

## SHORT STORY

## Godless

KISHORI CHARAN DAS,  
(translated by the author)

I am not godless, not really. Anyone who knows me will accept the statement. Even Abhiram babu has told me that, all said and done, I possess a clean heart and I can love God. But I know He does not exist. This is my conviction and I do not change it now. But I am not godless. I love the silent shimmerings of Nature and the little creatures of the earth--the tremulous pool of water in the courtyard, the kitten in the basket, the tender aswatha leaf...I love all children. Do I not suffer so, at this moment, from so much love? I have not met Abhiram babu for a long time. Could it be that he does not want to see me? No, I do not think so. I have also not been able to make it. For I have no respite these days from office-work. I shall go to his place next Sunday. I must. And I will take my son along.

I came to know Abhiram babu about one year back when I moved to Calcutta. We first met one day at the lunch-hour on opposite sides of a greasy table-top in a government office canteen. That was my trial visit there. But I was about to beat a retreat, thanks to the smoke, dirt and the sweating crowd when I saw a gentleman engaged in deep meditation. The meditation over, he offered a portion of the food to his gods. He smiled when he saw me, and said, 'Won't you be seated, please?' It was more curiosity than a desire to make friends. I sat on the chair opposite and noted--here is one of those godmen. I have a strong prejudice against these people. Yet it was taken in by his smiles, untouched as it were by pleasure, and the gentle, unhurried words. I thought it may well be nice to have lunch with him, once in a while, in the canteen. Eventually I found that he was not merely given to religion, he was also a lover of God. He would even get excited on hearing Ram-Dhun over the canteen radio. He would lose track of the conversation and would sometimes be lost entirely to the outside world, sitting there like an animated block of stone. Abhiram babu had a small frame,

fair complexion, and a balding forehead... He also comes to office neatly dressed; his gestures or manner of speech do not reveal any oddity either. On the whole I found nothing in him that is apt to tickle you in your idle moments...except the certain weakness of an emotion that refuses to stay under cover, his love of God. He hardly talks about himself. Most people in this world are on the side of God, but I have rarely come across such specimens of love for that invisible and unknown Person except for proclaimed saints and sadhus.

So, once, I pounced upon him. We were then standing somewhere in the Chowringhee maidan on a July afternoon, wanting to find a foothold on a tram.

'What is the image of your God?' I asked him.

The suddenness took him unawares and he stared at me. I re-framed the question: 'I mean, what is the image in which you happen to see Him? Father, mother, friend, child, wife, mistress or any other?'

He answered in his usual level tone. 'I do not see God. I feel Him.' A tram not overly crowded at the foot-board stopped near us then, and we rushed to get inside. We were able to plant our feet somehow on the available space and were trying to keep steady with one hand clutching at the railing and the other clinging to the briefcase. Abhiram babu concluded his statement in this situation. 'You know what I meant by feeling Him?' I gather myself completely. It seems I do not have any wants, not any more.'

The conductor came jostling among the passengers to ask for the fare. I managed to bring out the coins with painful contortions and handed over the fare for both of us, whereas my companion remained unmindful of everything. And then he said, 'I remember a funny incident. Once I had closed my eyes at prayers. When I opened them I found that my daughter Indu, sitting by my side, had also kept her eyes closed. She opened her eyes in a moment and smiled at me showing her two upper teeth. That is all. As if we had got hold of some hidden treasures between ourselves.' He laughed and added, 'She is a naughty one! Teases me all the time...but



there was a telephone call--the soft slow syllables of our friend: 'Namaskar. We have come back.' After a brief exchange of pleasantries, he said almost casually that Indu was not keeping well and that is why they had to shorten their stay in the village. I went directly to his place from my office. I looked for Indu. Abhiram babu said that she was bed with a slight fever. His wife added that she seemed to have some peculiar illness. She was merely nibbling at her food and was getting thinner by the day. Abhiram babu sought to tone down her concern by mildly negative gestures, as if it was not quite proper to impose the obligation of sympathy on another person. I did not quite like his attitude of otherness. Was not Indu a daughter to me? I said I would like to see her. Indu was sleeping. I found she had really become thin. But there were no signs of her getting well. The fever would not subside. The city doctor was confirmed in his diagnosis that it was typhoid. He also said that several complications had set in, but there was no cause for anxiety.

