. The result of a two-and-a-half year stay by someone who had once grown up in the city and who is now a journalist and fiction writer based in New York--an even more gargantuan metropolis--the book is an intense, sustained look at a unique city. Reading it, one becomes aware that the city is humongous and contains multitudes. No two people will see it the same way though anyone who has visited the city even once will see more vividly how unique it really is through Mehta's book.

I myself have been to the city twice. The first time I saw it as a tourist who had stayed a couple of days in it while on a trip to view Ajanta and Ellora. I remember coming to the city close to midnight, unsure of where to stay, but finding a helpful taxi driver who managed to take my wife and me to a conveniently located hotel. Of the visit, I remember most a ride on a speedboat across the city's harbor and the visit to Gandhi's Museum where mementos of his extraordinary career are kept in exemplary manner. I remember, too, the generally helpful people I met throughout my stay. The second occasion I was in the city was for an academic conference. On this occasion, too, I came to the city around midnight but from the airport. This time also the taxi driver, who drove me for over an hour through mostly deserted streets, charged me the exact fare and surprised me with his helpfulness (ever experienced haggling with a taxi driver in Dhaka's airport?). On this occasion I stayed first in a YWCA lodging close to the city centre, and then with a gracious academic couple in the outskirts of the city. This trip I got the chance to meet at least a few middle-class Bombay citizens who appeared to me no different from us in their friendliness and liveness.

The Bombay I saw is not certainly Mehta's Bombay. He had spent his

childhood in the city, left it as an adolescent who grew up in the United States and who came back to it twenty-one years later. Like Salman Rushdie, he is addicted to the city of his teens; hence his refusal to call it by the name given to it by the Shiv Sena--Mumbai. But he is also bent on coming to term with the megapolis as it now is. Roaming the length and breadth of the city, interviewing its rich and poor, noting down details of his conversations with the city's children, police, politicians, stars, prostitutes, gangsters, as well as "ordinary" people, he attempts to give his readers a massive testimony not only of his love of Bombay but also of his anguish at the way it is hemorrhaging.

Why does Mehta title his book *Maximum City*? Consider some of the statistics that he offers. It is a city of 14 million people living in what is essentially one island. Some parts of the city "have a population density of one million people per square mile". "Two-third of the city's residents are crowded into just 5 per cent of the total area." The city pays 38 per cent of India's taxes. 8 million of its citizens are homeless and yet because of the Rent Act and Urban Ceiling Act there are 400,000 empty residences in it. 500 new people come to live in the city every day. By 2015 it is projected to have twenty-three million inhabitants! It is the financial capital of India and impacts on the rest of the country in innumerable ways

Mehta is able to show us a city full of riveting individuals as well as one of swarming multitudes, crammed quarters, and metropolitan nightmares. At the heart of *Maximum City*, thus, we have some vivid portraits of its citizens. Some of them are the type that fills one with fear and loathing but some also attract because of their contradictions, vulnerability and resilience.

Among the repelling characters we come across in Mehta's book is Sunil. He is a Shiv Sena zealot who boasts about killing Muslims in the 1993 riots that transformed the city forever from a place of communal harmony to one of perpetual suspicion. And yet Sunil has no qualms about going to a Muslim holy man for water from a *dargah* that he believes cures the sick or about doing business with Muslims (Mehta's aside: "Bombayites understand that business comes first"). To Mehta, Sunil's rise to power is a symbol of the way the city has suffered because of the ascendancy of Maharashtra thugs and the decline of the cosmopolitan sensibility. Much more reprehensible than Sunil is Bal Thackeray, the thug supreme who launched a movement through which the Maharashtrans--the "Sons of the Soil"--wrested power from the Gujratis, seemingly derisively (Mehta's quip: "Actually, the soil in Bombay, much of it between the original seven islands, was filled in by the British"). Thackeray comes across as xenophobic, brutal, and shrewd--the ultimate small-minded fascist. Particularly chilling for the Bangladeshi reader is his panacea for Bombay's problems: "Migration has to be controlled. The Bangladesh Muslims to be driven out, not only from Mumbai but outside the country, back to Bangladesh." On the Muslim side is the goon Mohsin, who has killed "seven and a half" people and is a member of D-Company (D for the notorious gang boss Dawood Ibrahim) and who exults in his prowess in the "head shot." Then there is the Sikh hit man, Mickey (the names are, of course, Mehta's; Thackeray's is real!), full of bluster and spouting quotable quotes such as the following: "We are anti-alchemists. What ever we touch turns to iron." "Now there is only one business left: the bullet business."

The task of containing these gangsters for a long time lay with the police officer called Ajay Lal. He is more than a match for the thugs and the goons that infest Bombay, although successful police officers of the sub-continent like him sooner or later get transferred from their jobs, as he does in the course of Mehta's narrative--victims of their own success. Lal points out why gangs prosper in Bombay: they are destined to thrive in a country where the "criminal justice system has totally collapsed."

