

SHORT STORY

Two Men—Completely Drenched

IQBAL MAJEED (Abridged and translated by Sadiq Hossain)

I started raining suddenly. Big drops of rain fell thick and fast, boring down hard on the dust-laden road. Being out of season the downpour was most unexpected, specially such an intense one. And anything that is unexpected startles one by its sheer unexpectedness, throwing everything out of gear. Within minutes, the rain plunged the traffic into chaos. People, caught unawares without umbrellas and raincoats, scurried about looking for shelter.

I am one of those who easily get upset. So I was stunned as the first raindrops hit me. Acting on an impulse, like others I also sought to be under the nearest shelter. I was still gathering my wits when I saw a man stumble forward and stop by my side. We glanced at each other and then tried to regain our breaths. I wiped my face with my handkerchief, gave my shirt and trousers a cursory look and then surveyed the road. "Who could have foreseen the rain?" the man said easily. But I was in no mood for a conversation. I kept silent, putting an end to his overture. I thought the un-seasonal shower would soon stop, giving us an opportunity to get away. But looking up I saw dark clouds blotting out the sky, and what had started as a shower soon turned into a relentless downpour. The swirling water on the road flowed away. I was trying to gauge the situation when some cold drops fell on my head and shoulders. I looked up startled since I knew I was not standing under the open sky. Perhaps the man standing next to me had a similar experience because his eyes too traveled upwards. Our shelter was the old, narrow porch of an ancient building, barely five feet square. Drops of water glistened on the underside of the rotting beams above us. The drops would get bigger and then unable to sustain their own weight, fall down like ripe mangoes. Suddenly a gust of wind carried the rain in our direction and wetted us to our knees. I stepped back, cursing, while the man standing by my side leaning against the wall jumped up, startled. I looked at the road ahead of me. Sometimes a car, with its windows rolled up, splashed by. A stray cyclist or two, their teeth gritted, their bodies completely wet, laboriously pedaled down the road. I liked the determined manner in which they faced the onslaught of the rain. I looked idly at my companion. He was wearing a kurta and pajamas. The kurta was sticking to his shoulders. The drops falling from the ceiling had drenched his head, back and arms. His pajama legs were wet up to his knees. I looked at my own clothes. Their condition was not better than his. We were companions in distress. My plight angered me.

The rain showed no signs of abating. I turned to look at my companion, wanting to make amends for my past indifference. "The clouds are still heavy," he said. "It's not a safe place, if you ask me," I replied looking up at the porch roof. His gaze followed mine and then our eyes met. In fact, I was anxious to get away from this place. A few more drops fell on my head. I shifted my position but to no purpose. The entire roof was dripping and the drops caught me whether I stepped back or forward. I saw some more stragglers on the road. "Let's get out of here," I said in desperation. He made no response. Then he smiled and seemed to shrink back more into the corner. Perhaps he thought my suggestion was too odd to be acted upon. But my temper was rising and I was feeling suffocated under the porch. The drops of water were piercing me like arrows. I looked intently at my companion but there was not a trace of impatience or anxiety on his face. It was too much for me. "So you think you can save yourself by sticking to this place?" I said with an edge to my voice. "I see no other choice," he replied coldly. "Do you think this rain will stop in another ten minutes or so?" "No possibility of it," he said in a deliberate manner. "Then why are we making fools of ourselves by waiting here? If we must get drenched why not face it boldly?" "Let's wait for some time more. The rain may stop by then." He wiped his face with the end of his shirt which was sticking to his skin. I drew a long breath to relieve myself of the suffocation that was slowly building itself within me. It was still raining hard as before. I

looked around in the hope of spotting some drier place. But there was none in sight. Of course, there was a petrol pump but it was quite some distance from where I was standing. Beyond it I could see the outer wall of a residential building on whose gate, I knew, was written in bold letters: Beware of the dog. I was still mulling over the prospects of shifting from that place when a dog appeared under the porch. We drove it away.

"Look, our standing here like this does not seem to make any sense to me," I said turning to the man. "But what else can we do?" he said, shrugging his shoulders. "Why, we can get out of here."

