

SHORT STORY

ASAD M. KHAN  
(Translated by A. Ismail)

Soon after Partition Laji Bai Aseergarhvali moved to Karachi and set up shop in a flat on Napier Road.

Madam Laji had boarded a ship at Bombay's Ballard pier with her adopted son and one of her girls, and after arriving stayed for a fortnight in Moti Seth Shikarpuri's Mewal Mansion flat in Kemari.

She hadn't just upped and left, she'd come loaded. So on Moti Seth's advice, she bought this flat situated at the main intersection of Napier Road. In time the number of girls who worked for her grew to four and she ran her bawd-house with much flair. The shaded lights, the fans, the sofa set, carpets and velvet cushions--worn out now--all dated from those days of thriving business.

One rarely hears rumors about whores and bawds, one hears them about respectable women, spread with the intention of causing grief. So it was strange to hear the rumors about Laji Bai circulating on Japani Road, and indeed all over the city:

'Her real name was Lila.'

'No, it was Laila. She was the court singer of the maharajah of Aseergarh.'

'Not at all. She was merely the maharajah's keep. What does she know of singing? But she was a past master of the art of the boudoir...'

This last speculation seemed to appeal to people. As it was, no one had ever heard Laji sing. Her well-wishers had spread the story that back when she was young she used to coo like a *koel*, but her enemies fed her *sindur*, and she lost her voice forever. Laji Bai herself never confirmed or denied the story.

However, once, although no one remembers exactly what year, when someone very close to her, a man who is no longer alive, asked her to sing, Laji Bai had responded: 'Deputy Sahib (the man had been Deputy Sub-Inspector of Police), I used to sing for one or for one hundred thousand. But that one is no more, and neither are the one hundred thousand. What can I sing now?'

Cunning words--all this!

The fact of the matter is, she couldn't possibly have made as much by singing as she did by running four beds.

Gulbadan, Lajo, Bela, and Yasmin...the girls would change every two or three years, though not the four names. The girls were probably taught a smattering of song and dance, just so the other business could go on under the guise of musical entertainment.

In short, Laji Bai had four 'pupils' and the son mentioned above, whom everyone called 'Lajivala.'

Everyone called me 'Lajivala.'

When we came over here and Laji Sahib bought this flat I must have been at the most sixteen years old. I was forbidden to talk to the people who visited the flat. Gradually I learned how to conduct myself around these people, and how to talk with them, but I didn't mix with them very much. All except Mazhar Ali Khan, a bank officer, with whom I did develop a kind of friendship. I even went to his office to visit now and then, for though Mazhar Ali Khad did come to the flat, he was not a 'pleasure-seeker.' He was just an 'admirer' of Laji Bai. He must have been twenty-four or twenty-five at the time, about the same age that I am now.

It isn't me, nor is it Laji Bai that impels me to tell you this story. It is Mazhar Ali Khan, and he alone. What a courageous man! Who knows where he is now!

It was afternoon when he walked into the flat for the very first time. somehow the door had been left open. Laji Sahib was sitting comfortably in the reception room propped against a cushion, with the table fan on. A wet muslin sheet was draped over her feet, and she was humming something. Just then a handsome young man, in a white shirt, red tie, black serge pants and shiny boots, tapped on the door as if it were a drum, said 'Hello' and walked in.

Laji was annoyed, 'What craziness is this? Where do you think you're going, *mian*?'

T u r r e t s

This *mian* was Mazhar Ali Khan. He stepped forward and kissed Laji Sahib's feet. Laji withdrew them quickly, her stunned expression riveted on Khan Sahib.

Mazhar Khan answered in a cheerful voice, 'I've been wanting to see you for a long time. you are the doyenne of music, the queen of this art.' Laji, frowning, said, 'Young man, you have come to the wrong place. *She does not live here.*'

Khan Sahib laughed, 'For me, you *are* the queen of music. Here, only you rule; the rest are your subjects.'

This ingratiating impudence made Laji burst out laughing. Mazhar Ali Khan laughed too: 'Madam, only this month I have been posted as assistant manager of the bank across the street. If I could get you to open an account with us it would help me a lot. Will you?'

Feeling at ease now Laji Sahib leaned back on her cushions but continued to look at him with interest. Then she laughed and said, 'You must be in a tight spot, young man, why else would you come peeking into brothels for business?'

'I have an absolute bastard for a boss,' he replied. 'He won't confirm me in my post unless I sign up X number of accounts for such and such amount.'

'So, have you any?'