If Mehta is bent on exposing the violent nature of Bombay in his book, he is also intent on highlighting its seamy side. To Mehta, it is a "city in heat," "humid with sex." He takes us to Bombay bars because they are the "intersection of everything that makes the city fascinating: money, sex, love, death and show business." He features two bar dancers, the beautiful, desirable Mona Lisa and the tantalizing Honey (not real names, of course). According to the fashion photographer Rustom, Mona Lisa typifies the women of the tinsel town that is Bombay: "moon-faced, filmi-looking, non-threatening." But when Mehta looks at her up close she appears to be vulnerable, anguished; one of "a city-wide sorority" of women who have "slit their wrists and survived," said

inhabitants of a "shadow world" who lead precarious lives. Even more amazing than her tale is that of Honey, the "Tendulkar of the dance bars," someone who is "not a transvestite, or a homosexual, or a cross-dresser, but a man who dresses as a woman out of economic necessity" and who goes through a silicone transplant operation to have breasts but is delirious with happiness the day he finds out that he is going to be a father.

No book on Bombay would be complete without a longish chapter on Bollywood and in this respect, as in other ways, *Maximum City*, does not disappoint. In a long chapter, titled, "Distilleries of Pleasure" Mehta highlights the Bombay film industry. True to his technique of getting really involved in his subject to make it authentic and enthralling, he decides to become part of a film unit in writing about the world (the dust jacket of the book credits him with being the co-writer of *Mission Kashmir*). He respects it as a formidable force in the region ("Who is a South Asian? Someone who watches Hindi movies"). As in the other chapters he has an eye for the telling statistics ("worldwide, a billion more people a year buy tickets to Indian movies than to Hollywood ones"). As in the other sections he fills this one with compelling characters such as the director of *Mission Kashmir*, Vidhu Vinod Chopra, who would like to be Vinod the "committed film maker" and barely avoids being "Vinod the Bollywood hack." Star directors like Mahesh Bhatt and megastars like Amitabh Bachan make cameo appearances in the book. We get to read of Sanjay Dutt's traumatic experience of a life lived in prison in between his acting stints and stardom. But we also get to see the stragglers and the makers of the B films as well as the super hits. As ever, one notes Mehta's ear for the pungent observation ("The Hindi film industry has always had the secularism of a brothel. All are welcome as long as they carry or make money"), or verbatim in Indian English ("What do you think to play with the chastity belt? Is it the culture of any country?") or his eye for the paradoxical (Sanjay and Hrithik Roshan, the two heroes of *Mission Kashmir*, both "under the shadow of the underworld"; Sanjay "for his connections to them" and Hrithik whose father is shot at because of his instant success!)

All these stories are framed by chapters describing Mehta's own return to Bombay from New York to write this book and his eventual departure. Why did he return? "I went back to look for that city with a simple question: can you go home again? In the looking, I found the cities within me." In America he had always felt the loss of the city and carried his memories of it everywhere. But the city was the fixed point of the compass for his family and he kept returning to it for visits and for his marriage. Then in 1996 he spent 60 days in Bombay to write about the Hindu-Muslim riots and decided that he would write a book about it to rediscover the city he had stored away inside him. What he finds out subsequently is that it was "a maximum city", "the biggest, fastest, richest city in India" and the trendiest, but also the most crowded, violent, seamiest, and trickiest to negotiate and among the most polluted and frenetic places in the world. It is no surprise, therefore, that the book concludes with Mehta leaving the city behind and moving on with his life. He is not totally pessimistic about its future and decides that while it maybe a "killing city" it is not "a dying city". In fact he ends the book by telling us about a vision he has in it when one morning in the middle of a crowd he feels that it has "elaborated" into him, even as he had become part of it: the equivalent of Walt Whitman's vision in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry": "The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme."

Let me, however, conclude my review of Mehta's spellbinding and deftly written book by saying how reading it as a Dhakaite I had a feeling of *deja vu* again and again. Whether it was Mehta's snide comments on a dysfunctional city ("At the age of fourteen I had experienced a miracle. I turned on a tap, and clean water came gushing out") or the plain descriptions of the rituals of its citizens ("Every morning, out of the windows of my study, I see men easing themselves on the rock by the sea") or the sickening details of the city police's unlawful short-cut ways of disposing off criminals by killing them in custody through trumped up causes or in fabricated "encounters" ("crossfires")! I am sobered by the thought that we share so much with Bombay. We in Dhaka are, Mehta's book induces me to believe, Bangladesh's "maximum city"; the more is the pity!

Fakrul Alam is on leave from the Dhaka University and now teaches English at East West University.

Black Market

SABUJBARAN BASU (translated by Khademul Islam)

Within our city borders smuggling is called 'black' in the eyes of the law a grave offence

Yet in this city when my lover fooling all playing hide 'n seek comes to meet me from her eyes

drip
tears like golden biscuits...tempting
I note, she too wears a black sari

So, your Honour,
in this city am I
thief or lover?

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.



For more worse or both better?

M SHANMUGHALINGAM

"Mrs Kandiah who
More worse ah
Your husbuurn
Or my one?"

"Puan Selmah both
Also better
Without their
Backside behind

Us how we
Can grumble
Everyday in
The market?"

"Complain, complain
What for
Mrs Kandiah?
One day

They divorce
Us only.
By SMS
Some more"

"You ah must
Be a good
Cooker. Simply
Cook extra

Hot hot
Curry. Then sure
They raash
Back home"



artwork by anna

M Shanmughalingam is a Malaysian poet. This poem was submitted for publication to The Daily Star.