

SHORT STORY

The Sound of Weeping

SURENDRA PRAKASH  
(translated by Sadiq Hossain)

A flower under a tree is carefree.

Only a short while ago he had been sitting on a chair facing me and singing. Now only the depression in the chair testified to his having been with me. How well he sang. I don't much care for western music; I don't have the ear for it. But that wretch sings so well that I am completely won over. He had left me musing over the line: Can a flower growing under the shade of a tree ever come into its own?

Now he is gone and the tune that he sang has lost its echo but my mind is still entangled in the words of that son: A flower under the tree is carefree.

It goes to prove one vital point: words outlast their sounds.

When he came to my room in the evening he was quite drunk. A group of students had waylaid him during the day urging him to sing for them the songs of his region. They had regaled him with liquor. Subsequently he had recounted me the story, placing his hands on my shoulders: 'I left home with the resolve that I would go round the world to discover someone who bore a close resemblance to me and could be taken as my second. It's now almost eight years that I left home and I have yet to find my second.'

'Did you meet anyone resembling me?' I asked in jest.

'Yes, I did. It was in Scandinavia,' he replied offhandedly.

We kept knocking about on the roads till late at night. When dead tired we made for my home. Entering my room, after some casual talk, he started singing his favourite song.

'Do the words of this song denote something special?' I asked.

'Meanings mean nothing, only words do,' he replied. 'They impose their own meaning on the mind.'

Then he got up from his chair and surveyed the room while going out. It was in great disorder. 'Why don't you marry?' he suddenly asked. 'You look quite a mediocre.'

The suddenness of his question threw me off my feet.

'The fact is,' I said, 'one Vishnu Babu, our landlord, lives on the first floor of our building. Many years ago when he was just an ordinary man he married a girl by the name of Saraswati. Subsequently, he came to know a rich woman called Lakshmi and realizing his folly, eventually married her. Now Vishnu and Lakshmi live happily together while poor Saraswati cries all night. I have not married till now for the simple reason that I whether I should marry a Lakshmi or a Saraswati.'

He looked steadily at my face. The red lines in his eyes gave him a terrifying look. He shot a 'goodnight' at me and quickly descended the stairs. Because of his strange antics I am sometime led to feel that he is not a man made of flesh and blood but just an embodied idea pitchforked here from across the seas.

All the rooms of the building I live in have common walls so that one can easily overhear what one is saying in the adjoining room. I suspect the occupants of the other rooms must be hearing my voice and even my silence must be carrying to them. A short while ago they must have clearly heard the lilt and boom of my friend's singing voice.



artwork by amina

Outside, the night had started this journey towards the morning. Darkness crawled in every direction like white ants. I bolted my room and putting on the dim nightlight got into my bed.

In the faded light my own body looked to me like a corpse wrapped in a shroud. In the dark silence of a lonely room such a thought can strike fear in one's heart, akin to falling from a height in a dream. I felt I was slowly falling down and then I had a bizarre feeling

that my life had suddenly been jerked back into my body.

I heard someone crying outside my room. Perhaps Saraswati and Lakshmi again had a squabble. It seemed as if Saraswati's sound of crying had trickled step by step down the stairs and had reached up to my door. But no, it was the cry of a child; perhaps a neighbour's hungry child asking for milk while his mother slept on by his side, oblivious of his hunger. Or maybe she was dead and beyond hearing her child's cry.

Then the sound of the child's crying became louder and more distinct as if the child was lying in my own bed while I lay dead by his side, wrapped in a shroud.

If a tree is the symbol of civilization then we are like flowers which although free yet shed tears in the shadow of the tree. The meaning of these words whose tune my friend had carried away with him blossomed forth in my mind suddenly.

The child keeps crying. Gradually it takes on an agonized note as if it's already aware of its mother's death. But who had told him that she was dead? Not its father. He is still sleeping for there is no hint of his voice mingling with the child's cry. People instinctively come to know about death. I myself knew when my mother was on the verge of death. Oh, how closely the child's cry resembles my own voice.

My friend's words again ring in my ears. He had said that I was a mediocre person. 'You're mediocre'--that's what he had said.

Yes, mediocre--that's what I really am.

Every morning I get ready with the intention of going away for good. I bid goodbye to the door as if I'm closing it for the last time. Then I turn my face towards the sun and keep running the whole day. But as the night approaches I again find myself standing outside my door.

Early every morning, flapping my arms like a crane I fly to a building to have a glimpse of a woman who sits in her cabin in a revolving chair, her arms, white and smooth like marble, resting on the glass top of a table lying in front of her. She dyes her hair every morning and her arms, as they rest on the glass top, create the illusion of a woman's bare legs.