'I don't know anybody here except you. And my manager, he doesn't even know you. He's so timid, so straight that he steps out of his car at a quarter to nine every morning, disappears into the bank, walks out again at a quarter to five and drives away going no more than forty miles per hour.'

'Amazing!' Laji Sahib remarked.

'Well, then, let's begin. Call the girls, let me explain about accounts to them as well.'

Laji was totally thrown off by the manner in which this barely twenty-four or twenty-five year old man said 'girls.' She felt an uncontrollable urge to laugh, but held back, covering her mouth with her hands. In the end, she couldn't restrain herself anymore, and bubbled over, while Mazhar Ali Khan kept looking innocently first at Laji then at her. As Laji was still laughing, Khan Sahib asked me, '*Bhaiya*, call everyone. There isn't much time.'

I looked at Laji. She signaled her approval with a nod, still laughing.

Mazhar Ali Khan began to explain: 'Madam, while the matter maybe laughable, consider the fact that I have to solicit accounts worth hundreds of thousands of rupees, in just so many days. Now you tell me, if I don't beg and plead, what else should I do?'

It was the time of the day when the girls were free. They had heard Laji Sahib's laughter and started to gather in the reception room. Khan Sahib began to explain to each one of them the benefits of saving and banking. 'Look, he said, 'I don't need to tell you how insecure man is, and women, as you already know, are even more so, especially ladies, like yourselves, who are given very little time to shine in their profession...'



artwork by alake

said: 'Me? Heaven forbid, Bai, heaven forbid! The *sarangi* isn't an easy instrument. Only the truly gifted can play it...'

What came out of Gulbadan's mouth then was totally out of line. Looking at the other girls she said: 'Well then, he must have been rounding up clients for brothels, then.'

All the girls were dumbstruck, aware that what Gulbadan had alleged was really rude. And Laji Sahib--she seemed to have suddenly turned pale. Mazhar Ali Khan's fair complexion reddened. He cleared his throat, jerked his head, licked his lips, and then looking straight into Gulbadan's eyes responded: 'No, *Bai-ji*! Now I couldn't be as worthless as all that, could I? The fact is, my elders, God bless them, whored around quite a bit in their time. So you could say my blood has retained something of their daring, something of their fearlessness.'

Gulbadan was mortified and became speechless. Laji Sahib extended her hand and patted Mazhar Ali Khan on the shoulder saying: 'Young man, don't think anything of it. The wretch--she's crazy.'

Khan Sahib stayed on for a while longer and then left, but not before extracting a promise from Laji that she would think about opening an account in his bank.

After he was gone Laji Sahib said softly, 'What a fine boy! The Lord keep him happy!'

Mazhar Mian visited a few more times. Laji Sahib had sent a message to the owner of the 'Kashmir Milk and Lassi Shop,' and he, along with the tinsmith who sold buckets and filters, had been the first to open accounts with Khan Sahib, followed in time by the Gujarati cigarette wholesaler.

When Mazhar Ali Khan came to thank Laji Sahib for all these accounts, he opened his briefcase the minute he sat down and took

out a small flat box. It had Laji's favourite sweetmeats, purchased from the finest shop in town. He placed the box on his hands and presented it to Laji Sahib like an offering.

Laji asked, 'For what?' He replied, 'A while back I had decided that I would offer Lila-ji sweets one day.'

'But why, young man? Because the tinsmith and the proprietor of 'Kashmir Milk' opened accounts?'

'No, Lila-ji,' Khan Sahib said. 'Those accounts are of no consequence. It isn't that.'

'Then what?' Laji asked. 'Why are you speaking in riddles?'

'Look, it's like this,' Mazhar Mian put the box of sweets on the chair. He walked over to Laji Sahib and sat down beside her on the sofa. 'It's like this, Madam, that I...That day when I barged into your flat and chattered on, don't think that I was talking nonsense. I knew even then who you really are. I not only knew, by that time I already had five of your gramophone records in my possession. The sixth, which I've been searching for for a long time, was found yesterday. Lila-ji, I had decided that on the day I got hold of that record I would bring sweets for you. The gramophone company released it after you came over here. I wouldn't be surprised if even you don't have it. The same hymn of *bilaval*, which goes like this: *daiya-ri khan ga'e voh log...*'

Laji was gazing at Mazhar Ali Khan, in a daze. Khan Sahib hadn't yet finished speaking when Laji repeated as if in her sleep, '*Daiya-ri kahan ga'e...*' Then she seemed to be asking, '*Alahaiya bilaval?* Maestro Samdu's *alahaiya*?'

