

## SHORT STORY

# A Car Splash

PREMCHAND  
(translated by S. Mahnowar)

The storyline goes like this: early in the morning I finish off my bath and my prayers, daub a vermilion circle on my forehead, put on my garb of yellow robe and wooden sandals, tuck my astrological charts under my arm, grab hold of my stick—a straightforward skull-cracker—and start out for a client's house. I was supposed to settle the right day for a wedding; it was going to earn me at least a rupee. Over and above the breakfast. And my breakfast is no common breakfast. Ordinary clerks cannot summon the courage needed to invite me to a meal. A whole month of breakfasts for them is just one day's meal for me. In this regard I fully appreciate wealthy gentlemen and bankers—how they feed you, oh, how they feed you! So generously that you feel happy all over! After I size up a client's generosity in this regard I accept his invitation. If somebody puts on a long face when it's time to feed me I lose my appetite. How can anybody feed you if he's crying? I can't digest a meal like that at all. I like a client who greets me with 'Hey, Shastriji, have some sweets!' and whom I can greet back with a, 'No, friend—not yet.'

It had rained during the night, a lot. There were puddles everywhere on the road. I was walking along totally wrapped up in my thoughts when a car went by splashing through the puddles. My face got splattered. And then what do I see but my dhoti looking as though somebody mixed up a mess of mud and flung it all over it. My clothes were ruined; apart from

that, I was filthy, to say nothing of the money lost. If I'd caught those people in the car I'd have done a job on them they wouldn't have forgotten in a hurry. I stood there, feeling helpless. I couldn't go to a client's house in this state and my own house was at least a full mile away. The people in the street were all clapping to ridicule me. I never was in such a mess. Well, stout heart, what are you going to do now? If you go home what will the wife say?

I decided in a trice what my duty was. I gathered about a dozen stones from all around and waited for the next car. I'd show them a Brahmin's power.

It wasn't even ten minutes before a car again came into sight. Oh no! it was the same car. He'd probably gone to get the master from the station and was returning home. As soon as it got close I let fly a rock, throwing it at the car with all my strength.

The gentleman's cap went flying and landed on the side of the road. The car slowed down. I let go again. It went through the car window and a piece of glass even landed on the fine gentleman's cheek, drawing a line of blood. The car stopped, the gentleman got out and came toward me, landed a punch on me and said, 'You swine, I'll take you to the police!' I'd scarcely heard him when, throwing my books down on the ground, I grabbed him by the waist, tripped him and he fell down heavily in the mud. I jumped on top of him at once and gave him a good twenty punches one after the other until he went limp. In the meantime his wife got out. High-heeled shoes, silk sari, powdered cheeks, lipstick, mascara. She started to poke me with her umbrella. I turned from the husband towards her, waved my

stick in the air and said, 'Lady, don't meddle in men's business or you may get a whack and a bruise and I'd be very sorry about that.'

The gentleman used this diversion to pick himself up and give me a kick with his booted foot. I got a real knock in the knee. Losing patience, I swung at him with my stick, getting him solidly in the legs. He fell like a tree when you chop it down. Memsahib came running brandishing her umbrella. I took it away from her without any trouble and flung it away. The driver had been sitting in the car all this time. Now he got out and came rushing at me with a cane. I brought my stick down hard on him too and he tumbled flat on the ground. A good-sized mob had gathered to see the fun. Still lying on the ground the sahib muttered, 'You rogue, we'll hand you over to the police!'

I raised my stick again and was about to thump him on the skull when he folded his hands and begged, 'No, no, baba, we won't go to the police. Forgive me.'

I said, 'All right. You shut about the police or I'll crack you over the skull. I might fetch six months in jail at the most for it but I'd break you of the habit. You drive along splashing mud everywhere and you're blind with arrogance. You don't give a damn who's in front of you or alongside of you or on the footpath.'

One of the onlookers said, 'Aray, Panditji! These drivers know perfectly well they're splashing and when somebody gets drenched they think it's no end of fun and laugh at him. You did well to give this one a lesson.'

'You hear what the people are

saying?' I shouted at the sahib. He threw a dirty look at the man who had spoken and said to him, 'You're lying, it's a complete lie.'

'You're still just as rude, aren't you! Shall I have another go at you with the stick?'

'No, baba,' he said in contrite tones. 'It's true, it's true. Now are you satisfied?'

Another bystander said, 'He'll tell you exactly what he thinks you want to hear but as soon as he's back in his car he'll start the same old business all over again. They sit inside their cars and they all think they're related to the maharaja.'

'Get him to admit he's wrong,' advised another.

'No, no, make him hold on to his ears and do knee-bends.'

