

SHORT STORY

The Chair

K. RAJANARAYANAN (Translated by V. Surya)

A house without a chair?

Everyone in our house suddenly began to feel this way. And that was it: the matter was placed on the family 'agenda', and the debate commenced.

A friend of the family had paid us a visit the day before. He was a sub-judge. The man could have come in a veshti and shirt like any of us, couldn't he? But no, he had to turn up in 'suit-boot'. All we had in our house was a three-legged stool whose total height was just three-fourths of a foot. Paati, our grandmother, always sat on it when she churned the curds to make butter. As she was on the plump side, our grandfather had got the carpenter to make the seat extra broad.

The sub-judge, too, was on the portly side. There being nothing else in the house for him to sit on, we brought out the stool. He leaned one hand on its edge and attempted to seat himself. One fiendish thing about this three-legged stool was that if you leaned on one side of it, instead of depositing your weight directly on top, it would fling you down. We had fallen from it so many times whenever we failed to observe this precaution before climbing on it to steal a taste from the ghee-jar hanging from the rafters. Just as we were about to open our mouths to warn the sub-judge, he had toppled and was rolling on the floor.

Unable to hold back our laughter, the three of us---my younger brother, our littlest sister who was the baby of the family, and I---raced to the back garden. Whenever the howls were about to subside, my sister would do an imitation of the sub-judge keeling over. This would prolong our laughter. A further cause for mirth was the memory of how our parents had struggled to suppress their own laughter as their guest took a tumble.

When the three of us had finished giggling and tiptoed back into the house, there was no sign of the portly sub-judge. Or of the three-legged stool. 'Has he taken it with him?' asked my baby sister.

It was after this event that the decision was taken to get a chair made for the house. But there was a practical difficulty: no sample was available. There wasn't a single chair in our village. Neither was a carpenter who knew how to make one.

'So let's buy a ready-made chair in town,' said our big brother Peddanna. My father replied that no city chair would prove durable. Then Athai, our paternal aunt, came forward with the information that a highly competent carpenter lived in a nearby village. To hear Athai tell it, not only did he know how to make chairs, but the Governor himself had praised the chairs he had made.

When she heard the second part of Athai's little speech, Mother's look said Yes, yes! She's seen everything! She pointedly turned her face away.

Appa then sent the servant to the village to search out that far-famed carpenter. Discussions began on the kind of wood to be used for making the chair.

'Teak, of course,' said Paati. 'Only a chair made of teak will be easy to lift, and yet be strong and sturdy.' She sat with her legs stretched out in front of her, stroking her calves and shins. Our Paati was very fond of her legs.

At this moment, in walked Maamanaar, our maternal uncle. Peddanna ran inside and brought out the three-legged stool. For a while the very house shook with laughter before things settled down.

Actually, however, Maamanaar was in no danger. He always sat in the same spot whenever he came to our house. It was the southern corner of the front hall. Having seated himself on the floor, leaning against the pillar which stood there, he always unwound his tuft and shook out his long hair. Then he would give his head a good scratching and tie up his tuft again. This was his invariable habit. Having done this, he would peer closely at the floor around him. Peddanna would pretend to join in the search, and impudently remark, 'It doesn't look as though you've dropped any coins around here!'

Whenever Maamanaar came to our house, we tried to riddle him with our jokes and pranks. They fell like paper arrows on him. It's

her daughter prevents her from disclosing the truth of Kajju's past to her. Both women are meant to be seen as suffering a great deal from internal conflicts. Kajju's return to the land which she'd felt was a part of her, only serves to alienate her. The intensity of the Indian landscape, its class distinctions and poverty-stricken masses, the infringement on her independence to move around freely as a woman, coupled with flashes of the bloodbath from her past overwhelms her, and Kajju realizes soon enough--and as the author not so eloquently puts it--that she is "neither from here nor from there". She is neither an American, nor is she an Indian. Keya suffers from another kind of disillusionment. Both lands she calls home have their individual set of disappointments. She however, unlike Kajju, blends right in with her old surroundings when she returns, and is able to instantaneously reconnect with 'familiar' sights and sounds. This concretizes the notion of India being her real homeland, and where her identity stems from, even though she has built a life in America. Kajju, on the other hand, is more like driftwood, unable to neither absorb nor reconcile. Bose does create a commendable, stylistic touch by making her central character film--in fragmented parts--the Indian landscape, in an attempt to decipher and to piece together all that is around her; it also allows for a certain degree of emotional detachment from the intensity of her experiences, which otherwise threatens to engulf her completely.

