

SHORT STORY

Crooked Shapes

R. RAJENDRASOLAN
(Translated and abridged by V. Surya)

'Is that so?' he asked, agitated. 'Are you really sure?'
'I swear. Is he my own father or what, for me to just let him get away with it?'

Striding rapidly through the harvested fields, he goaded the bullocks on along the worn track till he reached the house. Without stopping to un-harness the animals, he called out, 'Mangalatchmi! Give these cattle some bran-and-water. Quick! I'll be back...' and set off at the same speed.
'What-at? You going as soon as you've come?' 'Chhe! Be quiet...asking where I'm going just when I'm leaving!'
Beneath his heavy tread, the dust of the road flew and mingled with the dusk. Going up the lane, he reached the road beyond. In the middle of a row of four or five *poovarasu* trees was an open space with a smudged *kolam*. Then the house, the door aslant. He went in. Through the passage towards the rear was the kitchen. Ladle in hand, she looked up from stirring millet porridge.
'Wha-at...at this time? Suddenly got the feeling, is it?' she smiled teasingly.
'Got the feeling, your ass!'
'Why so grumpy...?' She dropped the ladle in the pot and came up close to him, rubbed her body against his.
He gave her a penetrating stare. Rage seethed in his eyes.
'No need for all this fooling! Last night who came here?' With knitted brows, she thought over it. 'Why, nobody...!' she stood there, puzzled.
'Nobody...?' he queried, his demeanour overbearing. 'Minsaami don't come here last night?'
'What? At night?'
'Then what? As if he'll come in daylight!'
'Thah! Have you gone mad or something? Why should he come here at night?'
'Ei...don't you bluff? Out with the truth!' he demanded, insistent. She gave him a surprised look. 'Wha-at you want me to say?'
'You want me to tell it with my own mouth...?'
'What's all this you're saying? Can't you say what it is without telling riddles?'
'None of all that! Why did Minsaami come here last night?'
At last, she got a little fed up. 'Look, no Minsaami-Chinsaami came here. Don't dance to what people say!'
'Chhee, don't be yapping! Tell the truth: why did Minsaaami come here last night?'
'Who's yapping? What you are asking is proper, isn't it, but if I ask anything I am yapping...'
'Look, you just watch out now.' He came a little closer.
'Thah!...Let me alone! You don't even say what it is all about. Just "Why did that fellow come? Why did this fellow come?"'
'Wha-at, me! You're thinking "Who's this fellow? He is nobody?" he exorciated her. 'Suppose I am your husband and I ask you, will you talk like this!'
'Only because that man is useless, it went so far. Otherwise would you come openly to me, like this? You dare to ask another man's wife such a question.'

Swiftly he reached out, seized her hair, 'Ai...last night did Minsaami come here or not?'
'Chhee, take off your hand. Who are you to ask me that?'
PALAAR! He struck her right on the ear.
'Ayyo! she cried as she crumpled and fell. 'Ada, sinner! What sort of a mind you have got, da! Oh how much I have done for you! You got what you want, now you come back to give a kick! Listening to mischief-mongers and coming here like this, you sinful fellow! Looking at her weeping and wailing he gnashed his teeth in fury.
'Shut your mouth!' he said. 'Even now just tell the truth, or say, "Who are you to me to ask me that? I can do anything and go anywhere." Now tell me, did Minsaami come or not?'
'O why are you killing me like this, da? Upon Goddess Mariaatha I swear he never came here.'
'Then who was here last night?'
'HIM. It was my husband only. HE was here,' she said, referring to him in the third person plural.
'Just stop going on telling lies. HE already left when it was still daylight, after saying "I'm going to round up the cattle."'
'Daylight...! Who told you that? HE only left this morning! All night HE was here. In the afternoon HE said "I'm going" and went off somewhere. The HE came back...!' She spoke between sobs.
'What, meh? Who're you trying to fool here? You think the man