There is a spiral staircase taking off from the cabin. While climbing those stairs I peep into the cabin on the sly and wonder if they were really legs.

A big almirah rests near the landing along which that spiral staircase goes up. The almirah has many pigeon holes like lockers in a bank's safety vault where people keep their valuable belongings. Every morning I lock my 'self' in one of the pigeonholes of the almirah and then bodily climb up the stairs. In the evening, before I go I retrieve my 'self' from the almirah.

A car of the theater company where I work waits to pick me up every evening. By a gesture of the eye the driver tells me to get into the car and in a moment I am whisked off to the most prominent theater hall of the city whose auditorium resembles a circus arena where I have been performing the same role for the last eighteen years. The stage is in the middle of the auditorium. Rubbing off the earlier remnants, I hastily put on Gulliver's make-up. All the dialogue is projected from behind the auditorium. My role consists of taking a serious drubbing from the Lilliputians. Their needle lances pierce my body. The tiny arrows shot from their bows make the blood pour out like sweat

from the pores of my body. While being tortured like this I do not wince even once or give vent to my feelings in any manner. This specialty of mine has kept me on this job for the last eighteen years. I am not paid for my job; it has just become a pastime with me.

When the show is over they take me to the bathroom on a stretcher and throw me into a tub brimming with alcohol. My body shudders with pain and then a cold current passes through it which completely revives me and I feel as if nothing had happened to me.

A funny thing happened the other evening. As usual I had gone to the other building and was just coming out of the toilet when, to my horror, I found its door closing upon me. I banged on the door like mad and it was only then that a man opened the door for me. I was feeling greatly shaken. My mind boggled at the thought of remaining confined in the toilet the entire night. While going out I did not even care to look into the cabin to find out whether the woman was gone or was still there. I even forgot to take out my 'self' from the locker for down below the driver was frantically blowing his horn to take me away.

I was greatly agitated. How could I do justice to my role without my 'self'? But my surprise knew no end when at the end of the performance I saw the audience rushing towards me. They praised my acting for being so spontaneous and natural. I was really astounded at what they said.

Since then I have allowed my 'self' to remain in that locker.

A gust of wind has flung the window open and I can once again have the real feel of my room. To the sobs of Saraswati and the heartrending cries of the child a third voice has been added--the voice of the child's father. The child's father has woken up. He has not been able to stand the sight of his dead wife and bear his child's weeping.

Like a good neighbour it is incumbent upon me to share others joys and sorrows. We are free flowers that have blossomed in the shade of the tree.

I feel like pulling out one brick from each wall and peeping into each room and watch its inmates in their moments of joy and sorrow--to see them shedding tears and laughing. For in each state a human being just lets himself go.

The sound of weeping had by now become louder and it had become difficult for me to remain confined to my room.

I wrapped that shroud-like sheet round my body and putting on my black slippers advanced towards the door.

As I put my hand to the door latch someone knocked on the door and I flung it open.

Saraswati, who had been sobbing on the stairs, the crying child, the dead mother and her helpless husband--all the four of them were standing outside the door.

They asked me in unison: 'Why have you been crying all this while? Like good neighbours it is incumbent upon us...'

Surendra Prakash is a Bombay-based writer who has two collections of short stories to his name. Sadiq Hossain has translated prolifically from Hindi and Urdu.

Letter from

HIROSHIMA

The Other Americans

MANOSH CHOWDHURY

The document the immigration officer handed me at San Francisco airport in February of this year started: 'The United States has a proud tradition of welcoming immigrants and visitors...' It further said that I had to inform them of my departure every time I visited the US in the future in order to 'ensure the safety of all persons in the United States--citizens, residents, and visitors as well.' Then I signed a paper whereby state authorities could stop, question and arrest me anywhere if they found it necessary. What a welcome, I thought as I ran to board the connecting flight to Orlando, signing away my rights! Here I was, an academic with an invitation letter from an American university--and a non-Muslim!--and yet...