"In this rain?" "Why not?" I said, flaring up. "We are already drenched through the skin. Also, are we safe under this dilapidated roof?" "But even so..." He looked at me confused. "I am not staying here. I'm off."

"As you wish," he said as if trying to shrink further into himself. His reply incensed me. I had thought there was much in common between him and I—our going out of the house, getting caught in the rain, taking shelter under the same rotten roof. And then getting drenched together. Since we touched each other at many points I thought we would also be thinking in the same vein. But his silly logic defied my understanding. I braced myself up for action. Lifting one foot I rolled up the leg of my wet pants. I don't know whether I was more angry than confused. My reading of the situation had gone awry. We were poles apart in our thinking and our sense of values was no less different. He wanted to get wet, drip by drip, till his entire body was drenched. The drops were falling on his head and trickling down his back to get puddles at his feet. And yet he was clinging to the porch! Perhaps he was satisfied with what he had managed to achieve at the first go.

Stoic! Dimwitted! Gutless! Deadwood! I spat on the ground stepped down into the raging waters, disdainfully refusing to look back. As I stepped out gusts of wind and needle-sharp showers greeted me.

Struggle! Explore! Search! What else was life about? I represent the new generation and my thinking is cast in a different mould. To get wet, to allow the damp to seep through your body, fanned by a cold wind, could spell disaster. It is all in the game, though everyone prefers to die in his own way. For instance, no one wants to die of cancer or by falling under a running train. But if a man caught a chill and died of pneumonia wouldn't people scoff at him? "The fool!" they would say. "Could there be anything more stupid than standing under a leaking roof the whole day waiting for the rain to stop?"

It all depends on how we look at life. Since we have all to die one day it matters little how we meet our end. It would be a good subject for discussion. I'll go to the Coffee House and stand under the fan to dry my tereylene pants and shirt. Then I would pose a question to my companions: What would you like to die for? Of course, how they die is their own personal affair. I only want to know their ultimate goal for which they are prepared to stake their lives. That's what really matters. Is it laudable to die of pneumonia through exposure under a leaking roof? "You're right!" I'll say triumphantly. "That's where the big difference lies. The manner in which we think—that is it." I'll tell them



artwork by Th. Lisa

about the man standing under the leaking roof who refused to budge from there for fear of getting wet under the open sky although he was soaked under the dripping roof. While I had walked out straight into the full blast of the rain. It was only after undergoing this grim ordeal that I had made it to the Coffee House and its secure roof. I have ventured, I've faced the buffeting of the rain in my quest. I've tried to be one with it in my spirit.

At one with it in spirit. It was the lashing rain that had aroused in me the crusading spirit to seek...

While my companions would still be reflecting over my words I had become one with the rain had helped me reach a new and better haven. *Belief!* They would readily accept this word too and make it their own. Relegating that wet man to the limbo of forgetfulness they would trot out this word as if it was their own. *Attachment. Curiosity. Quest. Belief.* Their eyes shifting like a parrot's, they would tell me in subdued tones that the men of the Vedic Age were inspired by these four concepts: Attachment. Curiosity. Quest. Belief. Nowadays we don't live by any of these concepts and that is our undoing. None of us can write a Veda, any Veda...

But you were saying something about the man caught in the rain. Yes, about the rain...

While walking I suddenly noticed that the rain had stopped. I looked up to see that the clouds were fleeing. The Coffee House was still far away, but on the rain-washed road my feet were carrying me forward of their own accord, my pants and shirt still sticking to my skin. I had only one Charminar cigarette left in my pocket. I saw a wayside tea shop, its oven with glowing red coals inside. The evening had turned quite chilly. I stopped in front of the oven and proceeded to write out the water from my clothes. I took out the cigarette from the packet. It was limp and wet. I asked for a match from the teashop owner and managed to light it. I had hardly taken a few puffs, however, when it unraveled. I spat out the crumbs of tobacco and ordered a cup of tea. Then I stood against the oven, waiting for my clothes to dry. With the stopping of the rain, traffic had again appeared on the road. "So you're drying your clothes?"

