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SHORT STORY

Assuming Aunty Jaja

NADIA VRISHIBA HANIFF

he journey home is both a challenge and a luxury. Physically challenging, but luxuriously thoughtful. Today I thought about Sydney. The past five years spent there, to be exact. The early closing times here make me miss Sydney's constant whirring but home is where I belong. Even though my roots are threatening to asphyxiate me.

The white shirt that accentuates my honey-roasted skin had a misplaced patch of mud, courtesy of a pack of rabid Beckham wannabes. My toes were whining to be released from their Mary Jane dungeons. The grungy, mustard-gold key fit. Before I got the chance to relieve myself of my attaché case, a siren of "Aunty Ja!!" rang, and miniature limbs were entwined around my knees. It's amazing what two months of close proximity could do.

I looked down on the pseudo-octopus, which grinned cheekily to acknowledge my gaze. I began my penguin-like waddle around the living room, while the stubborn tumour emitted giggle after giggle.

"Matthew! Get off Aunty Ja! Can't you see she just got home?" a stern voice rang from behind me. I struggled to face it, nearly falling in the process. Cue more giggles.

"But Mummy..." the voice pleaded, fading on contact with the stern face of the anti-fun police. Reluctantly, my legs' captor released them, before fleeing in search of his next victim.

"Thanks for that sis."

"No problem. And how was your day, Nadia?" "Well, where do I begin... Mr Meyer's a prick, nearly fell asleep during the board meeting and my salad was garnished with a grimy

fingernail," "Wow. Sounds like you really needed the lotus position today," Nat replied, her face crumpling with concern. I loved yoga, but there was

no way Matt was going to be home alone. "Hey, no worries. I was getting sick of those self-righteous spiritual freaks anyway."

Nat examined my face, looking for circumstantial evidence. However, those acting classes really paid off. Content with the notion that I was alright, she let me be, while she went back to her room. I scaled the stairs, and made a beeline for mine.

"Mummy!"

I turned from the dressing table and found Matt facing Nat's room door. She let him in, closing the door behind him. Not a glance thrown my way.

I stared at the raccoon-eyed lookalike in the mirror. Duncan loved my "starry" eyes. I ran my fingers through my greasy tresses, the ones Duncan loved braiding. I touched the rough face that Duncan loved to caress. The waist he loved to encase, the hands he loved to hold, the...

"Stop it!" my brain screamed as my palms blocked by ears. I tried shaking the images out of my head, but Matt's hullabaloo in the background hampered my progress. I locked myself in the bathroom.

I showered for a good half-hour, letting the streams trace my weary body. The steam travelled up the walls, lifting the scent of the mint shampoo with it. I was nearly lost in my sinful indulgence when I heard my calling. A quick flick of the wrist - the hot water shut. A sudden surge of near freezing water jolted my senses. I nearly screamed.

Five minutes of accelerated dressing and a few screams later: I was at the door with Nat and Craig. While Craig smothered Matt farewell, I had to threaten Nat to move away from the building.

"If there's anything, just call my mobile." "I will..."

"Anything. Anything at all..."

"Sure."

"You remember my number right?" "Stop worrying already! Just go!"

"Right. Well... oh, before I forget, don't let him go near the computer.

Craig's working on his thesis so..."

"Yea, I gotcha, now will the two of you just vamoose!" I retorted. "Thank god you decided to move in with us, Naddie," she finally said, before bestowing me with the ceremonial peck on the cheek and leaving, arm in arm, with her knight in shining armour. Matt waved them farewell until their chariot disappeared around the corner.

"So pardner, what would you like for dinner tonight?"

"Chocolate cake!" the runt answered, his eyes gleaming. Ah, those eyes. They remind me of Duncan. They are the kind of eyes which could light a dreary room when they set their gaze on you. Irresistibly boyish eyes I call them.

"Hmm... I don't think so..."

to remain unmoved.

