

## 2 SHORT STORIES

### Intoxication

RASHIDA SULTANA  
(translated by Khademul Islam)

- Don't drink too much.  
- I won't. I have complete self-control.  
Call me if you feel bad. I'm going to be awake the whole night.  
- Why?  
- Too much to do. House full of guests, have to watch the children.  
- Why, where's Sheila, your wife? And shouldn't the children be asleep?  
- Sheila's just gotten over grieving, she needs a bit of rest. I'm watching the children so that she can get a good night's sleep.  
- Oh, okay. Yes, she does need some sound sleep. That was a tremendous shock she went through. I'd have been devastated had the same thing happened to me. You should take good care of her.  
- Yet most of the time she is the one who's asking for forgiveness.  
- Why?  
- Do you want my sob story again?  
- Nope. You can skip it.  
- What you need is cheery stuff, none of these sad stories.  
- Me too, I hate being sad. Or listening to sad stories.  
- Life is fun, and you should try to enjoy it.  
- No way. I'm not that young

anymore. I can't stand too much of this fun thing. Okay, time to stop now.  
- All right. Should I call you at night and see if you're having fun?  
- Ha ha ha. If you wish...  
- And don't scream at me for waking you up if you're asleep.  
- How can I yell at you?  
- You will after a few days. You want to bet on it? Why are you so worried?  
- If you keep pulling my leg of course I'll yell at you a hundred times. But you know what, you should do it when I'm neck deep in office work, that way I won't know at all. Maybe not even be aware of it at all.  
- I get it, love's fever is still on you. Can't give up my job as the driver of the Love Express for a few more days yet.  
- So drive it!  
- Tell me, why don't you dress yourself up like a maharani? You keep saying that people fall in love not to be slaves but to be maharanis.  
- You never call me a maharani.  
- And therefore I think you should kick this idiot's mouth in.  
- A million kisses on the mouth of this idiot.  
- I'm going to kill you. Absolutely kill you. Tie up your hands and feet and slay you. Only then will you know what's what. Keep

well, my love. I think I won't be able to call you again tonight.  
- Why not?  
- Tell you later.  
- I've been crying every five minutes today, know why?  
- My insides have been crying the whole day, too. Sometimes you have to cry.  
- Yes, maybe.  
- Now, listen to me. Don't lose your temper with anybody. Try to be as calm as you can. I'll call you every day. I'll give you lots of love.  
- No, please don't. Don't heap so much love on me. I'm ill as it is, and it's only going to make me more ill.  
- Everything's going to be all right. You'll be fine soon.  
- I don't think so. Isn't there a saying: a woman's mind is a thing of glass, once broken it can't be put together again.  
- Oh my maharani, you're going to make me very sad. I'm going to go.  
- Go then.  
- And don't get mad at me if I call you very late at night.  
- You're insane!  
- Lots of love.  
- You too.



### Love

RASHIDA SULTANA  
(translated by Khademul Islam)

Shayma from infancy had been headstrong, single-minded and foul-tempered. These traits only deepened as she got older. Before her marriage she would do all the household tasks by herself. She would not allow her mother to come near. She single-handedly took care of the household tasks, all without any help: washing clothes, scrubbing pots and pans, cooking, everything. She was critical of other's work. If her mother wanted to help she would scream out: 'You'll spoil everything, jumble it all up. Go, go away!'  
Her younger brother worked as a clerk in an office. One day she instructed him to buy her a yellow Tangail sari, to wear to a friend's wedding day festivities. She had taken the money from her father and given it to her brother. But after his office hours ended, the brother forgot his assigned task. When he returned home, all hell broke loose. Shayma screamed at him without let-up. Flung plates at the wall, smashed teacups, tore at her brother's hair. Her family stared at her in amazement.  
After her marriage she dotted on her husband. In order to save on costs she refused to keep domestic help, not even a part-

