

## SHORT STORY

# A Sunday Fairytale

**NILANJON CHATTAPADHYA**  
(translated from Bengali by Khademul Islam)

Every day when Hiron went out for his morning walk he would invariably run into Debu Mittir. They would walk together for about an hour and then return to their separate flats.

Today when he came down to the street from his second-storey apartment Hiron saw Debu Mittir standing there gaping at the huge water-tank-sized waste bin. Scrutinizing something there with great concentration. Stepping forward Hiron asked: *What are you looking at? Threw away some money along with the household garbage?* Debu Mittir turned his head to look at Hiron. Then pointed a finger at the waste bin and said: *See that? Hiron had deliberately avoided looking at the bin. The whole apartment complex deposited its garbage there. To look at it made one's body shiver involuntarily. —A newborn baby!... Who would do this? Debu Mittir said indistinctly. By now Hiron too had seen it. A small blanket on top of the waste heap, on which slept an infant. One glance was enough to show that it had just been born.*

—*Is the baby alive?* Hiron asked.  
—*It is alive... Look carefully at the toes. You'll see that they are trembling....!*

Hiron stepped forward for a closer look. That the baby's toes were wriggling wasn't apparent to him. But right then the baby gave proof that it was alive. Tiny hands rose for a millisecond into the air, and its back arched. Then it sank back to sleep again. All around was intolerable filth. Rotting vegetable peels, used sanitary napkins, broken glass and bottles, and all other kinds of waste. And yet how contentedly the baby slept!

—*Who tossed it here? Someone from around here? Or somebody from outside?* Mittir wondered.

—*How should I know? But...*

—*But what?*

—*Shouldn't we be thinking about saving the baby?*

—*What rubbish! What's the use of saving this unwanted baby?*

—*But it's a life? Are we going to just watch with folded arms?*

—*You want to do something, you do it. I'm going for my walk. And with that Debu Mittir stalked off, his arms swinging stiffly by his side. Hiron's morning walk remained incomplete. He ran back up the stairs to his flat and rang the doorbell. Ayetri was also a fitness buff, and like Hiron she too was an early riser. She however did her exercises at home. Now she opened the door, clad in skintight exercise clothes, and on seeing Hiron asked—*What happened, why are you back? ... Got to go to the bathroom?**