"Tempting offer, but you've gotta eat proper food so that you'll grow sat big and strong!" an I scooped Matt and abducted him from his spot, grabbing some rai

essentials along the way. While he drew coy cats and droopy dogs, I chopped garlic and

onions. While he coloured the sky green, I accidentally opened a can of kidney beans. Every once in awhile, Matt would set his artistic pieces aside to play inspector, and chat about whatever was on his youthfully innocent mind. It is surreal hearing him talk. When you close your eyes, you would

be convinced that Matt is an Australian child, but on opening them, would be shocked to discover that his hair is a bit too dark and skin a bit off-shade. Again, he reminds me of Duncan.

One of the things on his mind was a girl at kindergarten. Her face is framed with golden ringlets, and eyes, a Pacific blue. A real life Shirley Temple. She is more like a young Drew Barrymore. A complete paradox on the interior. Candy theft, child harassment, playground assault, non-napping, tantrum throwing -- the child has done it all. Satan would be so proud.

"Ayemeen Gerle said I have an ugly honker and called me fungus beak!" he wailed, sticking his nose up at me. Why can't that girl ever have words to match her appearance? A swift motion, and my height was dramatically reduced.

"Well, you tell Ayemeen Gerle that you got your grandfather's nose. Just like me. You tell her that I said so," I replied, kissing his minute albeit runny nose. He grinned he knew he'd be one up on Ayemeen now. Ayemeen always seeks my company whenever I pick Matt up. Although, I'm not particularly enthralled by the idea of being worshipped by the devil's associate.

"Now, do you know what time it is?" I asked in a mysteriously husky voice. I was met with a blinding onslaught of stars shooting out of the windows of Matt's soul.

"Cooking time!!" Matt shouted, just like the oversized fashionchallenged fruits on the television. What were they called? Zucchinis in bikinis? No, that didn't sound right. Before I could recall, Matt had raced back into the kitchen, with Shakira's voice in hot pursuit. I mercilessly condemned the vegetables, white with fear, into the pit of my trusty wok, rhythmically tossing them about. Matt was running around the counter, awkwardly wiggling about. It's always weird watching him to think that before I returned, the last memory I had was that of a helpless babe in arms. How happily he suckled his mother's breast, in contrast with how miserable I was feeling because I had to leave.

"Hunny, you've got to sway to the beat of the music!" I joked, attempting to displace my hips. Matt was suitably impressed with the mediocre attempt at belly dancing, cheering Aunty Jaja on. Funny that Matt should call me that.

Jaja: what a toddler calls herself when she cannot pronounce Nadia. Nobody calls me that except Nat. And Duncan. I remember when he first called me that. How the words just flowed so effortlessly, with such warmth. Jaja. Why are you calling me that, I remembered asking. Because it's a term of affection, he replied. His ring still graces my finger.

The promise of his favourite movie got Matt to swallow down his meal in record time. The DVD found its way into the magical black case as Matt snuggled up to me. I twirled his hair affectionately as I thought about Duncan.

"You know what I wanna be when I grow up Aunty Ja?"

"What's that?" "I wanna be a policeman!" he announced, obviously pleased with himself for choosing such a gallant occupation. "I wanna chase away all the bad people!" he continued, before scrunching his nose up, utterly disguised by the misdeeds of his future captors.

"That's very brave of you, but it's very dangerous being a policeman, you know.."

"I don't care! I hate bad people! They're mean!" he proclaimed haughtily, dismissing my worries. I wanted to discourage him, but the look on his face suggested that even the Power Rangers would have problems outdoing his feet-stamping if I continued. Men, even small boys, can be so stubborn at times. Even my beloved Duncan.

I remember it clearly. My eyes were burning from all the crying. I pleaded. Don't go. Think of the future we have planned, I begged. He would have none of it. Justice must be served. I *am* thinking about our future, Jaja. Would you want our children to grow up in a world ruled by hooligans? That's all he said before he walked out that door. I spent the rest of the evening rocking like a drug addict going cold turkey.