listening to all this is some fool with a flower in his ear?'
'Ada, you sinner! What for should I tell a lie? Is it written on my head or what, that I should come to you and tell lies? Abruptly he bent down and raised her face. Sparks of wrath flew from his eyes as he demanded, 'What did you say...!'
'Chheel! Take you hand off!'
'Stupid whore! What a nerve you've got!'
'Who's got a nerve? You or me? It's because you have a nerve that you put your hand out and beat me!'
'If you are decent why should I hit you?'
'Decent? What's gone wrong with my decency that your eyes would notice, anyway?'
'This kind of talk is just what I'm telling you to stop.'
'You think she came to me, isn't it? So just like that she must have gone to somebody else also---that's how you think?'
'Ei! What did you say...?' Enraged, he seized her and gave her a shove. Holding a tuft of her hair in both his hands he brought his face close to hers. 'Thei! Know why you came to me when you already had a husband...?'
'Must have lost my mind, that's why. See, now I know how grand it really is; isn't it?'
'All right, so you made a mistake, I made a mistake. Let it be. All this time we've been with each other, have I ever opened my mouth and questioned you about your husband coming here? After all, HE's the husband. If HE can't have even that, then what's left for HIM? So I've never asked you any question about it---have I or haven't I?'
'What is this mischief! Fine justice, isn't it? All right then: just question HIM...'
'Ai! I keep on asking you something and you sit there without even opening your mouth. You're thinking, what can he do?---so proud, is it?'
'Then what? You want me to say I went to everybody in this town?'
'Chhee, be quiet! The more I think of it, the more it burns me inside!'
'So let it burn. How I am trembling and shaking in my guts, only I know, you sinner. To sin against a woman is a terrible thing, that's what they say...'
'I'm telling you, don't talk like this. Just tell the truth. I'll just go away.'
'What truth?'
'That Minsaami came here.'
'Chheel! How can anybody talk to you? A woman can only say it once...a good bullock needs just one word...'
'So then---you're saying he came here...?'
'Yes, he came! He and I, all night long---we lay together! Po!'
PA-LAAR! He struck her again.
'Ayyayyo!' she shrieked, 'no man in the house, and he walks in and attacks like this... Ayyo!'
'Don't shout. Say it, and I'll go off.'
'Wha-a-at---ca-an---!---sa-ay!' she sobbed in a long drawn-out moan, a rage of despair. One after another, with the flat of both hands he hit her again and again. 'Shameless bitch! From today on, finished! Go to hell. Did you think I was a grinning idiot, too, like HIM...?'
'Ayyo, ayyo, let go...sinner! No, no,...I didn't go with anybody else but you, nobody else but my man and you.'
Tears streamed from her eyes. They spilt on the cow-dung-smoothened floor. Blood oozed from the corner of her lip. With

heaving sobs she said, 'I deserve it. I deserve this and more. See, I betrayed the man who married me, so...'
'Did anybody at all tell you to betray him?' he snarled.
'Enough, 'pa, enough. You go, now! Enough pleasure you had with me, and enough pain also... Goodbye to you, and goodbye to your THAT...'
'Son-of-a-bitch, today I'll take out his bones one by one,' he muttered to himself. The twilight had darkened to a bitter hue. Beside the *odhiya* tree, near the corner of the garbage mound, he turned into the lane and approached Minsaami's house. There he saw him playing cards with three or four people on the verandah, by lantern-light. He gave a roar, 'Dei Minsaami!'
Bent over to peer at the cards, Minsaami straightened up. 'What?' he asked, with a jerk of his head.
'Come here a bit, will you?'
Minsaami came up to him. The other shoved him up against the low wall. 'Where'd you go last night?'
'Nowhere...'
'Don't bluff---where'd you go?'
'Here, what's all this fuss? We talked about going to the cinema. We couldn't get any cycles. So we stayed back.'
'I know you stayed back, da. Afterwards, didn't you go anywhere at all?'
'What do you mean? Here we are, playing cards throughout the night....and you just come and put