I looked up. My erstwhile companion was entering the shop, a smile on his lips. He sat down at a nearby table and asked me to join him at tea. The wind had risen. My clothes were almost dry. "You were in a hurry," he said. "The rain let up soon after you left." He squeezed out the end of his shirt. I gave him a cold stare and mumbled, "And if it had not stopped?" "Then we would have stuck to the place." I found his answer very annoying. To waste precious words is as silly as killing a sparrow with a bullet meant for a lion. "You're a common man—a man of the street," I said testily. "What do you mean?" He asked, his face a question mark. "And what made you say that?" "Why ask? You're like any other common man." He did not seem to take offence at my remark. The tea came. He stirred his cup with a spoon.

Letter from MUMBAI

MENKA SHIVDASANI

Some years back, Prof Dr Abdul Sattar Dalvi, former head of the Urdu department of the Mumbai University, wanted to organise a felicitation ceremony for writers from two languages not his own -- Nissim Ezekiel, who wrote in English, and Dr Arjan Shad Mirchandani, the reputed Sindhi poet. They had both received Sahitya Akademi awards and Prof Dalvi wanted to applaud their achievements in what would be the first major event to be conducted at the J P Naik Bhavan at the Kalina Campus of the University of Mumbai. When he asked the University administration for permission to conduct the programme, he was asked why, as head of the Urdu department, he wanted to felicitate writers from other languages. "Because poetry and literature are one," he said, "even though the medium and the languages are different."

This month, on March 9, the newly spruced up J P Naik Bhavan saw another unique gathering. The occasion was an international workshop on 'Migration -- Marginalisation, Ghettoisation and Identity Crisis: Theoretical Perspectives and Practical Insights'. The

workshop was conducted by the Departments of Sociology, Marathi and Kannada, and one of its highlights was a Writers' Meet "to celebrate the multilingual identities of the megacity Mumbai". Gujarati poet Dr Dileep Jhaveri, who moderated the programme, put it differently. "There are several nuances to minorities, and to existence at the margins and the existence within. The poet speaks a language that is a minority language. Day-to-day languages do not have pretensions of surviving; these are the languages of power that politicians and journalists speak -- the majority languages. It is the poet who changes blood and darkness into soul".

The evening saw a congregation of writers from a variety of languages - Shimunje Parari from Kannada, Sudha Arora and Harsh Sharma from Hindi, Hemant Divade, the Marathi poet, Dr Suniti Udayavar from Konkani, Dr Hrishikeshan from Malayalam, Marilyn Noronha, who writes in English, to name just a few.

Among the speakers was Mandira Pal, Bengali short story writer and editor of the Bangla 'little magazine' *Prabase Nijabhashe*, which she started in 1990 to "come into contact with congenial Bengali diaspora who settled outside West Bengal". It was her way of coping with the 'struggle' of adapting to the cosmopolitan lifestyle of Mumbai, "where there are many cultures, many languages and there still exists solitariness" -- a solitude that she discovered when she moved to Mumbai after marriage from a small town in West Bengal.

Over the years, the literary magazine has grown far beyond its immediate personal objectives, becoming a vital space for writers from several cultures and languages. The short stories, poems, novels and essays that she has published in translation come from various parts of India and from the world, including Bangladesh, the Czech Republic and Sweden: they include Md Basir and T Padmanavan (Malayalam), Vijaya Wad and Asha Bage (Marathi) and Suresh Dalal, and Pannalal Patel (Gujarati).

"The Bengali non-commercial diaspora authors are benefited from this magazine," she said, "in the sense that this magazine is not bound by any market or face pressure such as public demand. A new word 'Bahirbanga', outside West Bengal, Tripura and Barak Valley, has emerged to identify a volatile space. Bahirbanga authors do not have any definable domicile at all, as they are neither migrants like the refugees from the former East Pakistan, nor are they permanently rooted in states where they are always under threat of being culturally weeded out or linguistically vandalised. They do not have a geographical or architectural space to return to or get rooted in..."

The most important feature of Bahirbanga writers is that they write about the place they live in and the people they live with. They have been able to evolve their own distinctive Bangla, laden with the inflections of local discourse, or a mixture of subaltern Bangla-Bhojpuri spaces, or Marathi or Gujarati discourse." Yet, she said, their achievements are rarely recognized: "you have to mimic the voices of Kolkata-centric literature if you want to get an award or prize".