My conference (the annual one on film and literature at Florida State University) was in Tallahassee. I had to write a note explaining it. I must have not written it well, because I had to explain it again to a group of immigration officers. For the next ninety minutes I had an insider's view of the 'special' immigration process that Americans now reserve for visitors from certain parts of the world. On my very first visit to America! After a night bus ride from Orlando to Tallahassee I found the hotel nearby designated for conference attendees. I didn't feel sleepy. I managed to connect to the Web through the hotel LAN-cable and felt a sense of liberation: Ah, the delights of modern communication! I immediately sent an e-mail to the organizers, and almost immediately got a reply from Amit Rai of the English department at FSU asking me to have lunch with him. Amit's mail was more than mere courtesy since he was working under tremendous pressure as one of the seminar organizers. He also had to take a couple of classes that very day. But Amit--a bearded man in his late 30s' sitting surrounded by books--warmly welcomed me into his office. He was playing a Hindi *gazzal* was on his PC, which was followed by a jazz-piece. 'That's my taste,' Amit explained. A poster of Shammii Kapur was pinned behind the door. He was now researching broadly on Indian cinema, as well as specifically on Bhopal. It was exciting to see a literature professor working on cinema, something quite different from the way

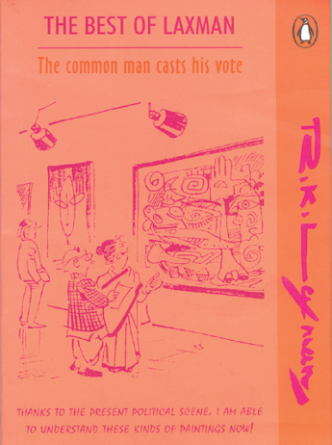
Bangladeshi academia thought. Talking with Melissa, one of Amit's graduate students, about her research I wondered how Subrata Augustine Gomes could be so unnoticed in our universities, especially with his translations and work on *Charjapod*! 'So, how do you manage to mix your interests in Indian cinema and Bhopal?' I asked Amit, thinking of course about the tragedy. 'It's very simple. I am doing kind of historical work on a cinema hall in Bhopal.' Amit's family had immigrated from Bhopal to New York when he had been a child. He had gotten his PhD from Stanford University and taught at New York University before coming to FSU. He told me all this while driving to his favorite food-shop, after first asking me if I had any problem with vegetarian foods. I did not. The food-shop was a fairly old, little house with a wooden sign hanging on the door, crowded at lunch time. The owner's family was Brazilian *Vaishnab*. 'You mean Iskon campaigners?' I asked (Iskon stood for International Society for Krishna Consciousness, better known as the Hare Krishna movement). 'So you know about them?' 'Of course. How can I be ignorant about them?' Most of the diners were university faculty members. Some popular Indian drawings of *Krishna-in-Gokul* and *Krishna-in-Vrindavana* on the walls. Amit smiled when he saw me looking at them. The food--rice, *dal*, spinach, *bara*, vegetable--tasted very Indian and delicious. Amit told me about his life in USA, about FSU. About how he got married to Sarah, a woman of Pakistani origin he had met in New York, and their little daughter Afia of 22 months. At the counter the Brazilian shop-owner, wearing a *tulsi mala*, chatted with Amit before we left. 'So this is what is left of Florida hippie lifestyle?' I asked as we walked to the car park. 'Yes, it is,' Amit answered grinning. 'It gives me a kind of strange feeling, seeing this so far from home, and only read about in books.' 'I do understand what you mean.' 'One question, Amit. Don't they have problems with the state structure?' 'White hippies have no problem,' Amit said carefully. 'I guessed that.' Empty streets, with just cars. Amit was in a hurry for his class. 'But one thing you can be sure of

in Tallahassee.' 'What's that?' 'These people are exclusively anti-Bush and anti-Republican.' I started laughing and Amit continued, 'They consistently vote Democrat.' 'The limit of their political actions.' 'Yes. You're right. The limit.' The first session of the conference was about race in the films. Two of the three presenters were black. A fascinating paper was about how black campuses were being portrayed in the recent films. Later in the evening two documentaries by Alan Rosenthal, considered an important documentary-maker these days, were screened. The first one was on Palestinian issue, while the last one on the anti-Semitic doctrine in the Nazi movements, a juxtaposition that was a little disconcerting. Especially against the backdrop of overt Western support to the Zionist state. Though I was very interested in listening, I simply couldn't keep my eyes open. So, unhappy, I left the hall for my hotel room. The big occasion was the next day. Almost twenty different panels along with the speech by Prof. Hamid Naficy from Rice University, a guru of contemporary film studies, followed by a reception party in the evening. Four presenters from South Asia crowded in a single panel, which I couldn't resist telling the organizers later was an 'area studies' framework not used for any other region except South Asia and Middle East. However, next morning only the panel chair Tamara, a faculty member of archaeology at FSU, turned up. Bev Curran, an energetic Canadian professor working in Japan, came to boost me up. Amit also came. The discussion afterwards was fascinating, though conducted loosely since other presenters had not turned up. 'So you maintain that any local film genre is obviously global to some extent?' someone asked. 'Yes I do. Especially if we consider the contemporary processes of visual production.' We talked about different things. About why I didn't feel that, even with the enormous influence, Indian cinema couldn't be compared with Bangladeshi cinema. About the significance of having a diasporic perspective and a defined viewership that Indian cinema is celebrating these days, not only in terms of the specific codes but also in mate-

Manosh Chowdhury is currently at the Institute of Development and Cooperation in Hidagi-Hiroshima, Japan.