Yet there was no noticeable change in the behaviour of Abhiram babu. He was coming to the office regularly, was having lunch in the canteen, and was getting lost unpredictably in meditations. Once I even saw him offer his naive smile to the sick child, when her mother tried to conceal her tears. The moon-faced Indu--her cheeks were still fairly round even as the body had shrunk to a bare skeleton--answered him in the same token. As if they were playing the old game of communing with each other after prayers: We know the score, you and me. Mother would not know--poor thing! Strange, how they sought to relate in sadness. The scene called for abundant sympathy. More abundant than acute, for the sadness seemed to be so out-of-the-world, almost inhuman, a bare idea of the limitless blue and the deep where the bubbles say hello to each other. I did not like it. I looked for the sorrowing mother, she was my kind. I consoled her as best as I could. I said the doctor was banking on fifty percent hope and we could provide the balance with our prayers. I hastened to add that I

was not referring to God. By prayers I meant the outpouring of emotions, the fear and fervent wish and all, for the one we love...does it not amount to something? Suddenly my son changed the scenario. He caught fever. Two days later his body was full of sores. The doctor said that it was small-pox, raging like wildfire in the city. I must say I felt somewhat exalted when I passed on the news of Abhiram babu. I have also been touched by Tragedy. Let me have the appropriate awe and respect from you all. But in a few days, his condition became critical. I swept aside the beguiling veil of Tragedy and felt the raw pain. The pain of the living body. The thousand angry sores, they were torturing him with needles and red-hot metal. He was crying, my son. I tried to comfort him in the manner of Abhiram babu. I tried to console his mother. But I could not control my own restlessness. I wanted to create or destroy something, so that I could gather a sense of power--and spread it like anodyne on his face. Once I saw the shadow of death in his eyes. No use asking the doctor. He would only nod his head like a know-all--wait, let us see. That evening I could not bear the sight of that lighted room, laden with numerous bottles of medicine, the uncasing of tears of his mother, the many orange peels and pomegranate seeds, and the pungent odour of the neem leaves. The efforts to extend life seemed like a cruel joke. Why suffer him to live if he has to die? Why this prolonged agony of the seconds and minutes...?

I wanted to be left alone and went to the rooftop. I surveyed the bright millions in the sky. Down below, I observed my fellow-men. Somebody is searching his garage with a flashlight for a precious piece of property. Precious indeed! He does not know a thing about my son nor does he care. There were men behind lighted windows and in the streets. Prayers? Does it have to come to prayers at last? Am I one of those intellectual weaklings, who demolish God by logic of words and yet run to Him for help at the sight of a ghost? I did not yield to temptation. I did not pray...I remembered Abhiram babu. Indu and Abhiram babu. He does

not suffer like me for he is safe in the cocoon of a lie. And then it came upon me that one of them will die. One of them will die so that the other may live. How do you smother a wish that overtakes you? How do you deny the passage of a shooting star? It is inconceivable that I bore him any malice or that I did not love Indu like my own daughter. Yet, I wished that my son would recover. Indu will die. It will not hurt Abhiram babu, for he is a man of God.

All those men in view in houses and streets suddenly seemed to move at a faster pace. At a faster pace and together. Even the racing cars and the sentry standing at his post appeared to be bound together in purpose and movement...like performers in a grand opera. Only I was not there. I was the outsider. Goddess.

I went down the steps in a scare.

I sat beside my son on the sickbed. His mother asked, 'Where had you been? There was a telephone call just now. Abhiram babu.'

'What did he say?'

She intoned restlessly, 'He enquired about our son and said that Indu has again taken a turn for the worse...'

There is hardly anything more to say. I could not go to see Indu on her last day. My wife was there. She told me that nobody knows if Abhiram babu wept for his daughter. For he shut himself inside a room for hours and was looking normal when he came out.

This is what I had imagined. I have no cause for remorse. But do they mean to say that my sorrow is a mere luxury of the aftermath? The pretence of not being able to heave the sigh of relief? That man will pass by my lane any time now. Or he may not. But I hear him toll the bell constantly, unreasonably, in my waking hours--

*The little boy will play  
Oh my little girl will play...*

--I shall not buy anything from him ever.