What is unbearable however is the overall sense of apathy and disconnectedness one might feel while reading the book. It certainly does not draw the reader in with its rapid, lifeless prose; in fact, the novel reads like a screenplay, and does a poor job of depicting what may otherwise have been a good film. What we, as viewers may have been able to

only my son-in-law's family making fun of me, after all, he seemed to say serenely, without actually opening his lips--like a stone Pillaiyaar by the wayside. Whenever our teasing became too pungent, Mother would pretend to scold us, ending always with 'You donkeys!'

As soon as Maamanaar sat down, Amma bustled off to the kitchen. Appa scurried behind her, meek as a baby goat, but intent on seeing what she was up to. When she returned a little later down the long passage from the kitchen, bearing aloft in one hand a silver tumbler full of buttermilk flavoured with asfoetida, Appa was right behind. Entirely for our delight, he made faces and mimed along, mimicking her walk exactly, with his empty hand holding up an imaginary tumbler: It seems her brother has come on a visit! Look at her fussing over him and serving buttermilk!

The aroma of asafetida in the buttermilk made us want to have some right away. We were quite certain it must be just to drink buttermilk that Maamanaar came to our house so often. The buttermilk from our cow was divine nectar, no less. And Maamanaar was the worst miser in town; we believed he was so greedy he would never give anything away free.

Maamanaar had bought that milch cow for his little sister, our Amma, at the Kannaavaram cattle fair. Whenever he came over, and also just before he left, he'd go up to the shed, pat the cow and say some words of praise. Always few and frugal. For Maamanaar was wary of the evil eye and didn't want his own too-ardent look to bring ill-luck upon it.

My youngest brother and sister doted on its little calf. 'As soon as the milk dries up he's going to take the cow back...and the calf will go back with it!' My little siblings' fearful anticipation of this separation increased their fondness for the calf and their bitter feelings for Maamanaar. The baleful glare from their two small faces should have pricked and pinched him all over. But there he was, drinking his buttermilk with relish.

Maamanaar showed a lively interest in the deliberations about the chair and let it be known that he would like one made for himself as well. We, too, were glad of some support in our enterprise. 'Neem wood is best,' he declared. 'Keeps the body cool. No one who sits on a neem-wood chair will ever suffer from piles.'

When he mentioned the *neem* tree, Appa covertly flashed him an astonished glance. Appa had been talking to our farmhand only the day before yesterday about cutting down the ancient *neem* and laying it out to dry! Its wood had seasoned and become diamond-hard over long years of standing in the unwatered cattle-pasture.

Reddanna said, 'Making it out of a *poovarasu* log would be really good. That's a firm, fine-grained wood, without knots. It'll be fine and glossy.' Our elder sister said 'All those woods have a whitish colour. Horrible to look at! Better make it out of some wood with a dark

glean from watching 'Amu', the film, Bose puts a damper on with a mere telling of events within the novel, and simply regurgitating what was shown on screen. For instance, while reading the book, you can actually envision some wonderful details which could make for some poignant moments on screen, but within the novel's scheme, it appears to have been unnecessarily lingered upon, let alone even observed to begin with. (Eg. "Kaju stood in front of the mirror and splashed water on her face, and resolutely lifted her chin," or, "Alone, in his book-lined study, Arun put his head in his hands," and so on.) The reader is, somewhat insultingly, spoon-fed as well. For example, we are 'told' that Kajju uses her camera 'not just as an extension of herself, but as a way to meet the gap between herself and the alien situations she encountered'. There is almost no room for the reader to figure it out on his/her own, or extract anything further out of the metaphorical gesture of filming. The prose overall solidifies the notion that Bose, perhaps a good director ('perhaps', because this reader has not had a chance to watch 'Amu', the film), falls short as an author.