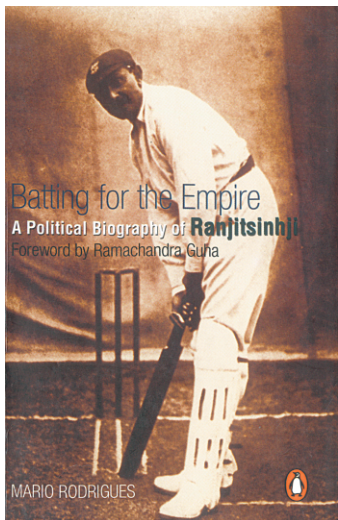
these questions, don't know head or tail about what!'
'Trying to bluff...? Didn't you go to Parvathi's house?'
'Oh! Is that what you're talking about...Yes, I went. What about it?'
'Why did you go?' he asked, taking a step forward.
'Why did I go? Why, I went and came back just like always.'
The other's eyes reddened. 'Dei! Don't play with me. What for did you go?'
'Just went to sit and chat...'
'Who with?'
'Wha-at is this, da! Before going, does anybody make a plan with whom to talk?'
'What do you have to talk to her about?'
'Wha-at's all this nonsense! If I talk to her, what's it to you... seems HE HIMSELF doesn't say anything. And you come along from who knows where and say I should not talk to her. Who're you to say that...tell me!'
His body throbbed with rage. He asked, 'All right, you sat and talked, and then when did you come back?'
'Came back straightaway...'
'You're lying.'
'Are you asking me to say I came in the morning...?'
'Dei! He reached out and caught hold of his *banian*.
'Dishta...! Up till now I gave you some respect because you are elder to me. Just take off your hand. If you want to kick up a ruckus, I also won't keep quiet. After that all the shame will be for you only...'
'What, da! Are you warning me or what?'
'I'm saying it nicely. Just decently take off your hand.'
'What appa, Minsaami, the game's started. Come quickly, 'pa.'
Kishtan hesitated. Then he loosened his grip. 'Later, after I have found out everything, I'll take care of you.' Staggering and stumbling in the dark, Kishtan reached home.
'Where'd you go without saying anything?' his wife said. 'By now the water on the fire must have got cold! Without replying he went to the backyard. Removing his upper cloth he slung it on the rope, slipped off his lungi, filled pitcher after pitcher of water and poured it upon himself. After he had dried himself, he wrapped the loincloth around his waist.
'Seems there's good selling price at the Mallaatta Cooperative Committee. I threshed the remaining four sacks. Took them and dropped them there. We can buy a chain for the elder girl. Her neck is so bare...'
Having sat down to eat, he just fingered his food...ate for form's sake, drank out of compulsion...went to the corner and stared at the crossbeam.
'What's this---sitting there, moping....like a man who's gone and lost his wife! With me right here, solid as a pounding stone!'

R. Rajendrasolan is a contemporary Tamil writer. V. Surya is a leading translator from Tamil.

Book Reviews

Portrait of the cricketer as prince

KHADEMUL ISLAM



Batting for the Empire: A Political Biography of Ranjitsinhji (with a foreword by Ramachandra Guha) by Mario Rodrigues; Delhi: Penguin Books; 2003; Rs. 299.

The premise, and conclusion, of this book on Ranjitsinhji is simple: where you stand depends on where you sit. Or, in this particular case, bat.
On one hand there is 'Ranji,' the man who, in the words of the author, 'stands paramount in the pantheon of India's sporting gods', the cricketing legend who is ranked up there with the game's greatest (during his day effortlessly holding his own with the likes of W.G. Grace and

Gilbert Jessop and subsequently among the game's half-dozen all-time greats), the Indian who 'turned out' for Cambridge, Sussex and England, and in whose name the Ranji Trophy was started in 1934 in the British Raj. On the other hand, he was also His Highness Shri Sir Ranjitsinhji Vibhaji, Maharaja Jam Saheb of Nawanagar, GCSI, GBE, KCIE, 'pillar of the Empire' and a 'loyal friend of England.' He battled for England in his famed white silk shirts billowing in the wind and met the queen at Buckingham Palace, an Indian ruler of one of the 600-odd 'Native States' of British India, during a time when the nationalist freedom movement was fighting to free India from the colonial yoke. Which led to the central question pursued in the book: how do the two aspects of Ranji match up? What was the dazzling batsman like as a ruler and an Indian?
In the predominant view of Ranji constructed by imperial writers the answer was that the two sides did indeed match up, that the dazzling cricketer was indeed an enlightened prince, the cricketing legend a gentleman on and off the pitch (P. C. Standing *Ranjitsinhji, Prince of Cricket*, 1903; the Parsi biographer Naoraji Dumasia, *Jamnagar, A Sketch of its Ruler and Its Administration*, 1927; Charles Kincaid, *The Land of 'Ranji' and 'Duleep'*, 1932; and much to my personal surprise, even Alan Ross, the otherwise