Mazhar Mian nodded, 'Yes, the very same!'

Laji Sahib brushed her hands across her face and asked softly, 'Who are you? How do you know me?'

'Me? I told you, I work at the bank, the bank on your street and...Madam, how do I know you? Well, Lila-ji, many people know you. Thousands, perhaps millions...who else besides you has sung the *kajris* since 1932? Who? Who could have sung it? Who can sing like Lila-ji Aseergarhvali? Madam, I listen to your records every Sunday from morning till night. Aseergarh's youthful, strapping forests resound in your music, and Lilaji, peacocks and peahens perched on the turrets of the Aseergarh fort can be heard in your melodies. I have not hear those sounds personally...but an acquaintance, who has heard them many times described them to me. Lila-ji, Madam, God knows, I do not understand music all that well, but I can trace out each note of your *kajris* on paper and show it to you.'

Laji Sahib, her hands pressed tightly across her face, was listening to Mazhar Mian. When he said 'Lila ji Aseergarhvali', she brushed her hands over her face and repeated 'Lila!'

A desolate silence echoed throughout the flat. I was leaning against the wall listening to everything. It seemed as though the corpse of bygone days was lying straight ahead in the reception room.

Mazhar Ali Khan saw Laji Sahib's tears. He stood up, taking hold of his briefcase.

Laji Sahib was sitting like a statue with her chin on her plump hennaed hands and her elbows resting on her thighs.

Swinging his briefcase from one hand to the other Khan Sahib gestured goodbye to Laji Sahib's 'statue' and walked toward the door. 'Wait!' Laji called out softly.

Khan Sahib stopped.

Laji said, 'You will come again, won't you?'

'Yes, Madam, I will. I'll bring the records and the player too.'

'No! please don't.'

'All right, I won't.'

That day, Mazhar Ali Khan crossed the threshold of the flat on his tiptoes, like someone who withdraws quietly after offering his condolences on the death of a loved one...

Asad M. Khan is a noted Urdu writer. A. Ismail is a poet/translator.

Introducing South Asian Poetry In English: The Dutts Of Rambagan

KAISER HAQ

Readers of this page might remember that I embarked on a series of short introductory pieces on South Asian poets in English. Very soon, however, various other commitments forced me to transfer the project to the back burner, from where I wish to retrieve it now and, hopefully, pursue it (forgive the mixed metaphor) without further hindrance.

I left off after briefly discussing Michael Madhusudan Dutt, whose greatness of course far exceeded his rather modest achievements as an anglophone poet, and I resume with a glance at a remarkable extended family of literary enthusiasts that bore the same surname. There were no blood ties but between Govin Dutt, who was the linchpin in the literary life of the Rambagan Dutts, and Michael Dutt there was a strange connection--strange because it was more of a disjuncture.

Michael and Govin were contemporaries at the Hindu College, and had a close mutual friend in Rajnarayan Basu. In his Bengali autobiography Basu recalls that he and Govin "used to read volumes of poetry written by the most obscure English poets, both ancient and modern." Michael and Basu shared an interest in both alcohol and literature. But it is certain that Michael and Govin didn't become friends; there isn't a single mention of the latter in Michael's letters. Michael's most definitive biographer, Ghulam Murshid, surmises that a sense of rivalry and concomitant jealousy kept them apart. And when an essay in the *Calcutta Review* of December 1849 ("The Poetry of the Dutts") rated Govin Dutt's poetry above *The Captive Ladie*, we can be sure that Michael wasn't amused.

I am sure the rivalry and jealousy of the two Dutts had a deeper significance. They differed in their personalities, their poetic orientation, their broad philosophy of life. Michael's heroes were



Govin Chunder Dutt

Milton's Satan, Byron, Ravana; he was a romantic rebel. Govin Dutt admired Wordsworth and was more of a Victorian than a romantic. Thus the incompatibility of the two contemporaries is indicative of a transition in literary history.

The Dutts of Rammagan were descended from Nilmoni Dutt, who had moved to Calcutta from his ancestral Burdwan in the eighteenth century and quickly established himself as a leading citizen. Of his children, the eldest, Rosomoy Dutt, and the youngest, Pitambur, feature in our story as the progenitors of the literary Dutts. Rosomoy was a judge of the Small Cause Court in Calcutta and secretary of the management committees of both the Hindu College and the Sanskrit College. His second son, Kylash, was probably the first Indian to publish fiction in English, and his third, fourth and fifth sons, Govin Chunder (1828-1884), Hur Chunder (1831-1901) and Greece Chunder (1833-1892), respectively, were anglophone poets, as was Pitambur's two sons Ishen Chunder and Shoshee Chunder (1825-1886). In the next generation, Kylash's son Omesh Chunder (1836-1912), Govin's daughters Aru and Toru, and Ishen's son Romesh Chunder (1848-1909) were poets and writers.