Bose merely skims the surface of more complex issues, whether it is the turmoil caused by the genocide of 1984, a quest to find one's identity, or class discrimination in India. Therefore, it turns out to be a rather chaotic display without any real focusing on one particular issue. A final word of advice would be to watch the film rather than read the novel, as the former is possibly more layered and well executed. 'Amu' may well establish Shonali Bose as a good director, but she does not deserve any particular accolade as a writer.

Rubaiyat Khan is a feature writer for The Daily Star.



artwork by th lisa

colour. Like red sugar-cane...or sesame oilcake...' A luxury chair, fashioned out of some shiny black wood with a mirror-like gleam, with carved front legs, a back curved to support a reclining spine, rear legs stretching as though yawning languorously...The vision flashed before our eyes and faded away.

It struck every one that what she said was absolutely right. And so it was at once arranged for two such chairs to be made, one for us and another for Maamanaar. When both chairs were finished and delivered at our house, we didn't know which one to keep for ourselves and which to send to Maamanaar's house. If you saw one, you didn't need to look at the other. They were like Rama and Lakshmana. Finally we sent one off to Maamanaar's house. And at once there was the

doubt: had we sent away the better of the two?

One by one each of us tried out the chair--and didn't have the heart to rise from it. Each felt obliged to get up only because the next person had to have a chance. Peddanna sank into it with an appreciative 'Ah...h,' rubbed his hands on its smooth arms, tucked up his legs and folded them under him. Athai said, 'We have to stitch a cover for it at once, or it'll get dirty.'

My youngest brother and sister fought over it all the time. 'You've been sitting on it for so long already! Get up, da! It's my turn now!' she'd shout at him.

'Ayyo, I've just sat down! Look at her, Amma!' he'd say, crinkling up his face as though he were going to cry.

Like fire the news spread all over the village that a chair had come into our house. Grown-ups and children came crowding in to have a look at it. Some ran their hands over it. One elderly person picked it up. 'Quite heavy! He's made it sturdy,' he said in praise of the carpenter. Some days passed. One night, at around two, someone banged on our door. Peddanna, who was sleeping on the inside verandah, opened the door. An important person in the village had just died, they said. Our chair was needed, they said, and took it away with them.

Since the deceased was someone of consequence to us, we went as a family to attend the funeral. But when we went to the house of mourning, what a sight met our eyes! It was on our chair that they had propped up that eminent personage for his last journey!

Where our village people had now picked up this newfangled notion of seating corpses in chairs, we had no idea. People had moved from floor-tickets in cinema halls to chair-tickets... Whatever the cause, that was the beginning of our chair's tribulations.

When the 'festivities' in that household were over, they dropped our chair off in our front yard. Just looking at it gave the children a fright. We had the servant take it to the well at the back, scrub it down with a handful of straw and wash it with fifteen large buckets of water. For several days no one had the courage to sit on it. We just

didn't know how to make it usable once more.

Fortunately, one day a visitor came to our house. The chair was ordered in for him, but he said, 'Don't bother, I'll just sit down here!' and went towards the cloth-mat.

Alarmed that he would seat himself there and neglect the chair, the entire family rushed up to him to persuade him to sit on it. The moment he did so, my little brother and sister fled to the backyard. Then they kept peeping in from time to time to see if anything happened to him.

It was not until the next day, when a local elder dropped by and happened to sit on it, that we were reassured of its safety. 'Already he's practicing how it'll feel!' Peddanna said secretly into my ear.

This was the way we had the chair 'seasoned' once again: the old people in the house sat on it first. The little ones were still afraid. 'Please sit down a bit first!' my big sister would beg my younger brother. 'Why can't you sit down first?' he'd snap back.

It wasn't until Suganthi, the girl who lived in the next street, came over and seated her one-day-old baby brother on the chair that the children began sitting on it without fear.