Sure he came back safe and sound from another successful raid. The news was splashed in the papers about his latest triumph. You must be so proud of him Nadia.

safer by the day. That ought to teach those bikies! But I knew the battle was far from over. Was it over when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour? Was it over when the World Trade Towers came crashing down in a cloud of dust?

those bad guys.. BANG BANG BANG!"

Matt yelled with a

vengeance, haphaz-

ardly shooting the air

around us. I blinked

hard. BANG BANG

home after a night in

the city. Our hands fit

perfectly as if they

were moulded for

each other.

remember thinking

that there was nothing

that could make us let

We were walking

BANG indeed.

He's making our city

go of each other. We stopped to appreciate the Southern Cross. His hands warmed my cheeks, his lips tasted my love for him. We were so happy we had our whole lives ahead of us. The past four months had been our happiest.

whole lives ahead of us. The past four months had been our happiest. We couldn't wait for more firsts our first house, our first anniversary, our first taste of parenthood... the list was endless.

We ventured on as one. I was certain that our love would never die. Then... BANG BANG BANG. My back hit the punishing concrete. Then came the screeching friction of rubber tyres and the asphalt road. My stomach ached, but save for a few bruises, I was okay.

"Duncan..." I whispered, terrified to make a sound. Duncan's hair tickled the crook of my neck. I held his warm body close to my accelerating heart. My hands caressed his back, feeling the woollen strands of his knitted sweater. It felt moist. I lifted my head and found my palms clutching a reddened sweater.

I remember the sleepless nights spent wrapping my arms around my belly protectively. That used to be Duncan's job. Not bothering with my mini-skirts anymore. Besides, there was no one worth looking good for. Not anymore. Torturing myself with incessant images of Duncan, clearer than any plasma screen could ever transmit. Afterwards I couldn't even walk down the street without runny mascara making me look like a brown zebra. I transported my hollowed body as far as I could, as soon as I could. I severed all contacts. Anything to get the ear-splitting, flesh-bound bullets out of my mind.

"Will daddy like it if I was a policeman instead of a lawyer?" Matt asked, breaking my reverie. His eyes were widened by his blissful ignorance and inherent curiosity. It's heartbreaking to see the apparently non-exhaustible hope in the eyes of the innocent in times of almost certain uncertainty.

I was not quite sure what to say. Malevolent spirits rubbed chilli on my eyes. But I knew the answer to his question.

"Will daddy still love me if I was a policeman?" he repeated, thinking that Aunty Ja had gone deaf.

"Your daddy will love you no matter what you do," I finally enunciated, forcing the words out of my larynx. I wasn't lying. There is no doubt that his daddy will be chuffed. After all, Matt wants to follow in his

Kashef and his melting images

Amitava Malakar

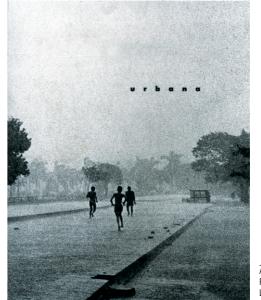
Urbana: Around Dhaka (a book of photos) by Kashef Mahboob Chowdhury; Image Works Production, Dhaka; 2004.

This is not the first time I have seen an architect trying to understand his 'location' from a distance. Dhaka for Kashef Mahboob Chowdhury is a canvas that he has been re-orienting with elements. He adds a bit of poetry to a wall and a bit of mystery to an empty living room--which was supposed to be dead forever-- and then puts in another bit of sunlight and sky and laughter-long-forgotten into brick windows. He calls this collection of photographic representation 'Urbana: Around Dhaka.' Anthologies that deal with construction works always have photographs of the 'working class.' It might seem only natural that all socially conscious artists would do so. But these kinds of constructions never seem to have any relationship with the workers. So Kashef cramps them down to a dinginess which reveals the contrast--while vanishing them from these sites, he gives them a space that is exclusively their own, an 'outside.' It is we who would assume that the figure dancing into a haze or those at the tea-stall are workers--people who are

comprehensively different from the unreal, toy-like figures in the 'plazas' with glass towers.