As interesting as the Dutts' wholesale poeticising was the dramatic conversion to Christianity of one branch of the family. The eldest son of Rosomoy Dutt, Kishen Chunder, fell mortally ill immediately after their father's death in 1862, saw a vision of the next world on his deathbed and asked to be baptised. The cleric sent for evaded the request--lest, one assumes, Hindus accused him of stealing a dying man's soul. The youngest brother Greece, who himself was unbaptised, then administered

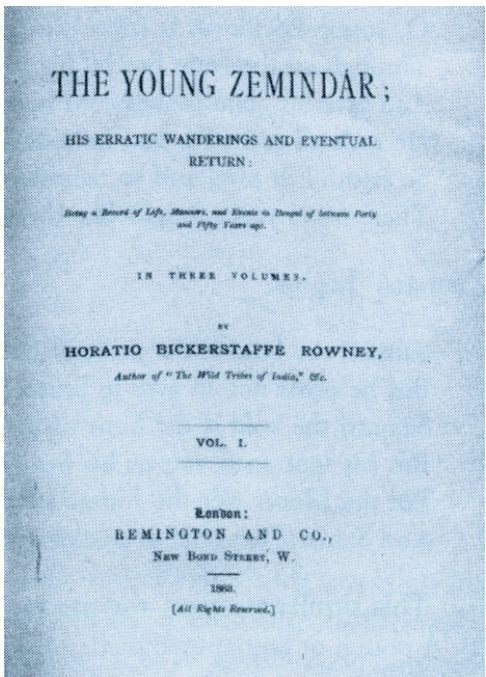
the baptismal rites. The dying Kishen adjured his brothers to embrace Christianity, which they presently did, en famille. The wives seem to have lagged behind in the zeal for conversion; witness Govin Chunder's poem "The Hindu Convert to His Wife" in which the woman in entreated not to "join the scoffing crowd,/The Cold, the heartless, and the proud,/Who curse the hallowed morn/When, daring idols to disown,/I knelt before the Saviour's throne."

However, true to the Hindu wife's irrevocable vow of conjugal fealty, the women followed their husbands to church and in time acquired a name for Christian piety. Govin's wife, who survived the rest of her family, translated a religious tract from English to Bengali and left money for building a church.

Pitambur's side of the Dutt family remained Hindu. Though relationships between the Christian and the Hindu branches of the family remained cordial as ever, the conversion did result in a slight difference in outlook, which noticeably affected their literary productions. The poetic showcase of the Christian Dutts is the *Dutt Family Album* (London: Longmans, 1870). An anthology of 184 poems, about three-quarters of them were by Govin and Omesh, the rest by Hur Chunder and Greece Chunder. A number of them are expressions of Christian piety; others include romanticised poems on Western subjects, Orientalist poems on Indian themes, and a few translations from French and German. One could regard them as a conspicuous expression of the desire among a section of the Indian upper classes for complete assimilation into the culture of the coloniser. There is unabashed toadying in "To Lord Canning, During the Mutiny" and the celebration of British power in "Gibraltar". It was in the very nature of colonialism, of course, to make assimilation impossible, and an awareness of this is poignantly reflected in a few lines in the poem "Wordsworth":

There are some faces I have never seen  
Which haunt my spirit like a music-strain;  
There are some places where I've never been  
Which stand minutely pictured on my brain.

The unconverted Dutts aren't distinguishable in their poetics from their Christian cousins, but otherwise seem to be more responsive to the emergent nationalism of the time. Romesh Chunder, the first Indian ICS officer, and a poet, novelist and historian, also became an active nationalist and once chaired the annual session of the Indian National Congress. His uncle, Shoshee Chunder, too, was like him a writer of both verse and prose and a critic of colonial excesses. There is a stronger Indian focus in the works of both; Romesh Chunder's most ambitious poetic work, available till recently in Everyman's Library, is a retelling of the Indian epics in the metre of Tennyson's "Locksley Hall". The political difference between the Christian and the Hindu Dutts is well illustrated by two



*The Young Zeminder* by Shoshee Chunder Dutt under the nom de plume Horatio Bickerstaffe Rowney.