Again, one night somebody died and they carried the chair away. This began to happen more and more often. Sadly we let them take it away each time. The mourners who came asking for the chair understood our sorrow quite differently: they would assume we, too, were mourning the death of their kinsman.

It was irritating, too, to have our sleep disturbed. 'Don't know why these wretched people have to go and die at such unearthly hours!' said my elder sister one night.

'A fine chair we've made--for every corpse in the village to sit on! *Tchai!*' said Peddanna wearily.

'The chair was ordered at an unlucky hour,' Athai declared. Peddanna finally came up with an idea. He and I decided to keep it to ourselves.

One day Amma sent me on some errand to Maamanaar's house. As soon as he set eyes on me, Maamanaar said hospitably, 'Do come in, Maapillai! Would you perhaps like to chew some betel?' Answering his own question, he added, 'When schoolboys start chewing betel, chickens will grow horns and start butting us!'

I gave him Amma's message and went home.

That night, at an untimely hour, there was a knock at the door. Every one in the house was fast asleep. I woke Peddanna. Some people from a house of bereavement stood waiting outside. Peddanna led them out into the street. I went along too. When they had finished telling us what they had come for, he coolly replied: 'Oh, the chair...? It's in our Maamanaar's house. Go and ask him. He'll give.' Having sent them away we came back inside and laughed noisefully.

Fuzzy with sleep, Appa turned in bed and asked, 'Who came?' 'Oh, someone wants to borrow our...bullocks for threshing, what else?' Peddanna said. Pulling the sheet over himself, Appa rolled over to the other side.

The deluge had shifted course--now it was Maamanaar's turn to be swamped!

Several days later when I went to Maamanaar's house, he was sitting on the floor and chewing betel. He greeted me with his habitual smile and chatter.

'Why, you're on the floor! Where's the chair?' I looked around. As he spread lime on a betel leaf, he gave me a probing look, and smiled. Then he said, serenely, 'I told them to keep the chair. To use it for such occasions. A chair's needed for that too, isn't it?'

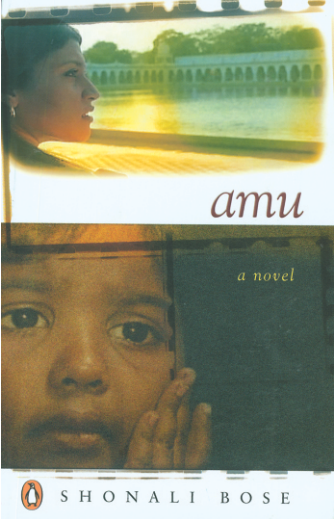
I just didn't know what to say. Returning home I rushed in, intending to tell Peddanna this piece of news. But somehow my feet gradually slowed down by themselves.

K. Rajanarayanan is one of the second-generation Tamil short story writers who transformed the genre in that language. V. Surya is a noted translator.

BookReviews

ReviewsBookReviews

'neither from here nor from there'



Amu, Shonali Bose; Penguin India; 2004; 142 pp.; Rs. 200.

RUBAIYAT KHAN

'*Amu*', a short novel by filmmaker Shonali Bose, is based on the life of a twenty-one year old Indian-American woman named Kajori Roy, orphaned during the 1984 Sikh riots in Delhi. It is the story of a rather convoluted journey she undertakes in search of her roots when she returns to India--the land where she was born, and where she'd lost her birth parents. The novel is based on Bose's feature film, entitled the same. Kajori, or rather Kajju, is clearly the central character, though a collage of the lives of a host of other characters is presented alongside her story. Keya Roy, Kajju's foster mother and a social activist, moves to L.A. with three-year-old Kajju in an attempt to erase the horrific events of the genocide that had had a traumatic effect on the young girl who'd witnessed both her parent's deaths.