Still, the Bangla 'little magazine' culture seems to be alive and well; in fact, one of Mandira's short stories, *Kindred in Pervasive Sadness*, translated into English by Rajlukshme Debee, appears in a collection that has sprung up from 600 Bangla little magazines and their 2,000 fiction writers. The collection, titled *Postmodern Bangla Short Stories 2002*, features contemporary post-colonial Bangla fiction from India and Bangladesh and is brought out by Haowa 49 Publishers, Kolkata.

Another interesting presentation was Sunita Shetty's introduction to Tulu. "Earlier, Tulu was considered a dialect of Kannada," she said, "but in the 19th century, research by German missionaries proved that Tulu is an independent Dravidian language." One of the five Dravidian languages of South India -- the others being Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam -- it is spoken mainly in coastal Karnataka and the Kasaragod district. "It retains the sound of older languages but maintains its own identity," Dr Shetty said. Mumbai has touched these

writers in various ways -- Marathi poet Hemant Divade's middle-class romantic "fragrance of Pond's Dreamflower at Marine Drive" metamorphoses into the "smell of tired sweat"; his is earthy poetry that confronts the smells and sounds of the daily routine of this city. Marilyn Noronha's poetry in English underlines the dehumanization of the Mumbai experience, as reflected in that great lever, violence to women. Speaking of her domestic help, she says: "She sits on the floor, I sit on a chair/ last night we were both yanked by the hair"... As Marilyn said, "Mumbai is home, I will not be happy elsewhere -- though there are some concerns and some disillusionment about the city I love, and writing is part of the endeavour to make sense of this."

Through the crowds and the chaos, Mumbai has space for everyone; the Malayalam writer Hrishikeshan who arrived in the city in search of a job; Konkani writer Suniti Udayavar, who came to Mumbai 45 years ago, and continued her education after a 22-year-gap, doing her Masters and winning the first gold medal in her department at Mumbai University; the Sindhis who came as refugees post-Partition and carved a niche for themselves -- people like Arjan 'Shad' and Popati Hiranandani, who are recognized as eminent writers in their own community but find few readers elsewhere. If there is one thing that a multi-lingual reading like this one underlines, it is the universality of the human experience, whatever the language -- the shock of familiar situations in different cultures.

As Prof Dr Annakutt V K Findeis, who organised the event with Madhuri Bajpai, head of the German department, put it: "Mumbai has an identity which is not segregated but a whole. When ghettos or segregation take place, it is the poets who are the bridge-builders. When poets sing from the heart, they forget all distinctions, they have the power to make us laugh, love, and cry with them." In this, language can -- and should -- only be a transient barrier.

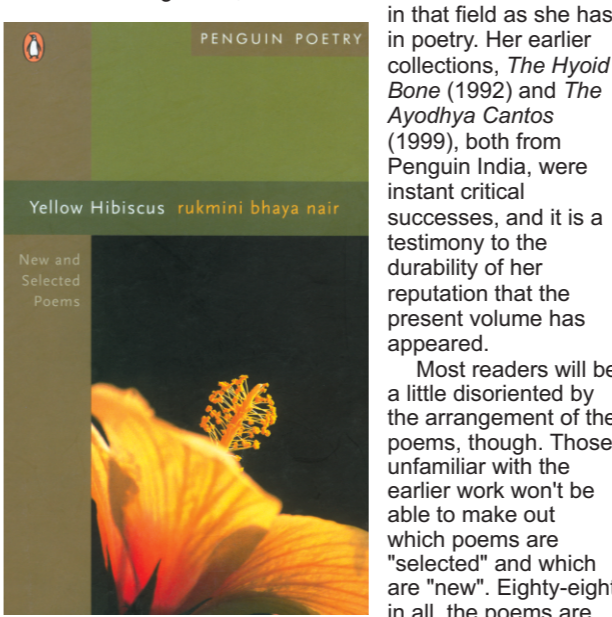
Menka Shivdasani is an English-Indian poet based in Mumbai. She is a co-translator of *Freedom and Fissures*, an anthology of Sindhi Partition Poetry.

BookReview Poetry Engage

Yellow Hibiscus: New & Selected Poems, by Rukmini Bhaya Nair. Penguin India 2004. 214 pp.