What seems interesting is that the spaces created by Kashef does not seem to be made for the 'living' or, for that matter, the 'dead'--these spaces can never be 'spooky'...I would never tell fairytales to my son if we had to live here, we would rather play videogames. The windows are not for anyone to look out into the world--there is no world outside. The cover of the book shows a road with children running, but this road does not lead outside to these 'designed' houses and they would never reach the 'jalebis' depicted at the end of the book.

We are made to walk unfinished museum/alien spaces where the hallucinatory effect of the surrounding is enhanced by the way sunlight from outside is brought in through squares cut in the roof. This is going to be the reality of the finished piece of architecture. Light wouldn't just pour into the rooms during the day (or at night), but would have to be brought in--a sanitized light - as clinically as the bricks and glass and concrete were during building. We would have a quota of both the expected and the unexpected, but the unexpected would not surprise us. It is a cleverly constructed book. The reader/viewer who goes through it would have to think would have to think how s/he moves in and out of it. Kashef wants us to look at these images from behind closed brick windows and from the living rooms of artists who never lived.



The Baily Star DHAKA SATURDAY JUNE 11, 2005

"I promise I won't get a stomachache," he pleaded, casting those eyes on me. The desperado knew my weakness, but I was determined

Duncan on the other hand, was hooked like an addict chasing his first high, but never quite achieving it. He had to continue his quest. And he did it with such fervour.

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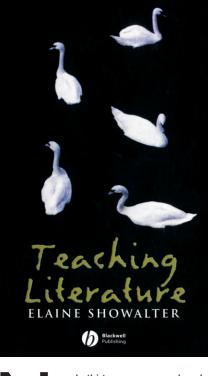
Nadia Vrishiba Haniff is one of Singapore's younger women writers.

Amitava Malakar teaches at Pathshala, Drik Picture Library..

BookReview **Content** The Joys and Anxieties of Teaching English Literature

FAKRUL ALAM

Teaching Literature by Elaine Showalter; Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003. 177 pp.



early thirty years ago, when I first went into a classroom in the University of Dhaka to teach English literature I remember how terrified I was. I had spent a couple of days reading for the class and half of a sleepless night writing out the lecture itself. I think I had written out my lecture in its entirety--twenty pages at least! --and then memorized it. And yet once in the classroom I managed to blurt it out in about forty minutes, leaving me with ten minutes of sheer agony and embarrassment.

I wish I had Elaine Showalter's slim but succinct introduction to teaching literature with me then. Turning to p. 111 of her book, I would have had a sense of deja vu in reading the testimony of a fellow sufferer: "It was scary...I knew the material, but I felt I needed a lot more help." But having the book itself would have perhaps calmed me down and would have equipped me somewhat for that initiatory moment and subsequent hours, weeks, and months in class. Wise, witty, wide-ranging in its review of literature teaching practices and options, Showlater's book is that rare thing in our profession: the perfect guide to the classroom.

Showlater is eminently equipped to share with us her expertise as a teacher of literature. Professor of English at Princeton University, she has taught English and American literature at all levels and all over the world for almost forty years now. Once president of the Modern Language Association of America and author of the seminal feminist study A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing and quite a few other major studies of English and American literature, she is one of the foremost teachers of English in America at this time. But the book also distils the experience of other major academics of the western world, presenting readers with expert advice on how to teach literature in the classroom.

Showalter begins her book with a chapter on the anxiety of teaching--the sense of panic beginning teachers have before class, "the fear of failure--the failure of one's authority" reported by one of her respondents, who even wrote a poem about the experience: "To teach is to be battered/Scrutinized, and drained/Day after day. We know this./Still, it is never said." (3). She identifies seven sources of teaching-anxiety: "lack of pedagogical training, isolation, stage fright, the conflict between teaching and publication, coverage, grading, and student or peer evaluation."