'And what about the driver? They're all rogues. If a rich man's puffed up, that's one thing, but what are you drivers so conceited about? They take hold of the wheel and they can't see straight any more.'

I accepted the suggestion that master and driver grab on to their ears and do knee-bends, the way you punish little children, while his wife the memsahib kept counting. 'Listen, Memsahib,' I said, 'you've got to count a whole hundred bends, not one less but certainly as many over as you like.'

Two men drew the master up by his hands, and two more that gentleman-driver. The poor driver's leg was bruised but he promptly started on his knee-bends. The master was still pretty cocky; he lay down and began to curse a blue streak. I was furious and swore in my heart that I wouldn't let him go without doing a hundred knee-bends. I ordered four men to shove the car off the edge of the road.

They set to work at once.



Instead of four, fifty men crowded around and began to push the car. The road was built up very high with the land below it on either side. If the car had slid down it would have smashed to pieces. The car had already reached the edge of the road when the sahib let out a groan and stood up and said, 'Baba, don't wreck the car, we'll do knee-bends.'

I ordered the men to stand off. But they were all enjoying themselves and nobody paid any attention to me. But when I lifted up the stick and made for them they all abandoned the car and the sahib, shutting his eyes tight, began to do knee-bends.

After ten of them I asked the memsahib, 'How many has he

done?'

Very snootily she replied, 'I wasn't counting.'

'Then sahib's going to be groaning and moaning all day long, I won't let him go. If you want to take him home in good health count the knee-bends. Only then will he be a free man.'

The sahib saw that without completing his punishment he wouldn't get away with his life, so he began the knee-bends again. One, two, three, four, five...

Suddenly another car came into view. Sahib saw it and said very humbly, 'Panditji, take pity on me, you are my father. Take pity on me and I won't sit in a car again.'

I felt merciful and said, 'No, I don't forbid you to sit in your car,

I just want you to treat men like men when you're in it.'

The second car was speeding along. At my signal all the men picked up rocks. The owner of this car was doing the driving himself. Slowing down he tried to creep through us gradually when I advanced and stopped the car. Then I caught him by the ears, shook him violently and after giving him a slap on both cheeks, said, 'Don't splash mud on people with the car, understand? Move along politely.' He was about to start an argument with me until he saw a hundred men carrying rocks, then without any more fuss he went on his way.

A minute after he left another car came along. I ordered about twenty of the fellows to bar the

road; the car stopped. I gave him a few slaps too but the poor fellow was a gentleman. He accepted them as though he enjoyed them and continued on his journey.

Suddenly a man shouted, 'The police are coming.'

And everybody took to his heels. I too came down off the road and sidling into a little lane disappeared.

Premchand, the pseudonym used by Dhanpat Rai, (1880-1936) is arguably the greatest writer in Hindi, with an astonishing output of fourteen novels, about three hundred short stories and several hundred more essays, commentaries, editorials, etc. Bengalis probably remember him most as the writer of the story subsequently made into the film 'Satrije Ki Khelan' by Satyajit Ray. S. Mahnowar is an academic translator.

## BookReviews

# The personal enmeshed with the political

REBECCA SULTANA

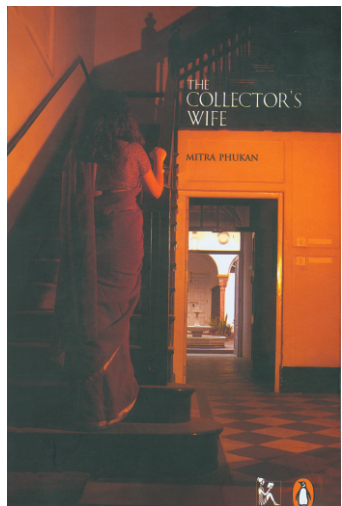
*The Collector's Wife* by Mitra Phukan. A Zubaan/Penguin India publication, New Delhi; 2005; pb, 349 pp.; Rs 205.

Mitra Phukan's *The Collector's Wife* is the first collaboration between Penguin India and Zubaan, a branch of Kali for Women, India's first feminist publishing house.