—*Go to the balcony. Take a look at the bin...*

—*At the waste bin? ... Why? What's going on?*

—*Somebody left a baby there. A new-born baby!*

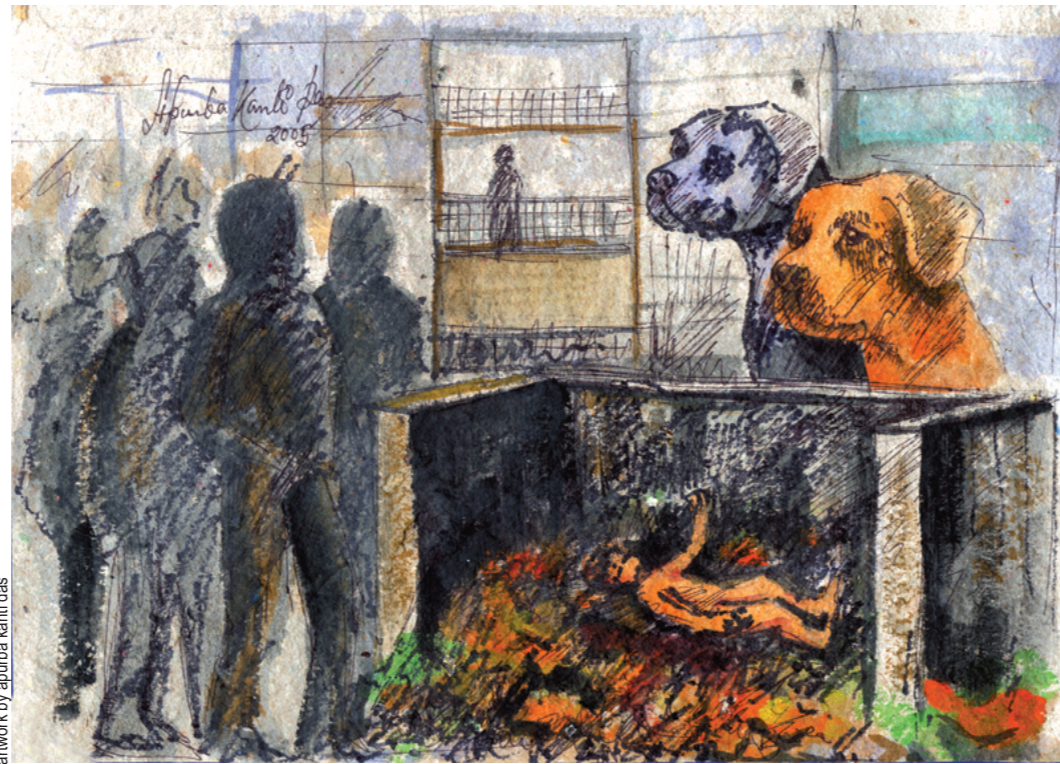
—*What? ... Oh my God!*

The waste bin was directly opposite the balcony of Hiron's apartment, across the road. The neighbouring flat was Debu Mittir's, which too was on the first floor. When members of their households stood on their balconies the waste bin was unfortunately in their direct line of sight.

Now, standing on the balcony Ayetri was looking at the garbage disposal vat. That the baby was sleeping on top of the garbage she could make out. But she could not see it clearly. She rushed inside and returned with the binoculars that hung on the wall. Hiron had bought it a few days back when he had gone to see a cricket match at Eden Gardens. Raising it to her eyes Ayetri looked at the baby. —*Oh, an absolute new-born baby! ... Who could do this? —That's impossible to know, but we have to do something to save the baby. It can't be left to die there.* —Hiron said.

—*But what can you possibly do? It's best not to get involved in these things.* —Ayetri's eyes were still glued to the binoculars.

Slowly the crowd around the garbage bin kept increasing. They were talking in hushed tones: such a juicy bit of news was bound to spread throughout the neighbourhood. Today, in fact, was a Sunday and it



artwork by amuna kanti das

would help pass the time pleasantly.

—*Ma! Ma!*—their girl was calling from the adjoining room. She was in Class Two. She went to school every morning and even on Sundays she woke early.

—*Mamoni is calling.* —Hiron said. —*She's woken up.*

—*I'm coming, darling.* —On the balcony was a square seat. Plastic. Laying the binoculars down on it Ayetri went inside to her daughter. Hiron searched in his diary for the local police station's phone number. He was a careful householder, and had written down the phone numbers of the police station, hospital, power station, the gas company. One never knew when one would need them. Hiron called the police station. At first it kept ringing; nobody picked up.

Somebody answered the second time he tried. A bored, gravelly voice. On being questioned who it was, Hiron immediately gave out his government job and title, and that he wanted to talk to the big boss. But the big boss couldn't be found, so he had to settle for the middle boss. The talk lasted for quite some time. After learning about the problem from Hiron the mid-level boss informed him that there were a lot of 'technical' problems associated with picking up an abandoned child. That the baby needed to be 'produced' in front of a court. And today being a Sunday, the courts were shut. And if the baby was brought to the police station, who would feed it, look after it? The police station was hardly equipped to handle such cases.

—*So what is to be done?* —Hiron asked. *Is the baby going to lie on the street? And everybody just sit on their hands?*

—*There is a way out. Why don't you phone the Aradhona people?*

—*What's Aradhona?*

—*An NGO who work with street children. If you notify them they'll come over to take the child.*

Aradhona's telephone number and street address was provided by the police officer. Hiron noted that the address was not too far from his home. If notified then perhaps they could come here soon.

—*Bapi, come take a look, what fun!*—his daughter called out to him from the balcony. Hiron ran out. The binoculars were now in her hands. Ayetri was standing holding a glass of milk. She now had on a blue maxi. They were staring at the garbage vat. People had come out from the surrounding balconies, staring curiously at the garbage container.

—*Do you see, Bapi?... Those four dogs around the baby?—*his daughter said with the binoculars glued to her eyes. Hiron looked. Four pye-dogs sat in a circle in front of the bin. Staring at the baby. Hiron felt his chest give a lurch. What if the dogs tried to pick up the baby and run off with it? He should call the Aradhona people at once!