KAISER HAO

The poet-academic has long been a familiar figure. Usually s/he is a teacher of literature and/or creative writing. Nair is a little different: like the late lamented A.K. Ramanujan, she is a specialist in linguistics, and has earned as much distinction in that field as she has in poetry. Her earlier collections, *The Hyoid Bone* (1992) and *The Ayodhya Cantos* (1999), both from Penguin India, were instant critical successes, and it is a testimony to the durability of her reputation that the present volume has appeared.



Most readers will be a little disoriented by the arrangement of the poems, though. Those unfamiliar with the earlier work won't be able to make out which poems are "selected" and which are "new". Eighty-eight in all, the poems are split four-ways, in a mathematically precise fashion: 29 each in the first ("Immortals") and last sections ("Languages"), 15 each in the middle two ("Brutes" and "Territories"). Unusually for a selection, there is no chronological order among the poems. Twenty-three poems from *Ayodhya* are scattered over all four sections. I do not have *Hyoid* with me, but the title poem can be spotted in the last section. Perhaps Nair considers thematic clusters more important than chronology, but even then she could easily have tucked in bibliographic information to help the chronologically minded.

Nair seems to be a poet who debuted fully formed and who hasn't changed dramatically since. The whole of the volume under review resonates with an easily recognizable, distinctive voice. Nair writes fluently, perhaps a little too fluently. There is occasional loss of focus as a result, as in "Renoir's Umbrellas". Take these lines from the poem: "Taut stretch of madness overhead/ Like a parabola." I was reminded of a Wodehouse story in which the versatile valet Psmith composes a "modern poem" of which we are given this hilariously unforgettable phrase: "the pale parabola of joy."

Sometimes Nair can be quite pretentious and turgid, as in "The Truth According to Tarski"; or simply banal: witness "Love", which spreads such lines over five pages:

you knew about the accusations, the guilt
but you had no inkling that all the schmalz
the romance, begins with this instinct
for pairing
with recitations, incantations
encirclements

spells
Perhaps this should have been a slimmer book, a true selection, so that we could open it anywhere and see how good Nair is at her best. She has a fine sense of feminism's relevance; at times she can descend a bumper like "it takes a woman to be defiant", but more often than not serves up genuinely thought-provoking stuff. My favourite in this line is "Gargi's Silence", which takes off from the Upanishadic episode in which "Gargi, pupil of the sage Yagnavalkya...is threatened with dire consequences by her guru for asking too many questions (Author's note)." In crisp, beautifully cadenced lines we are drawn into the fraught space of the momentous agon:

Who turns the crankshaft in my brain?
Answer, Yagnavalkya! How many oceans deep
is desire? When you touch me, am I sane?
Can a bee taste honey? Why does it sting?
In mean streets, in the slushy yards of pain
Gargi whispers in Yagnavalkya's ticklish ear
Your metaphysics is shaky! We're not chained
To Brahman. He is a prisoner of our senses.

Commendably, Nair is alert to the dangers from entropic forces in the world today. She is in the finest sense of the term a committed writer, a *poete engage*. The title section of *The Ayodhya Cantos* is brilliant, emotionally charged satire; it's a pity only a bit of it has been included here. But there are other poems here that warn us of the peril of fundamentalism; one should perhaps say fundamentalisms, for across the globe the phenomenon has emerged in varied manifestations, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Moslem. Buttressing the engagement is a savvy historical sense, perty adumbrated in "A Haiku History of the World": Foucault and the faux naif charmingly rub shoulders:

The 17th Century
Enlightenment in the Age of Reason!
All lunatics crippled and put in stocks
Europe's best universities are its asylums.

The 16th Century
Great Emperor Akbar rules in India
A Virgin Queen captivates England
Why were kisses never interchanged?

Let me end with a mention of Nair at her most personal, in "Cambridge Blues", which is confessional poetry minus the heavy-lidded angst, and deliciously sly:

At Cambridge I learnt to lie with elegance

To turn to advantage a narrow bed,
A narrower scholarship, sail close
To the edge of the fens but be careful
Not to sink, fence myself with books
But be certain not to think.

In less than two decades Nair has given poetry lovers much to celebrate; let's hope she can give us more.

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