Book Review

The Common Man



FARHAD AHMED

**The Best of Laxman: the common man casts his vote** by R. K. Laxman; Delhi: Penguin India; 2005; 188 pp., Rs. 200.

R K Laxman (the 'R K' stands for Rasipuram Krishnaswamy) is widely regarded as India's foremost cartoonist, the creator of The Common Man. He was born the youngest of eight children--of whom one was R K Narayan, the novelist--in the southern city of Mysore in present-day Karnataka. Laxman's earliest work was for newspapers and magazines such as *Swarajya* and *Blitz*. Then, while still in college, he began to illustrate R K Narayan's stories in *The Hindu*,

as well as start to draw political cartoons for local Mysore newspapers. Later he left Mysore for the *Free Press Journal* in Bombay. The story goes that one day the *Journal's* proprietor banned him from making fun of communists. So the twenty-three-year old Laxman left the premises, caught a victoria, and walked into the *The Times of India* office. From that day 'I had a table and a room to myself which I have used ever since,' he has said, speaking about a career in the newspaper that has spanned for over fifty years.

It was in the *Times*, in 1951, that he began his daily one-panel comic 'pocket cartoon' series *You Said It*, which featured The Common Man, and started to chronicle the state of Indian life. The evolution of The Common Man is interesting to note. In the beginning Laxman attempted to cram in his cartoons representatives from all the different states and cultures in India. In the rush to meet deadlines, Laxman began to draw fewer and fewer background characters, until only one remained: the now-familiar Common Man--the tousle-headed, check-coated man who blinks in bafflement from the sidelines in each cartoon.

Farhad Ahmed is a free-lance writer.



I am all for getting rid of corruption completely. But then after that how are you going to get things done?

Carnival Time

MASUD KHAN  
(translation of Ullash by Fakrul Alam)

It's carnival time today  
Serfs and plebeians pour into streets.  
Behold the giggling, decked up undertaker's wife,  
That man over there, completely soused, is her spouse!  
He holds his pay tight in his fists and grins grotesquely.  
See the sweeper there, lips reddened by betel leaf!  
There he is--the constable--sporting a shiny wristband.  
And look at that rotund young eunuch--  
All merry, like dusky Abyssinians or Afghan revelers in the rain.

Today it's time to collect wages and bonuses and forget files.  
Today superiors have traded places with subordinates  
And mandarins have transformed themselves into mere clerks.

The roly- poly slave and Kishorimohon Das  
Sleep fitfully next to each other near the town reservoir,  
Stirred again and again by the Mayor's snores,  
The hapless water bearer gets completely wet.

The woman over there is a streetwalker,  
Visiting town for the first time with her snotty-nosed brother.  
That man there trades in lead, and there is the perfume seller,  
He's the accountant, and he the treasurer,  
And next to him on this day of intermittent rain is the petty thief's no-good brother.  
And there--leaning, bent by the weight of his imagination, as if in a trance,  
Is the poet, the king of poets!

This day all have spilled out into the streets and stroll there endlessly--intransitive  
Wrapped in newly spun silk.

artwork by apurba

Masud Khan is a Bangladeshi poet. Fakrul Alam teaches English at Dhaka University.

ANNOUNCEMENT

The Daily Star on the occasion of its fifteenth anniversary (in 2006) will publish an anthology of fiction, poetry, and related articles/pieces. Bangladeshi writers/authors/translators plus our readers are invited to send in their contributions for consideration. Short stories/articles should be limited to 2000-2500 words, though this stricture can be relaxed in the case of outstanding efforts. Translators should send in the original Bangla if they are to be considered. Please send the contributions electronically in Word format to Attn: Literary Editor, [starliterature@thedailystar.net](mailto:starliterature@thedailystar.net), or by snail mail to The Literary Editor, The Daily Star, 19 Karwan Bazar, Dhaka-1215. All submissions must be clearly marked 'For Anthology' (in case of electronic submission on the subject line). Only Bangladeshis need submit. We specially welcome submissions from outside Dhaka, as well as humorous pieces dealing with the lighter side of life. The last date for submission is October 15, 2005.

-----The Literary Editor