—*Is it still alive?* Ayetri said. —*... If it was alive wouldn't it be moving around a bit, crying?*

—*That's what I'm thinking too—*Hiron answered thoughtfully. —*I should call the Aradhona people right now.*

—*Aradhona? Who is that? I've never heard you say that name before.*

—*Aradhona isn't a woman. They're a volunteer organization. They work with street children. If somebody notifies them, they'll come pick up the baby.*

Without further explaining the matter Hiron dialed their number. A woman's voice. After getting the information from Hiron she said—*We're going to send our*

*ambulance immediately. They'll pick up the baby. But there is one thing—*

—*What is it, madam?*

—*Please see to it that the baby is safe. Don't let crows jab at it, or dogs bite it.*

Putting down the receiver Hiron came back to the balcony. The dogs were still silently sitting around the bin. Looking at them it didn't seem as if they wanted to bite the baby.

—*Look how many crows are sitting on the branch, Bapi!*—his daughter exclaimed. It was true. On the mango tree behind the vat were rows of crows. Craning their necks down at the baby.

—*The crows are not coming down because of the dogs, isn't it so, Bapi?*

—*Maybe—*Hiron answered absentmindedly. Ayetri now had the binoculars again. And then, starting everybody, the baby began to cry: *wah, wah, wah, wah...*! It was alive! Hiron felt relieved.

—*Oh, it is feeling hungry!*—Ayetri exclaimed. In the meantime she had managed to make her daughter drink the milk. The empty glass now stood in a corner of the balcony. The cleaning lady would pick it up later.

—*wah wah wah wah*—the baby kept wailing. When would the Aradhona vehicle arrive? Should he call them again?

—*Won't you give it some milk, Ma?*—her daughter asked.

—*Don't speak nonsense—*Ayetri snapped. *Everybody else is standing around watching the fun and you want me to go to out amid all that garbage and feed that baby milk?* It was hard to know whether her daughter paid any heed to her mother's words, for in that instant she was asking Hiron a different question.

—*Bapi, where is that dog running to?*

Hiron looked. Till now the four dogs had been sitting in a posture of guarding the baby. Now, where was one of them racing to? Had somebody called out to it? A lot of the dogs were fed by the occupants of the flats.

—*I'm going inside. I have to get meals ready. I can't keep standing here the whole day.*—And with that Ayetri picked up the empty glass and strode off inside. Hiron stood beside his daughter. The baby suddenly stopped crying. Again it was quiet. Three dogs in front of

the vat. Rows of crows on the mango tree. It suddenly occurred to Hiron that these animals too were anxious about the baby. The crowd from the surrounding flats had thinned somewhat. How long could anyone stand around watching this nasty business? Where was the ambulance from Aradhona? Hiron went inside and again dialed their number. Again the same woman. The ambulance was on its way, she informed him.

Hiron again stepped out on the balcony. His daughter was still sitting there staring at the waste dump. From time to time she looked through the binoculars. What a thing to get involved with on a weekend, Hiron thought.

—*Mr. Dutta! Mr. Dutta!*—Hiron turned his neck. It was Debu Mittir on the neighbouring balcony.

—*Yes!*—Hiron said.

—*What a thing to happen, eh? To come to the balcony and have to see this, how ghastly! Did you call the police station?*

—*They can't do anything about it.*

—*So what now? Is that thing going to lie there like this? If it dies the smell is going to be terrible. What a horrible thing to happen. Today it's been cloudy, but the moment the sun comes out it'll wake up and start crying again. So the police were of no help? What should we do now?*

—*The station gave me an NGO phone number. They work with street children.*

—*Did you call them?*

—*I did... They sent an ambulance. It's supposed to be here any moment now.* —On hearing this, perhaps feeling reassured, Debu Mittir retreated inside his flat.

Then the baby started crying again. *Wah wah wah...*! Oh, it was unbearable! A whole, unfettered life! Abandoned. Yet it too felt hunger. And was begging the earth for a few drops of milk. Or perhaps this cry was a cry of protest. Against those who had flung it out onto strangers' garbage. *Wah... wah... wah... wah...* Hiron felt as if somebody was poking him in the ear with a sharp object...

—*Bapi, come and look!*—His daughter's cry made Hiron come back to his senses.

—*What?*

—*The dog that had run away is coming back!... What is that in its mouth, Bapi?* Hiron looked. It was true! That dun-coloured, skinny pye-dog was indeed coming back at them at a dead run. Once it came near Hiron realized what was going on, and in that moment a electric tingle ran through his entire body. The dog had come back with a milk packet held between its teeth!

—*What fun! Mother, come here and have a look!*—his daughter screamed, clapping her hands. —*The dog has brought milk for the baby!*

Ayetri rushed out to the balcony. —*Dear God, it's true!*—she said in astonishment.