Bose attempts to portray a degree of closeness within the mother-daughter relationship, but one that inevitably falls short, as she fails to add any real depth to it. The only complexity in the relationship arises out of the fact that Keya's deep-seated insecurity of losing

her daughter prevents her from disclosing the truth of Kajju's past to her. Both women are meant to be seen as suffering a great deal from internal conflicts. Kajju's return to the land which she'd felt was a part of her, only serves to alienate her. The intensity of the Indian landscape, its class distinctions and poverty-stricken masses, the infringement on her independence to move around freely as a woman, coupled with flashes of the bloodbath from her past overwhelms her, and Kajju realizes soon enough--and as the author not so eloquently puts it--that she is "neither from here nor from there". She is neither an American, nor is she an Indian. Keya suffers from another kind of disillusionment. Both lands she calls home have their individual set of disappointments. She however, unlike Kajju, blends right in with her old surroundings when she returns, and is able to instantaneously reconnect with 'familiar' sights and sounds. This concretizes the notion of India being her real homeland, and where her identity stems from, even though she has built a life in America. Kajju, on the other hand, is more like driftwood, unable to neither absorb nor reconcile. Bose does create a commendable, stylistic touch by making her central character film--in fragmented parts--the Indian landscape, in an attempt to decipher and to piece together all that is around her; it also allows for a certain degree of emotional detachment from the intensity of her experiences, which otherwise threatens to engulf her completely.

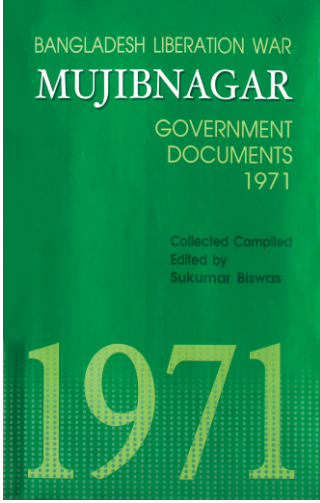
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glean from watching 'Amu', the film, Bose puts a damper on with a mere telling of events within the novel, and simply regurgitating what was shown on screen. For instance, while reading the book, you can actually envision some wonderful details which could make for some poignant moments on screen, but within the novel's scheme, it appears to have been unnecessarily lingered upon, let alone even observed to begin with. (Eg. "Kaju stood in front of the mirror and splashed water on her face, and resolutely lifted her chin," or, "Alone, in his book-lined study, Arun put his head in his hands," and so on.) The reader is, somewhat insultingly, spoon-fed as well. For example, we are 'told' that Kajju uses her camera 'not just as an extension of herself, but as a way to meet the gap between herself and the alien situations she encountered'. There is almost no room for the reader to figure it out on his/her own, or extract anything further out of the metaphorical gesture of filming. The prose overall solidifies the notion that Bose, perhaps a good director ('perhaps', because this reader has not had a chance to watch 'Amu', the film), falls short as an author.

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Rubaiyat Khan is a feature writer for The Daily Star.

Oath-taking at Bidyanathtala



Bangladesh Liberation War Mujibnagar Government Documents 1971; compiled and edited by Sukumar Biswas; Mowla Brothers; February 2005; Taka 1200; 655 pp.

ZOBAIDA NASREEN

It is undoubtedly true that the Bangladesh War of Liberation is the most remarkable event in the history of the people of Bangladesh, and it is equally true that the documentation of this struggle is a continuous process. Unfortunately, since the history of the liberation war has become a highly politicized matter, its history, and interpretations of it, have become a contested site. Though the war in 1971 was itself the historical consequence of a long-lasting economic, political and social oppression, it is often treated as an outburst of the oppressed people.

It was as a part and a continuation of this history that the Pakistani army launched a barbarous attack on civilians on the night of March 25, 1971. It was the beginning of a genocide with rare parallels in world history. After the declaration of independence by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on 25th March, a provisional, independent government of Bangladesh was formally established on 10 th April, 1971. The oath-taking ceremony of this provisional

government took place at Bidyanathtala under Meherpur sub-division of Kushtia district, which was subsequently renamed as Mujibnagar. From then on, this provisional Bangladesh government came to be popularly known as 'Mujibnagar Government'.