estimable late ex-editor of *London Magazine*, who penned a book that can only be charitably described as hagiography lite, *Ranji: Prince of Cricketers*, 1983). It was this dominant imperial construction which set Mario Rodrigues, special sports correspondent of The Statesman, off on his four-year quest to answer the question. As he puts it, 'what would be the Indian view of this great historical figure?'
The answer is given in great detail in this book, which is as thorough a deconstruction job as I have read in recent years. And it makes for dismal reading. Not only was the great Ranji a supreme Anglophile whose greatest joy and delight was in playing for England, who forbade his equally famous cricketing nephew Duleepsinhji from playing for India (then admittedly British India but an 'Indian' team nevertheless), who never lifted a finger, or bat, to help Indian cricket, but he was also a hidebound reactionary who sided (there, regrettably is no other word for it) with the British against the nationalists, who used his cricketed fame to secure his disputed gaddi, was a despot and spendthrift who ruthlessly squeezed money out of his subjects in order to pay for his permanent durbar parties, and an absentee ruler who steamed off to his beloved England on the flimsiest of pretexts. He especially loved to flatter English governor-generals

and royals, as witness his welcoming address to the Prince of Wales on the latter's visit to India in 1922, which began: 'Your Royal Highness, the Ruling Princes and Chiefs of India united here, offer you, above all, a welcome of unity--the unity of our Order in deep and enduring loyalty towards His Imperial Majesty the King-Emperor, towards the glorious House of Windsor and towards Your Royal Highness, his beloved and so distinguished heir; nay further, the unity of our Order with the rest of India in the mighty fabric of the British Empire as a true member of that great body politic.'
The book is extraordinary reading on other levels, too. It is replete with scathing, and very funny, use of cricketing lingo, as for example, of Ranji's efforts to promote himself as a true Hindu ruler by virtue of his claim to be a descendant of Krishna, but, notes Rodrigues, 'the Jam Saheb's innate "Hinduness," however, did not prohibit the Nawanagar Royal Band from striking up "The Roast Beef of Old England" on state occasions, which E.H.D. Sewell, cricketer, raconteur and one of the Jam's regular guests, thought as being a little wide of the wicket for the Maharajah of a strict Hindu state.'
The more discerning reader can also take delight in the meticulous research of the author, in his methodological

exactness. From the first chapter 'A strange light out of the East' (the phrase taken from Neville Cardus's article on him in the *Manchester Guardian*), to the last, 'Crumbs for Indian Cricket', the writer slowly unveils the layers of Ranji's political life like an onion, and builds up an irrefutable case against Ranji.
Finally, since much of Rodrigues's material has been culled from newspapers of the day, it is fascinating to read about the figures in the nationalist (or 'Native') press, an articulate and sometimes fearless group who, at logger-heads with the Jam of Nawanagar for his oppressive ways, thought nothing of taking on the British Raj when circumstances warranted it. In 1931 when Ranji called A.D. Sheth, the crusading editor of the *Saurashtra*, a 'blackmailer' and *The Times of India* (then British-owned and the stentorian voice of the Raj Establishment) gleefully reported it, Sheth promptly fired back by writing that 'Only one thing out of two can be true. Either the Jam Saheb is a liar or we are blackmailers. We have often stated that the Jam Saheb is a liar...' and then instituted legal proceedings against *The Times*. Which later, after an investigation by the authorities, backed down and reached an out-of-court settlement with Sheth for Rs. 10,000.
So where does that leave us,