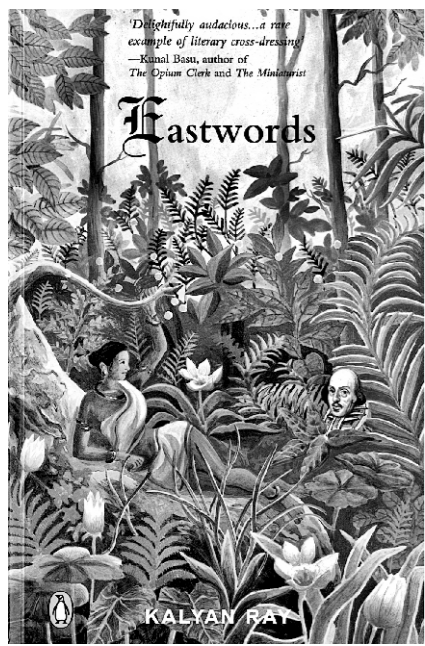
time one. She took care of the whole household all by herself. Took care of her husband like he was baby: tracking what foods he liked, when he liked to have it, saving for him the biggest portions of the fish, chicken legs. The two daughters, too, she loved to pieces. Her two princesses. Fed them at scheduled times, lullabied them to sleep, bathed them. The girls too were absolute darlings. They never disobeyed their mother. Even tended to fear her slightly.  
But lately Shayma had begun to have to have fights with her husband. Sometimes she would make taunting remarks about her mother-in-law. Her husband too would jeer at her about her father's household. Would make comments on her lack of education. Would frequently remark: 'Nearly all the wives of my friends passed their school matriculation exam. Only you failed to pass.' Shayma would yell and scream, throw crockeries. The girls would tremble in fear. Whenever things would get too hot her husband would leave the house. He would come back to the house after a couple of days without telling her where he had been. As the fights got frequent, and so did the absences of her businessman-husband, who now would disappear for a few days at a time. Lately he seemed to

have gotten very friendly with the couple's daughter-in-law and her husband—next door. Whenever a fight erupted he would go over to their house for a visit. This only succeeded in further angering Shayma, which led to more fights, and to longer, more prolonged absences by her husband. Her mother, brother and sister-in-law came to inform her that her husband would be divorcing her. They begged with her to be more gentle and reasonable with him, because if he went through with the divorce, who would take care of her and the children?  
Shayma listened to them calmly. She thought hard about the matter for two whole days. On the third day, while the girls were asleep, she carefully undid one of the drawers of her petticoat. She bent over her eldest daughter's mouth. Kissed the lips tenderly. She couldn't even imagine their lives after she was dead, growing up uncared for like street cats and dogs. With the drawing she formed a noose around her daughter's neck and drew it tight. In the same way the younger daughter too became lifeless in her mother's lap. Then Shayma hanged herself from the ceiling fan.

Rashida Sultana is one of Bangladesh's younger woman writers. Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.

### BookReviews

## Eastward Ho!: Kalyan Ray's remaking of Shakespeare



Kalyan Ray, *Eastwords*, Penguin Books India, 2004, 253 pp., Rs. 275.

**SYED MANZOORUL ISLAM**  
*Eastwords* is a brilliant—and at times brilliantly flawed—work, that brings two of Shakespeare's greatest works, and references to some more, on a level, dovetails them into a seamless timeframe, transforms the characters into more ancient and more mythical ones than what they have been, and generally, orientatizes their content, raising million dollar post-colonial questions like 'Why did they come from their cold western coasts with incomplete maps, cannons, desperation and Christianity to the East?' along the way that would indeed be the envy of question setters of a PC 101 undergrad course. As the title suggests, *Eastwords* almost rivals the 'Punpundit'—who else?—'Bill Babu' (these are some of the terms of endearment addressed to Shakespeare) with its seemingly endless parades of puns. So endless, indeed, that it seems *Eastwords* should have fared better with a name like *Feastwords*. If Willybaba were alive today, he'd probably be turning green with jealousy or pink with merriment. The