Hiron now understood the whole matter. Near the entrance to the apartment complex was a Mother Dairy depot. The dog, God knows how, perhaps with a quick lunge behind the employees' backs, had snatched a packet of milk. Human beings had remained unmoved while hearing the cries of the abandoned baby lying amid the garbage. But the dog had not been able to... Astonishing! Could this be true? It was as if a fairy tale was being staged in front of Hiron's eyes. Then sound of clapping all around! Everybody was saluting the dog!

But what would the poor dog do now? How could it tear the packet open and feed the baby? The dog, the packet between its teeth, now looked from side to side. As if asking for help from humans. How could anyone stand silently by after this? Hiron swiftly opened the door to his flat and came out. He began to run down the stairs.

—*Wah... wah... wah... wah...* the baby kept on crying.

Hiron came out on the street. And then, drowning out the baby's cries, came a familiar sound, a siren, and he saw an ambulance round the corner of the street behind the apartment complex. The Aradhona's employees had come at last... Hiron waved his hand at them.

## Book Reviews

### Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain

***Sultana's Dream and Padmarag: Two Feminist Utopias***  
Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, translated with an introduction by Barnita Bagchi; Penguin Books, India; 2005; pp 197+xxvi; Rs. 200

JAYEETA BAGCHI



Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain  
*Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, popularly known as Begum Rokeya, needs no introduction, at least not in this subcontinent. Bangalees, to a large extent, are aware of her oeuvre. Researchers are working on her both in West Bengal and in Bangladesh. *Sultana's Dream* (1905), of course, is known to many. It was originally written in English and has attained the status of being an anthology favourite. As an outstanding feminist utopia it has often been compared to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915). It is part of the syllabus in many universities. But most of Rokeya's other writings have remained an unknown territory for the non-Bangla-speaking people.

Barnita Bagchi has done a great job (and here I must state that she is my cousin but I have tried to do as objective an assessment as possible) of translating *Padmarag* (1924), meaning 'The

Ruby'. I happen to know personally that she was apprehensive about its reception, especially in Bangladesh where feminists take Rokeya studies seriously, but I think she need not be so anxious. While reading, I often forgot that it was a translation that I was reading. Of course, certain words being culture-specific, demands a glossary which she provides. *Padmarag*, as Ms Bagchi points out, complements *Sultana's Dream* and presents, to us, a daring, complex educational and philanthropic female utopian narrative. It is a utopia which is founded in real time and space. The name Padmarag is untranslatable since it is one of the names, others being Zainab or Zainu, and Siddika, by which the protagonist is known to the inmates of the Tarini Bhavan, an institution which provides shelter and educational support to women. Dina Tarini, herself a Brahmo, is the owner of the institution which recognizes that women, whatever their caste, creed or religion is, are all victims of patriarchal oppression. The only way to survive in this male world is to develop marketable skills and that is what the institution teaches to its students. It is through Siddika that we get acquainted with Tarini Bhavan and its striking female residents. The story line is interesting and has all the popular elements of mystery and romance yet all of them leading to an ending which most of us would find baffling. Thereby it also challenges the popular notions of romance and mystery novel.

The great idea about this volume is that it produces an original English text side by side with the translation. It gives one an opportunity to compare and judge the quality of the translation. I think the introduction demands special mention. Ms Bagchi not only places the two texts in the proper context, but also provides the relevance of studying Rokeya, today, in the south Asian region. She also provides her own reading of the texts, especially of *Padmarag*. She introduces Rokeya to those who are yet to know about her. The book is complete with a select bibliography which mentions books written both in Bangla and English thus providing one with an opportunity to carry on studying Rokeya's other works. Finally, we must remember that the cover of a book often attracts bookworms, or even those who are not. Thanks to Pinaki De, the cover illustrator, it looks like the cover will attract a lot of readers.

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### Plight-of-an-oppressed-woman storyline

***Shakuntala*** by Namita Gokhale; Delhi: Penguin Viking; 2005; 208 pp.; Rs. 275.

MUNJULIKA RAHMAN

The protagonist Shakuntala of Namita Gokhale's *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* is named after the fifth century dramatist Kalidasa's heroine Sakuntala. While the original Shakuntala is a helpless nymph who is deserted by her husband King Dushyanta and needs her mother Menaka, 'the celestial apsara,' to put things right for her, Gokhale's mortal Shakuntala is bold and restless at a time when women are confined to the household. Shakuntala questions the rules and customs of society, and when the opportunity arrives, she goes out into the unknown to satisfy her adventurous spirit.