Lack of training is one of the main causes of teaching anxiety anywhere but my experience tells me that it is the number one problem for beginning teachers in Bangladesh. We are let loose in the classroom with no training at all, whereas in North America chances are that you have been a teaching assistant for at least a few years before you are perceived to be ready for the real thing. The consequence is that most of us enter classrooms without any sense of the audience, no insight into managing time, and no knowledge of the varieties of activities possible in a classroom besides lecturing.

In contrast, Showlater is a great believer in the idea that "teaching is a skill that can be learned". To say that good teachers are born to the profession is to her to perpetuate a myth. She advocates a continuous dialogue with other teachers about teaching and is a great believer in teaching workshops. She also suggests that research and teaching at the university level are complementary; the good teacher is the one who is at the cutting edge of research. Personally, I am amazed at praise heaped on university teachers who have done no research at all for years: yes, he or she might be good up to a point, but isn't the substance of his or her lecture going to be hopelessly outdated sooner or later?

Reading Showalter I realized that the first time I lectured I had suffered because of what she calls "performance anxiety." Beginning teachers have something very close to stage fright; but not having been trained to perform, they are even more nervous than actors in standing up and playing the role of the teacher before a large classroom. Reading Showalter also made me feel that to teach well is to achieve the right balance between performing, imparting information, and making students think.

Showalter urges instructors to opt for midterm student evaluations on their own so that they can adjust their teaching to meet student needs or to correct problems in interacting with students on their own. She stresses how important it is to learn the names of students correctly, to develop one's voice and physical movements and adjust them to classroom size, shape, and sitting arrangements.

Chapters 2 and 3 of Showalter's book are about the theories and methods of teaching literature. She points out how literature was once taught because of its humanizing elements but is now viewed as "a mode of consciousness-raising", as a means of identity formation, and of nurturing the imagination of students. Of course many of the points stressed by her and her colleagues may strike us in Bangladesh as irrelevant or impractical. Almost no one here-administrator, parent, teacher, or student--will agree with one of her colleagues who declares that "the objective of a course is not to cover a certain set of topics, but rather to facilitate student learning and teaching," or with another one who suggests that "the main goal of...teaching is to get their students to be 'critical thinkers'"--but surely these goals are not to be slighted even if in our country students come to the English department mainly to be fluent in the language and ready for the job market?

Reading Showalter's Teaching Literature I was made to reflect on the major difference between the ways we teach English in Bangladesh and the ways it is taught in the west. We are still caught up in teachercentered pedagogy whereas there the emphasis is on "active learning". In their approach teachers listen as well as talk and adopt the kind of "dialogic, problem-solving pedagogy" recommended by the great Brazilian theorist of learning Paulo Freire. The problem, of course, in our country is how to do so in large classrooms and in a culture where all wisdom is supposed to emanate from the teacher. And yet if this goal proves difficult to implement not only because of the size of the class but also because students prefer to be spoon-fed rather than led to come to their own conclusions, it is a goal that we can ill afford to abandon. As Showalter puts it: it is "only the real exchange of ideas that makes teaching memorable"

But whether we prefer teacher-centered pedagogy to one that prioritizes learning by students, Showalter is emphatic about the sine qua non of good teaching: "The first step in teaching method is preparation, both in the course and the individual class." She stresses the necessity of studying before the class and of teaching new material or that which is still fresh from a recent reading. I particularly liked the Emersonian emphasis in Showalter's book: "Every course is a fresh start, a chance to start anew, to get it right...Each semester is an opportunity for self-renewal." How can a teacher ever get iaded or sound boring if he or she starts every teaching term as a new one? She suggests too that the teacher must take special care to engage the student's attention in the first class and that attitude, dress, body language, and appearance as well as statements about course requirements that are articulated in the first class are all important for the success of the course.