possibility lies either way. For, Kalyan Ray's novel is both an edifice that stands on its own solid foundation, and an echoing chamber where once words release their echoes, the repetition becomes endless, and after a while, indistinct.  
But then, this minor carping aside, one might point out that the novel was meant to be an echo, in the first place, of the words spoken by the 'beringed Bardshah of Britain.' Or is it a ventriloquist's show, with the dhori clad, wiry, toothless Shiekh Piru playing the dummy? For an answer, let us posit a compromise, one that brings us nearer to the truth of the matter: *Eastwords* is a sparkling edifice all right, but with a huge echoing chamber inside.  
On that happy note, let me plead for its inclusion in a Postmodernism 101 course. The novel indeed is a postmodern tour de force, with its self-conscious artistry, its careless abandon of verisimilitude, its colourful world of parody and pastiche, and its super self-reflexive plot/event line. Kalyan Ray doesn't even spare himself—he metamorphoses into Caliban, the *aqabat* (a new coinage in honour of Ray!) son of Sukumari (a.k.a. Sycorax). The eponymous character goes about his business in the novel (including making Pandeyji's—Prospero's—daughter Meera—guess who—big-bellied) with the same abandon as Ray does in *writing* the novel. Indeed, the novel's big-bellying business comes in overripe passages heavy with loaded, velvety descriptions, such as this:  
'The fruits were jade orbs with the suggestion of white ripeness under the stretched surface. Around the weightiness of jackfruit hung the sphere of its ripe smell, a heady neighbourhood of growth and tumid stillness. The roseapple tree was bent with loaded growth and scattered about its swollen trunk lay, in a white and pink circle, the

small rounded fruits like rococo pearls on a green floor.'  
Rococo indeed, and baroque, too. But these are exceptions, mercifully. By and large, *Eastwords* employs a prose that is gripping in its easy, almost effortless telling, and its ability to create emotional equivalents of thought. Evoking the 'Princely Papa of Pentameter' and the Sultan of Sprung Rhythm (description mine!) might have induced the prose to labour at times to become poetry, but there are moments when Ray does succeed as a poet. Example:  
'For time is a moulting snake... the child Kalyan had begun to explore the island beyond the clawroots of the shore mangroves... Peepal trees let down their dreadlocks from their dense-tangled branches into a willing soul...'  
If one discovers a time-obsessed sonnet of 'Sir Shakescene' lurking behind the passage, and expects more of the same to follow, then Ray administers a corrective by quickly taking his language through an entirely different field of engagement—one that needs both verbal agility and mathematical skill at permutation and combination to squeeze out meaning(s) from an innocent cluster of words. Let me refer to the instance of Pakhee—Puck—the *aerobat* (another nonce word in the spirit of *Eastwords*!) son of Sukumari fetching the juice 'Love in Idleness' for Oberon—for you know what. 'Love in Idleness' became flotsam in Pakhee's mind as he goes through the permutation and combination process:  
LOVE LIES IN DENS SELL DIVINE NOSE... LESSON LIVE DINE DINE LESS LIVE ON... and so on.  
Clever? Yes. Ingenious, perhaps. Brilliant, certainly.  
But that's hardly the way to write a review of a novel. Sorry. First things first.  
Q. What is *Eastwords* about?  
A. It's about a woman named Sukumari, whose husband had died when she was three months pregnant. She gave birth to a son, Pakhee, who knew how to

fly. Pakhee grew up a happy child. Then one day, Oberon came to the shore of the Bay of Bengal, only now he was called Abhiram, and he had such a terrific time with the widow Sukumari. While he made Sukumari big bellied with a child of his own, he left with the boy Pakhee. But don't blame Abhiram alone for the cruel act. The mother too, was excited by the prospect of her son going to a far country (the Dubaiwallah Syndrome!) and allowed Abhiram to become a child trafficker in the process. Pakhee never returned as Pakhee. Sheikh Piru tried to warn the boy—'he will make a slave of you'—but who listens to an old man? Besides, Abhiram pummelled him some, which made him run short of breath.  
Q. Who is Sheikh Piru?  
A. An abject Indian who has Macaulay for his father and who likes to think himself as Shake Pear's (falter ego. He, an old man inhabiting a violet hour with his biological taxi throbbing waiting—although a mere spectator and not indeed a 'character', yet is (one of the) most important personage(s) in the novel. What Sheikh Piru—Piru Baba—sees, is the substance of the novel.  
Q. So who is Kalyan?  
A. He's the seed of Abhiram that grows into a full, Dionysian dude. Before he is born though, queen Titania comes to Sukumari's shore looking for her hubby's ship. She is full jealous and possessive, and takes hold of Sukumari: 'Thou shall be a votress in my order and shall bring the child into the world, O.O.O.' But then, while Titania remained as a real lesbian/child snatcher treat for a while, she left as abruptly as she had come, rushing back to Athens for the marriage of Theseus and Amazon Hippolyta.  
Good riddance!  
Q. Where does Prospero fit in?  
A. He comes, eventually, to the highly orientalized shorescape of Kalyan's little kingdom. Kalyan is there. And you know the rest of the story.