Shakuntala is born into a poor 'vanvasi' family, hill people who live near the forests of the mountainous areas in India. She grows up roaming the woods, and spends her time watching clouds and birds. Shakuntala's brother Govinda is predicted to be a great rishi, a descendent of a great line of sages. Their mother gives all her attention to his education and care, neglecting her. Once deeply hurt by the mother, Shakuntala runs away from home and meets a rock-demoness who gives her shelter. She teaches Shakuntala about the many faces of the mother-goddess who takes many forms, but is always "Swamini, mistress of herself."

Shakuntala is married off to a wealthy man, and although they share a happy life, seeing traders and pilgrims and horses, Shakuntala feels there are 'thoughts and events and people' in far off lands that she is yet to see and experience. If men can travel and seek, why is it 'unseemly and inappropriate' for women? When her husband brings home a mysterious handmaiden from his travels, Shakuntala is consumed with jealousy. While praying by the Ganga, she meets a Greek traveler and runs away with him leaving her respectable home. Shakuntala wanders with him from place to place and gives up all her societal bindings to lead a life of pleasure. But this carefree lifestyle is not enough to satiate her restlessness and she wanders off in the holy city of Kashi.

In the novel, Gokhale's language flows easily, and has a wistful edge to it, which serves as a reminder of the many precious things Shakuntala has lost in her lifetime. The tone of the novel is quiet and a bit haunting, because of the supernatural and the mystic that have a constant presence in the background of the story. Perhaps this is enhanced by the knowledge that Shakuntala is already dead at the beginning of the novel, and the story is a flashback recounted by her spirit.

Gokhale's other books such as *A Himalayan Love Story* (2002), *Gods, Graves, and*



***Grandmother*** (2001), and ***The Book of Shadows*** (1999) also have strong female characters who deal with love, lust, death, and often the supernatural. Gokhale is a journalist in Delhi whose work focuses on women's issues and literary criticism. Her

first book *Paro: Dreams of Passion*, which was published in 1984, is said to have 'pioneered the sexually frank genre' that would later characterize Shobha De's work.

Gokhale draws deeply from Hindu mythology and philosophy, and although some of the symbolism in *Shakuntala* can be easily understood, others are vague. The metaphorical use of incidents and dialogues may be lost on a reader not fully familiar with Hindu philosophy.

It took Gokhale five years to write *Shakuntala*, and in her own words, it is 'her most painstaking work.' The in-depth research about the time period and the historic places that was required for the novel is evident in the lively and pictorial descriptions that add greatly to the plot, which drags at some points. Shakuntala's grievances about being oppressed and her restlessness are constantly brought up by Shakuntala herself as she narrates her story, and this makes the plot monotonous at times.

The novel cannot quite transcend the plight-of-an-oppressed-woman storyline, and it is, at the end, about a woman who lives her own way, in defiance of social and religious obstacles. Virginia Woolf says in *A Room of One's Own* that a great work by a woman must be about something more than just the struggles of women in a male-dominated world, and *Shakuntala* does not seem to succeed in that aspect.

Nonetheless, *Shakuntala* is an informative read, and Gokhale's words are often intricate and lyrical. Even though the protagonist's death is certain, the end does have a surprise for the reader in the form of a chapter that is numbered '00'.

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## Autumn Days Are Here

**MOLOY GOSWAMI**  
(translated by Shankho Raichoudhury)

Dropping a cube of ice on a plate  
Shyamol Bhattacharya begins his life story.

Standing by the north-facing window  
Dipambita Roy looks at the cloudwisps encircling  
the monument's head  
and even if Age rushes in to batter her chin  
standing guard there is a lovely mole!

Shyamol Bhattacharya recounts in a neutral tone:  
*Aray Dipambita, yesterday noon I suddenly thought of you...*

The office peon Proshanto sidles in to place a cup of tea  
over the dreams of silent beauty Maya Ghosh...  
small-breasted Maya, gazing at the piece of ice, that  
without rhyme or reason is melting away, like her youth.

Above accountant Agarwal's head at the far end of the office  
the clock that hangs solemnly on the wall, there  
it is now almost five o'clock...evening is falling...



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