The plot revolves around Rukmini Bezboruah, the District Collector's wife in a small town in Assam. She is English-medium-educated and teaches literature at the local college not because she enjoys teaching but because that is the only befitting career option left to her in her short stints as the DC's wife in small towns. Rather condescendingly, she faces the small town pettiness with dignity and feigned acceptance as she avoids unpleasantness unbecoming of her exalted position. She is beset with the usual feminine concerns—a pressure to conform and be the ideal wife. On the personal front, however, her life does not present a picture of marital bliss. Unable to bear children, her life has become a calculated maneuver in the attempts to a successful conception where doctors and mother-in-law get involved. As she feels others' pitying and sometimes deprecating (depending on the

age of the beholder), gazes upon her, Rukmini is 'always burdened with the feeling that she had been unable to fulfill her part of a social contract. That she had not kept a bargain. That she had reneged on a promise of vital importance' (54). Her relation with her husband, thus, becomes fraught with tension. The neglect results in loneliness and leads her to succumb to a relationship which promises to bring her some happiness. But just as she might be sorting out the tangles that her life has gotten into, it is shaken to the core.

The novel reveals how the private space can be appropriated by the public as we discover the personal enmeshing into the political with tragic consequences. The time frame is the late 70s and early 80s with the volatile political climate of student protests, outlawed groups' demands for Assam's freedom from foreign infiltrators and street peoples' agitation until it becomes difficult to distinguish the innocent bystander from the perpetrators of violent chaos. They all contribute to the destruction of property and lives. But Phukan never takes the high ground in condemning any one particular group. Although the underground group MOFEH is responsible for many killings and ultimately in the destruction of her own life, Rukmini provides a human face to the organization through her discovery of a sym-



pathetic member. Members of MOFEH, misguided youths hardly into adulthood, are never demonized à la Bharati Mukherjee in *Tiger's Daughter*, where she belittles Naxalites as goondas and hooligans or as the left-most of the leftist politicians. Neither does she romanticize or condone their actions.

Despite belonging to the other side of the divide as the wife of the highest-ranking administrator in the region, Rukmini is not judgmental of her students' involvement in politics. When she questions two of her students about the sagacity of their involvement considering their background of poverty and parental dependence, she is given a caustic reply as to what had compelled

these young people to risk all.

Yet this is more a personal story of Rukmini than a political one in that the background intrudes only slightly and considering that the novel is told from Rukmini's sheltered perspective, that is understandable. Concerns that are more important to her are dealing with a virtually absent husband and her resentment at her inability to achieve something worthwhile as she remains constrained within the decorum of being a DC's wife. Such an identity also forces her into a symbolically cocooned existence as she stays protected on a hill-top residence while the "common" crowd is relegated down below.

Also, worked into the novel are pertinent issues we can ponder upon. Rukmini bemoans not only the students' complete apathy towards English literature but also their inability to comprehend the spontaneity of Romantic poetry or reach the depths of the Metaphysicals. She questions the relevance of teaching college-level English literature to students who lead vernacular lives far removed from its privileges. Students who are unfamiliar with a skylark or have never seen a daffodil can not be ideal candidates for the perusing of a Shelley or a Wordsworth. In Meena Alexander's *Nampally Road*, Mira Kannadical, a similarly beleaguered poet of Romantic poetry, ponders the

usefulness of her teaching. Indoctrinated with the ideals of British Romanticism, a dismayed Mira discovers that Wordsworthian philosophy is ineffectual in the confusion and unrest around her. She finally comprehends that her teaching could make no difference. But whereas Mira herself participates in protests as her concept of nationalism is distorted by the neo-colonial elites' exploitation of the poor and misuse of invested political power, Rukmini is conspicuously devoid of agency. It is, then, somewhat incongruous for a person so passive, and at times demure, to embark on an intimate excursion with a person she comes to know for only a day, or to sit undaunted in the face of armed personnel from whom her other identity would have protected her.

Phukan has earlier published articles in newspapers and magazines and has written children's books. As a first novel, *The Collector's Wife* is well-crafted. I certainly look forward to more ventures from these two publishing houses as they promise 'the pioneering energy of Zubaan and its commitment to women's literature, and Penguin's national and international distribution reach.'

Rebecca Sultana teaches English at East-West University, Dhaka.

## The Blame Consultant

NASIMA AZIZ

We're professional Consultants for assessing Blame: Automated Appraisal. Rating and Claim. Our methods are fully Computerised. A system of points has been devised.

You sir, were saying that you feel the need To kill a Muslim neighbour. But the deed Requires a finely tuned state Of motivation, to know the precise weight Of what you Blame him for before you act Since you're a Rational Man and all that.

We give receipts. Down payment required. Five thousand. Expert detectives are hired. The balance fifteen to be paid on the date We hand in the report that will seal his fate.

Part One is the Blame covering 800 years. (A discount rate. I paid the researchers just once for the job. I'm an honest man, see) The Blame-points taken in proximity To places like Somnath and Ayodhya 'Particular Destructions' took place here As you know. The rest was regular loot, Plunder and pillage of the usual sort.