sonnets with the same title, "India". Both evince the self-conscious Indianness fostered by the Bengal Renaissance, but with different accents. The poem by the Christian Hur Chunder, after declaring "boundless love" to the "Land of my birth" mourns her lost glory and looks towards the future: "But Time shall yet be mocked:-- though these decay,/I see broad streaks of a still brighter day." There can no doubt that the Hur Chunder's "brighter day" is materialising under the aegis of British colonial rule. Shoshee Chunder's "India", on the other hand, is an exhortation to seek independence:

I dreamt a dream of strange and wild delight,  
Freedom's pure shrine once more illumed did seem,

.....  
Science again aspired to the sky,  
And patriot valour watch'd the smiling strand:  
A dream! A dream! Why should a dream it be?  
Land of my fathers! Canst thou never be free?

Despite such differences the critical judgment on the Christian Dutts of the *Album* and their Hindu, nationalist relatives is the same. They are generally disparaged as imitative writers, merely of historical interest. But the youngest writer produced by the family, Toru Dutt (1856-1877), is a talent of a different order--the appellation "genius" in its fullest sense may not be inappropriate for her. She deserves an essay all to herself.

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Unfinished Journeys

MENKA SHIVDASANI

And finally, when the tributaries  
have run their course, you wander home,  
feel a little strange:  
the red checked cloth,  
spiders and the strings,  
so familiar,  
so very out of range.

The decades you travelled  
belonged to someone else,  
bed-bugged pillows,  
shadows on the wall,  
ghostly faces in packed trains  
on other tracks,  
empty suitcases  
in someone else's hall.

And suddenly, old friends  
look older than before:  
the girl in the mirror  
has wrinkles you don't recognise.  
The poet you loved has turned  
into cigarette smoke,  
and nobody told you  
that while you were gone,  
something at the centre broke.

I have put down my bags  
in what seemed familiar once:  
a smile in the hallway,  
a room that belonged to me.  
But the echoes are new,  
the wind plays a different tune.  
Back home at the beginning,  
a voice at the window  
is hushed against the moon.

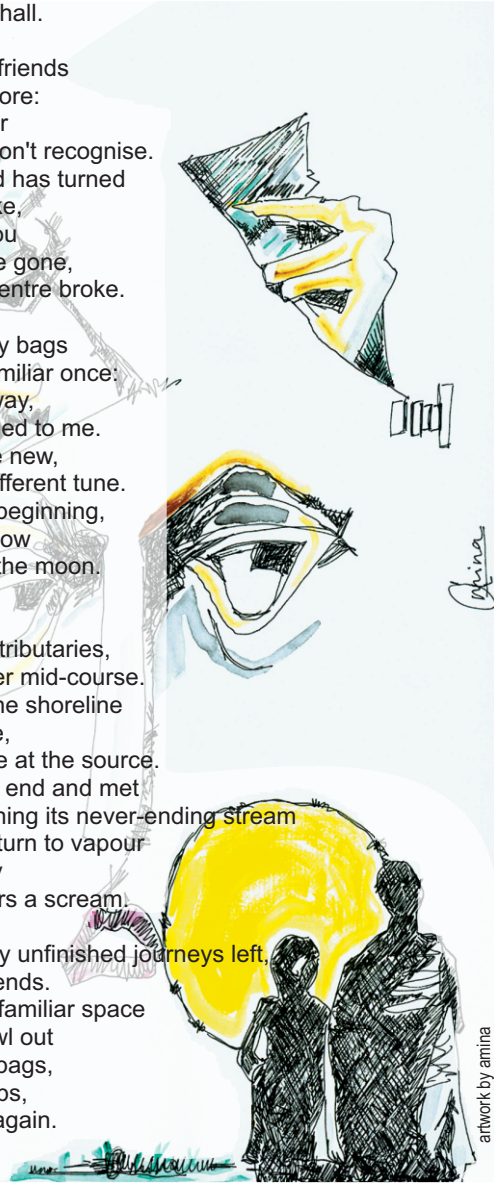
The tributaries, distributaries,  
have come together mid-course.  
But the shells on the shoreline  
are quiet and white,  
and there is silence at the source.  
I have come to the end and met  
the beginning, running its never-ending stream  
and as the clouds turn to vapour  
against the red sky  
somebody smothers a scream.

There are too many unfinished journeys left,  
too many tangled ends.  
In the hush of this familiar space  
as the spiders crawl out  
I must pick up my bags,  
scratch off the scabs,  
begin the journey again.

Menka Shivdasani is a noted Indian English poet. This poem was submitted to The Daily Star for publication.



Shoshee Chunder Dutt



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