I found Showalter's book full of stimulating ideas and helpful suggestions about the theory and practice of teaching. For example, she notes that studies show that our attention levels drop after ten minutes and therefore teachers must break or change their approach every fifteen minutes or so. She points out how one literature teacher who is considered outstanding, Bonnie Zimmerman of the University of California at San Diego, succeeds not by going to the classroom with

notes but by "being totally focused on the students," by conveying her "great enthusiasm" for the material she teaches, by asking "a few pointed and direct questions," and by having "an overall sense and plan" for how she wants the class to go. Evidently, Showalter herself succeeds in the classroom, even in a very large one, by giving lectures that are structured and clear, using technology, and by "the deliberate introduction of the personal" experience without indulging in narcissistic behavior, as well as observing fairness and transparency in grading and of course by her scholarship.

The rest of Teaching Literature describes specific aspects of the pedagogy of the subject. She thus has separate chapters on teaching poetry, fiction, and drama. In the chapter on teaching poetry one of her correspondents suggests, helpfully, that the teacher of verse must foreground "languages. in its complexity, intensity, and relatedness." Showalter's chapter on teaching drama is as helpful as the one on teaching poetry. She indicates that a very effective way of doing so is to stage plays in whole or in part in the classroom since just as the meaning of a poem is fully realized when it is read out loud the essence of a play comes out when it is dramatized. As one of her correspondents observes, a teacher of drama has to make students "think of a play not just as a book but as a script for a possible performance."

I must say though that I was quite disappointed with the chapter on teaching fiction in Showalter's book. She and her correspondents recognize the problem created by the length of a novel and the limited time that the instructor has but the solutions they offer aren't very helpful. In fact, I found at least a few of the solutions offered to be eccentric. Isn't the method adopted by Lisa Berglund of Connecticut College, of making students study the eighteenth-century novel by candlelight and then write in that same light, downright silly? The length of Showalter's chapter here is indicative of her earnestness throughout the book in helping readers teach literature better, but its failure perhaps is indicative that the novel is an almost impossible form to handle in the classroom and that there are no satisfactory solutions to the problem posed by sheer size

In view of the importance theory has assumed in English departments, it is good to have a chapter on teaching it in *Teaching* *Literature.* Showalter and the colleagues she consults on the subject recognize the difficulty of teaching it and the fear and/or loathing it can induce not only in students but also in some academics. However, she calls attention to ways of overcoming resistance to theory through methods that stress active learning in addition to "patience and imagination."

In the chapter on theory and in subsequent chapters Showalter points to the Web as an endless source of material on teaching literature She has, in addition, useful tips about utilizing videos and films in classrooms She offers a helpful collection based on postings from instructors on such key issues of teaching as beginning the class, asking the opening question, controlling discussions, course planning, pacing, and continuity, classroom management, ending classes, grading, and making use of student course evaluations. She has something to say about teaching controversial texts, especially on teaching texts containing explicit sexual language. I was particularly taken by her emphasis on teaching as "a humane, humanistic, value-laden art" and how teaching can be therapeutic in times of personal tradedies, something I have learned from my own experience.

Showalter concludes her book with a chapter on the joys of the teacher of literature. As someone who feels privileged to be in the profession, and who knows that he is learning about teaching all the time, this was a heartening chapter to read. Indeed, I found the book as a whole elevating and her conclusion that "developing a coherent teaching self is a lifelong process" inspirational. Showalter also presents in her concluding chapter an observation made by another of her correspondents that I found particularly motivating, "Teaching is after all a 'work in progress'." Yes, that's exactly it! I am of course no longer the nervous young man who had rushed through a wad of material in forty minutes thirty years ago in a literature classroom at Dhaka University, but I feel that the process of learning about my profession that began so inauspiciously that day has been greatly helped by Showalter's Teaching Literature.

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