Since both of you live in the heart of Old Delhi Let's start on a scale, shall we say, 93? You had Timur and Chingez, frequent Mongol attacks Khiljis and Tughlaqs -- the whole Barbary pack.

The tricky part (the main expense) will come When Appraising the Individual Sum. 107 years he has been your neighbour To evaluate that time is a lot of labour.

Four generations must be reconstructed. Understand please that points are deducted For the following:

Did your mother and his old aunts' womenfolk Sit in the sun on rooftops and talk, Filling cotton and basting *razais* in winter Or dyeing *dupattas* in warmer weather? Did they hold a common *dupatta*, wet, One at each end, billow and swing it In rhythm to dry straight and flat?

Did they lean over trays of *jeera* and *dal* Picking out stones? Did they cry in a movie hall In a matinee show? Did your fathers share One black umbrella on a rain-soaked day From bus stop to doorstep? Discuss threadbare Political views in newspapers on Sunday?

We haven't yet come to the day you were born Played 'ala-bala' with him. It goes on...

That was Part Two, the Family section We'll need several sittings, additions, corrections. We'll talk about babies, hen-chasing and kites Sharing *jalebis* and pickles and fights.

Part Three in the software asks: Who's Really To Blame And pinpoints the guilt to a specific name. If he is dead -- he has gone to his fate. If he is here -- I'll let you know straight.

Here comes the AVM print-out which reads: 'Guilt does not belong to Communities. Go and research the political plan, The surest way to expose Your Man.'

Sir! Don't change your mind! Hello! It's a very good rate -- Damn! I haven't had a single client till date.

Nasima Aziz, once a promising young poet, has returned to poetry after thirty years. She lives in Lucknow. Published with the express permission of The Little Magazine, Delhi.

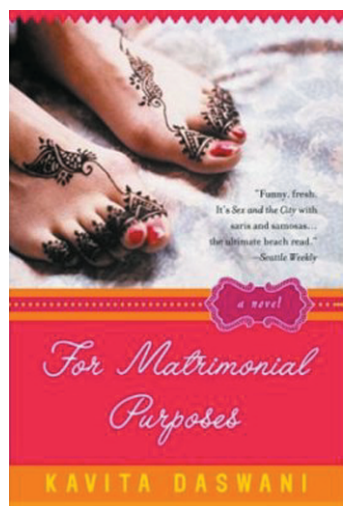
# The Great Official Husband Hunt

NAUSHEEN RAHMAN

*For Matrimonial Purposes*, by Kavita Daswani; London: Harper Collins; 2004; 325 pp.

This is a humorously written book about a grave matter—the marrying off of daughters! It's a first-person narrative of a 33 year-old Indian woman, Anju, living in New York, and many mothers with grown-up, single daughters will find their own emotions, their dilemmas, unfolding in the pages of this hilarious, yet sensitive, book. More importantly, perhaps, single women (30 and above) will readily relate to the protagonist.

Anju has an exciting job and a self-sufficient existence—but in



her social circle at home in India, the fact that she is not married, while her younger cousins are, is

what everyone's attention is focused on. Even her mother tells her, in no unclear terms, that being married is a bigger priority than being happy.

Anju's very first romance with an American is nipped in the bud because 'the core of Jeff's life was freedom and adventure. The core of mine was restraint and caution. On top of that I was guilty and afraid all the time.' Just as well, one might venture, for Anju's mother isn't quite complimentary about 'those Umricans'. Kumar, whom Anju meets over the Internet, seems perfect—until he drops out of the scene on learning that she lives on her own in New York.

Anju isn't averse to an arranged match as long her

ideas of compatibility aren't violated. As 'The Great Official Husband Hunt' proceeds we meet such amusingly nicknamed suitors as 'Mr Monobrow', whose eyebrows merge in the middle. Happily, the ending is romantic, realistic, optimistic...and beautifully evolved. By the time we get there we are thoroughly entertained by the book's social realism (e.g. in the convincingly gorgeous description of an Indian wedding) and psychological realism (e.g. in depicting the inhibitions of Indian girls). There is also an unobtrusively introduced didactic dimension: both parents and daughters learn something about the importance of self-discovery, self-respect, self-preservation and the ability

to live with grace.

Here's one paragraph that well illustrates the book's serious side: 'Sheryl had asked me once what defined me, and I didn't have an answer. Now I did: Not my parents, not my quest for a husband, not my quaint religious endeavours. I was going to be defined by the work I did, the people I befriended and the impact I would have in my small, but increasingly happy, world.'

This is a book I didn't put down—to do other, 'more important' things. And it's not only because I have a marriageable daughter.

Nausheen Rahman is an educator and freelance writer.

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