Kishori Charan Das pioneered the psychological mode in the modern Oriya short story.

## Jamini: An International Arts Quarterly

Publisher Abul Khair; editor Luva N. Choudhury; executive editor Ziaul Karim; Layout design by Shamim Chowdhury. Volumes reviewed: February 2005 (Popular Art) Tk. 300; Vol. 2, Number 3, 2005, Tk. 300.

AMITAVA KUMAR

These days are over when for serious art criticism we had to look at the West. The 'masters' informed the 'natives' about who were fit to be called artists and performers and which were the places that produced 'good artists' or a 'martial race'. Thus if the cultural shackles were not broken at a particular historical juncture, we might have never known about Sri Lankan or Korean maestros. Our idea about 'profoundness' in

art might have forever been derived from what Western Europe produced--not that I want to negate any of their achievements--without the slightest idea of what might be happening at *arshinagar*. There is a tradition of art criticism in our culture that was indigenous and with local flavours, making it popular among the relatively uninitiated. But it was certainly quite different from what *Jamini* has been doing with its unique approach towards not only art but also its presentation and reception.

I personally fell in love with it at first sight. Here I was holding something in my hand that was in a class by itself from every point of view. Other important magazines that dealt with art valorized them to an extent where

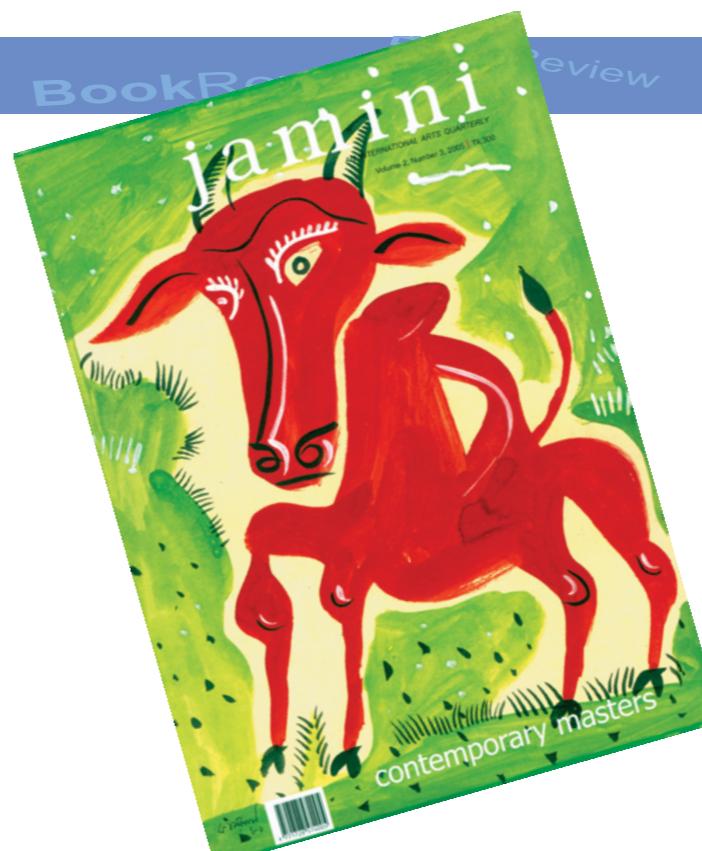
it actually did not matter whether the books--or in most cases magazines--perpetually failing to meet publication deadlines--attracted potential readers or not. They were shabbily produced with a lot of printing errors; the quality of reproductions of photographs or paintings gave birth to ideas that were quite contrary to what was probably intended -- or did the editors even care a fig! The interest of the general readership was supposed to be 'developed' with the help of erudite ramblings-- excuse me--which in most cases were second-hand references to oracles pronounced by a dead white male-- that usually did not mean anything at all in our everyday context.

*Jamini* has changed that idea here for the first time we see due importance given to the production that comments on the love for artistic expressions and making them reach out to a large group of uninterested but potential readership. The reproductions are of a quality that takes the readers to an intimate level of communication with ideas that the artist wanted to convey through combinations of colours and textures--they are not just a waste of space that fail to connect, to provoke. It is evident that beyond all other motives that one could think of, a basic sense of respect for the readership works behind the designing of such a production.