South Asians who are fans of cricket? Do we despise the writer for having written this 'expose' of a cricketing god, or do we despise Ranji the prince and separate the cricket from his politics? In all fairness, it is impossible to fault the writer for writing the book. He wrote the book he had to. And the Anglophile despot cannot be separated from the dazzling cricketer with the steely wrists who invented the leg glance, who was the first batsman 'to top 3000 runs in first-class cricket' (as Sussex captain in 1899), and who, on his Test debut at Old Trafford, tamed the rampaging Aussie attack with...an unbeaten 154 in 190 minutes...while none of his partners (Englishmen all) could cross 19.' And therefore, at the end one has to accept the whole man, warts and all, consider Ranjitsinhji in historical context in an explicit acknowledgement of the tangled, complicated and contradictory history of cricket in the subcontinent. The true fan of South Asian cricket should have no problems with this book. South Asian cricket writing, especially the writing of the social/political history associated with subcontinental cricket, emerges the richer for having a more complex and rounded picture of its greatest cricketer.

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.

Rain, Rain

SHAHEED QUADERI
(Translated by Kaiser Haq)



Sudden panic sends colourful homebound crowds--
Even the drowsy ones among them--
Scuttling like scared red roaches every which way
As if someone with a cold forbidding voice,
Tolling a familiar bell,
Had come to warn of imminent plague
Emptying all homes and city squares.

And then
A flying lance of lightning rips through
The rotund whale's-belly of the sky.
Thunder and hail and rain:
Deafening the ear
As if circular saws had roared into ceaseless motion
While a million lathes set off a tormented whine.

Dusk brings on an electric storm--
Nervy and peevish--and more
Clouds and water and wind--
Wind with a peacock's rainbow scream--
How imperilled our dwellings--
Doors and windows desperate to spread wings--
This old house heaves like a tyrannosaur--
Flash floods sweep through crowded neighbourhoods
And gleaming but abandoned avenues
And swirl around the city's knees.

Through the dusk--rent by apocalyptic winds--
As if the wind were Israfil's OMI--
Rain falls aslant on parked cars--
The passengers sit quietly, heads bowed
In anxiety and apprehension, and suddenly startled,
Look up and see
Only water,
Swift and fierce,
Flowing ceaselessly
And willy nilly hear
The sound of lamentation
In their own hearts
And in this weird and vagrant monsoon's sterile dithyramb.

Tonight in this rain, on city thoroughfares,
Tramp and drifter, homeless youth and lifelong beggar,
Spiv, thief and the half-crazed
Come into their own,
Theirs is the kingdom
In this rain tonight.
The revenue collectors
Always to be seen carefully counting
The money they pocket every day,
Have fled in terror.

They burst into lusty song--dark
Festive auditorium and drunken placard on the wall,
Twisted telephone pole at whose tip swings
An old, dented, signboard blown thither by the wind
While the city's countless shutters keep time
With a relentless clatter,
For the constable on the beat,
The sentry and the taxman
Have all fled in terror.

And these too--the wise and the wealthy
And all their sidekicks and sycophants--
They too have slipped away unnoticed--
The torrent has washed away all footprints
And will only carry a few miserable mementos
As it rushes, merry as a civic procession,
Towards the cascading town drains:

A cigarette tin floats by with a sound like tambourines,
And broken glass, torn wire, envelopes,
Blue letters, yellow laundry slips,
Doctor's prescriptions, white medicine box,
A broken button from a favourite shirt
And miscellaneous keepsakes
From the varicoloured days of civilized existence.

O Lord, amidst the lightning-lit deluge
In this dark city, barefoot and alone
In tattered pantaloons, inside
A shirt billowing like a sail,
I am like a shiny little ark--
In the lonely turmoil of my flesh-and-blood existence
Smolders Noah's restless red-hot wrathful soul
But not a single creature--man or beast--
Stirs in response, though the scudding waters
Carry the sound of breathing,
The wind wafts anguished cries--
Exalted by what aourl, towards
Which city shall I drift,
Lured by these seductive waters?



Kaiser Haq teaches English at Dhaka University.