Only Prospero's—Pandeyji's—punishment of Kalyan for his offer of a grandchild was extreme, registering a high notch in colonial brutality. But wait, the story is not finished yet. For Pakhee—Puck—Ariel has to be accounted for. Now in Prospero's employ, he had wanted freedom all his life, and in the end, finds his power of flying abruptly coming to an end. As Prospero's spell on him breaks, he tumbles from the top of the sky, down towards the green surface of the delta. And he lands on a 'stack of boxes on which was written in large letters: GUNPOWDER.  
It is the battlefiele of Polashi—Plassey for you—and the time is some June day in 1757, and he quickly goes through another sea-change to become Harilal the British spy and confidant of Lord Clive.  
He is the one who eventually kills Siraj, as he sits eating his last kingly dish of *halwa*.  
So it goes.  
And Sheikh Piru? *Eastwords* has him last seen in a small backroom of a crumbling building at 2, Sambhunath Pundit Street in Calcutta in an 'abandoned office of the defunct Indian National Congress Party.' He whispers to himself sibilantly of flying. That is what I have heard people say,' writes the narrator, and adds, as a famous last line, and a punch line at that, 'I do not know if this is true.'  
Yes, *Eastwords* is about making and remaking stories and histories; of meta-narratives and material narratives; about colonization, but more importantly, about re (and/or de) colonization of minds with every telling of those quintessentially colonialist encounters. Only, Ray's treatment is not that academic-serious. He shows how people can fly and narratives can fly and then tumble headlong down to ground zero below where intertextual warfare ravages known and alien shores. Tinged with magical realism, Ray's description ranges across classical mythology, the Puranas, the glittering world of Renaissance England, *Hecatommithi*, *Der Bestrafte Bruder* and the

narrator's *Indian Stories*—which, by the force of their eclecticism somehow do not allow magical realism to gel. Indeed the two braids Ray weaves (or yokes together by violence) are i) The plot line, where *MSND* and *The Tempest* and Sukumari and her two sons and lots of others come together, and ii) The sub-plot line where Ray/ the narrator/ Sheikh Piru all become one. Shakespeare, in this sub-plot, is evoked with the nagging name-calling of a supplicant (*O baba Shakespeare, O thakur...*). One feels that here, in this in-between passages/chapters Ray overdoes his part. 'Tell me how, sweet Bard of gentle English Avon. Here I am, by the groaning brown roll of the wide Ganges... let me confuse myself with you. Let me confess, that we two must twain, like the East and West...' etc. One wonders, what's the point of this overemphasis on the double Shakespearean bind. Why the excuses for the narrator's India/Bangaliness. 'I know those words too, even here in monsoon-battered India.' So we see. More food, perhaps for a PC 101 repeat.  
*Lastword: Eastwords* is for the strong-hearted. And for those with no colonial hangover. For those who can make sweet meaning out of life's unsweet chaos. For those who look on the world with a postmodern nonchalance.  
In short, *Eastwords* works your imagination and your intellect. And in case, you are beginning to take my review seriously, here is what the publisher says as a caveat: 'This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and any resemblance to any actual person, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.'  
How about it, Willyumbaba? Old stuff, you say? John Barth did that in *Giles Goat-Boy*? Perhaps. But that's another story and should wait another day.

### Arranged Marriages

NUZHAT MANNAN

Oh, go ahead, take the plunge,  
Let the cold shower  
Send a ripple or two from head to foot  
  
Get wrapped up in torrid pursuits  
Lying with  
A stranger  
In tricky  
Intimacy.  
  