*Jamini* is important for another aspect. Within its two covers is a meeting place, a salon where a broad range of people thinking seriously about art meet from all over this subcontinent and beyond. We are introduced to people commenting on the world of artistic manifestations throbbing around us without encountering a language that alienates the readers with unnecessary complexities--largely the end-product of academic high-browness--but instigates them with subtle references from Bakhtin (as in

John Thieme's 'Carnival, calypso and steel band'). The idea behind this is suggestive of an intellectually attractive interdisciplinary approach that the reader might ponder upon at leisure. That too with an ease which makes him/her move into Zainul Abedin and Eduardo Paolozzi and African ballet and the relations between colonialism, famine and the politics of the 'black body' as against classical ballet. Both these issues of *Jamini* are anthologies no doubt, but I would more readily call them anthologies of thoughts and communicative methods (in terms of analytic style and artistic syntax) that Syed Manzoorul Islam and Quddas Mirza and Kaiser Haq develop as distinct from Ziaul Karim and Angus Calder and Mee Ae Lee. I am in no way ready to call them two critical camps within *Jamini*, or to be a bit more restrained, two different critical orientations. Let's rather call them supportive analytical methods within whose dialectic the reader is afforded breathing spaces which enhance the meanings and mysticisms shrouding a Manu Parekh or the subdued hues of H.A. Karunaratne. It is a space for story-tellers like Ella Datta building their narratives on mythical colours of Ganesh Pyne with a link that almost automatically relates to the hand-coloured aquatints (Mahboob Alam's 'European artists in Bengal') and Ravi Verma (Gayatri Sinha's 'The effect of Indian popular art on mainstream art') which is an integral part of our understanding of Shambhu Acharya's re-orientating the *pat* style from the past.

We Bangalis with our 'claim' of cultural superiority--which for some rather strange reason is currently being transformed into a 'demand'--could hardly ever (heaven forbid!) think of Nepal as a source for anything else other than sherpas or 'Bhadrabs' guarding our premises. In this respect *Jamini* introduces a world that we have never really looked



at. We are being forced to look at ourselves from perspectives that do not really let us remain complacent with our Quamrul Hassans and Safiuddins, who were supposed to remain as museum pieces and collectors items. *Jamini* places them with Lee Ufan and Kwackniski, to be seen with references to the experiences of Zubeida Agha, with Bhabesh Sanyal. It is a multi-layered visual experience that the reader is made to face.

I also found the issue on popular art followed by contemporary masters well thought out. For someone like me who started off with the February 2005 issue, it was a bonus to get my bearings straight with an initiation into the world of Zainul Abedin that then moved from graffiti to art on wheels--it was like having a firsthand experience of knowing which windows to open with Ranjit Das and Kalidas Karmakar so that I could move on to the voices of resistance echoing from Chetana and Brick Lane. That is what prepared me to enter the world of Shakir Ali, which depicts the apparent composure of *Still*

*life with bottles* and an anger that is evident in *Beggar woman*. But the anger really started to seep into my consciousness reading about the production of the play 'Mephisto' by Suman Mukhopadhyay in Sudhanva Deshpande's 'Performing Fascism, Resisting Fascism') and Ghada Mohamed Amer and Rolf Harris and the graffiti of a little girl in a gas mask by Banksy.

Reviewers must express reservations at some point or the other--let me choose the concluding lines for such an inglorious task. Could there possibly be a space within the book that could include readers' comments and 'requests'? It is certainly evident that *Jamini* has set a very high standard and if there are 'compelling' requests it would only amount to more sleepless nights for the editors. I wish them all the best of luck.

## Circuit Breaker

ABEER Y. HOQUE

She's a fast-acting fuse  
she knows what to do  
in this century of high loss and gadgets

A low-loss antenna is the first construct of the project enclosure  
She spins the dial on the potentiometer  
and if the needle on the high gain signal amp flies  
she switches off the surge protector  
her isolation transformed

But sometimes,  
even with the precision lubricators  
she'll arrive at a standoff,  
un-insulated.

That's when she pulls the plug  
flips on the resistors  
-- a female quick disconnect.

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