Yet there is a scarcity of reliable documentation about the Mujibnagar Government, which played not only the pivotal role in our struggle for independence, but which is also considered as the first non-institutionalized government of the Bangladeshi people. The provisional government of Mujibnagar had to face tremendous hurdles, but, as the author puts it in his preface, 'it eventually succeeded in achieving independence through farsightedness, firm mental strength and relentless effort. The Mujibnagar Government was recruiting freedom-fighters for fighting against the Pakistan army, giving them training and making and implementing war-plans, (and) also had to keep in their mind the responsibilities of arrangement of relief of nearly ten million refugees in India, sending emissaries to different countries of the world, making efforts to form world opinion and also maintain overall good relations with India regarding all aspects (of the military and civil struggle).'

The book is arranged in four sections: In the first part are 77 out of 82 press releases issued by the Mujibnagar Government. The second part contains '*Bangladesh*' a bulletin published by the Mujibnagar Government. The third part includes news items in the foreign press related to Bangladesh and the freedom movement which started after the crackdown of Pakistan army on March 25. The fourth part contains a number of documents of the Mujibnagar Government and rare photographs of that period. The latter is indeed the great attraction of this book.

Though many books have been published on the liberation war or its background over the last 34 years, few of them have focused on the Mujibnagar Government. In the case of documents pertaining to the liberation war, the most definitive is the official, 14-volume *Bangladesher Swadhinata Juddho, Dalilpatra*, edited by Hasan Hafizur Rahman, published by the Bangladesh government. While that does include papers and documents relating to the Mujibnagar Government, they are not arranged chronologically. Also, some of the documents in *Mujibnagar*, as Professor Salahuddin writes in the foreword, 'had remained hitherto unknown.' Given the specific focus of Dr. Biswas's book, it therefore gives us a truer picture of the Mujibnagar Government. Of special interest is that all 26 volumes of '*Bangladesh*'--a journal brought out by the then newly formed External Publicity Division of the Mujibnagar Government to fight the crucial publicity and propaganda war--has been published here for the first time.

But here one must note that typos abound: indeed, at the very beginning, the author's introduction is spelt 'Indroduction.' At times the indexing has been overdone; for example, 'Gestapo rule,' and 'Gestapo' are indexed separately on pp. 185 and 157. Why? And if that is to be the case, then why leave out 'Gestapo interrogation'?

But, in conclusion, it must be said that it is a necessary book, one that should be of interest to all Bangladeshis concerned about the history of their freedom struggle. Dr. Sukumar Biswas, a researcher on our liberation war as well as publisher Mowla Brothers, are to be commended for having undertaken to bring out this book.

Zobaida Nasreen is a graduate of the Anthropology Department, Jahangirnagar University.

Tempered Poetry

RUMANA SIDDIQUE

My life in words or words from my life
Either way , unfinished
Like an aphrodisiac, that one
Ventures to taste
But is too scared to drink
Beyond a sip
For fear of revealing too much
Not to others, but to oneself
Beneath the veneer of
Polished words
What if the real me
Once free
Refuses restraint?
Laughs in the face of
Compromising clichés?
Insists on delving out diction
From cracks in the heart?
Scooping out metaphor
From hidden convolutions
Of the mind?
What if the real me
Connives to fulfill
A cliché of its own choice?
To drink life to the dregs
Threatening, inebriating words
Poems that must be tempered
Like the Devil's wine
Watered down.

Rumana Siddique teaches English at Dhaka University.

Sunday Afternoon Reverie

ADOITO HAROON

Where do I begin my science
Ply my trade of reason
To a thousand questions
That wrap around the naked boughs
Of this late season
Dare I reckon with the hand
That has been dealt
Or bury its devious plots
Like the snow now buries
Memories of summer

Should I live among stars
And ask 'What lies beyond this universe?'
And 'What lies beyond that?'
People have asked these questions before
Then they picked a religion
Out of a hat
Should I live among living atoms
And ask 'What is the meaning of their symphony?'
And 'How meaning they begat?'
People have asked these questions before
Then they picked a religion
Out of a hat
Maybe I should live among Sunday paper articles
And sips of coffee.

Adoito Haroon is a programmer who lives in New Jersey, USA.