Give you bland life a kinky break  
Get quite occasionally misunderstood or quite  
Deliberately  
Left in the corner of a drawer  
Like a rusty screwdriver or a shoddy vegetable-peeler.

Tall, sweet, affable, graduate, unpretentious  
Glamorous like Ash, homey, emotionally stable,  
Linux user, four-wheel driving, specialized  
In hospitality, nursing and TLC  
In child-bearing age  
Available  
For arranged marriage  
Ideal  
For tall to medium, gold-collared, thoughtful, considerate, workaholic  
Elegant, stylish, Richard Gere-ish  
Sloppy in kitchen or emotionally complex  
Hi-tech wizard, ideally specialized  
In art of fatherhood and  
Romance management.  
  
Well, strange family...

Father-in-law  
Accomplished crook  
Eldest daughter  
Squint, dim, dark  
Get the picture?  
Wasn't expecting her  
When they passed  
Her to me  
Like a greasy lantern.  
The matchmaker had  
Evidently stashed her away  
And given me before the vows  
Were made  
A tantalizing glimpse of the younger sister  
A beauty who,  
Had flirted promisingly  
From underneath a flimsy veil.

### You Can Have It, But Can You Eat It, Too?

Swati Kaushal, *Piece of Cake*, Penguin Books India, 2004, 367 pp., Rs. 250.

**REBECCA SULTANA**  
If you are looking for a book that will provide deep insights into life's intricacies or solve the riddles that baffle our understanding of mortal existence, *Piece of Cake* is not the book. However, if you are looking for something that will give you a temporary respite from life's intricacies that weigh you down this book can do you wonders. This is a book which I call a stress-buster. You might want to pick up this book as you curl up your feet with a steaming cup of tea or coffee, oblivious to the craziness around you as you claim some time of your own.

You might, however, have to rearrange your posture as you try to keep pace with the sprinting pace of the story. It is a rollicking, wacky description of adventures, or misadventures, of a twenty-nine-year-old single woman in Delhi. Minal Sharma works in International Foods, a multinational company that produces cookies and cakes, among other delicacies. As the book opens, we are introduced to the primary bane in her life, a non-existent man with whom to share her life while her biological clock ticks away, according to her mother, of course. She is set up with two eligible bachelors with disastrous consequences. The ones she herself fancies reveal themselves to be far from perfect. In the meantime, in her work place, she comes face to face with an old

nemesis, Rana Bhatia, a school mate who was a source of enormous irritation to her. She soon finds out that he still is.  
Pressured to come out with a new strategy to cope with competition she spends time and effort in designing a new cake along with a new advertising plan, only to have the plan betrayed to the rival company. This soon results in her being transferred to a branch office. But she is not one to stay cooped up away from the corporate world and soon finds her way back by dint of her intellect and ingenuity. On the personal front, her ride is equally rocky. If you are like me and try to cheat by sneaking into the last pages first to find out who she finally ends up with, you won't. This is not a traditional romance where the two of them live happily



Swati Kaushal

The book can easily be read in one go and I have actually skipped over a few pages as I went along. The book will be welcomed by those who like light reading. But Kaushal does hold on to your attention with her flair for writing at an even pace. Her description of the Indian corporate world rings true as well, revealing her detailed knowledge of the nitty-gritty workings of international trade and the cutthroat competition that goes on between rival companies. Kaushal herself has worked in Nestlé India Limited and Nokia Mobile Phones and no doubt gets her background material from there.  
The book might remind you of Bridget Jones and her endless disasters. That is the refreshing part of the book. The heroine is

not the usual beautiful or flighty women of most romance novels or movies. Most of us can empathize with her disdain at being primed and pampered and spending endless hours at beauty salons. But nonetheless, she does look enviously at the perfectly manicured ones but can only sigh.  
As the blurb says, this is 'a delicious romantic comedy.' Kaushal's first novel, the book promises to be popular especially with the Mills and Boon and the Harlequin crowd. Swati Kaushal writes from Minneapolis, U.S.A. where she lives her family.

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