

## SHORT STORY

# The Night Queen

S.K.POTTEKAT  
(translated by V. Abdulla)

One of the fragrances I like best is that of the *nishaagandhi*. There is nothing I find more attractive than the scent that emanates from the small flowers of this plant, called the 'night queen' in English. Its fragrance, wafting through the darkness from a bush by a fence or the corner of a garden, always fills my mind with intoxicating delight.

But I will never allow a *nishaagandhi* to be planted in my own garden. There is a special reason for this and an old tale behind it.

I will narrate it to you. I was a seventeen-year-old college student at the time. It is a dangerous time. Although the English call this age 'sweet seventeen', I have christened it 'calamitous seventeen'. Many ideas that seem intoxicatingly novel occur to a seventeen-year-old. A dreamer who does no one any harm, he intervenes in unnecessary love affairs and complicates them; runs behind every new ideal he hears about only to stumble and fall face down; imagines all the reasonably good-looking girls he sees to be goddesses, nurtures secret desires about them and encounters disappointment. Editors find these seventeen-year-olds great problems. This is because it is a period of life when even a youth with an idiot's mentality wants to write poetry. Disliking to be materialistic, he will favour the love in Nalini or in Leela rather than in Vilasitlakam. His ideal lover will be an Italian dandy.

After I had conducted research on the beauty and character of many young girls without their

knowledge or permission, it was Malathi who had the good fortune to finally become my ideal girl. She was a high school student, fair-skinned, with a short, stocky body and rounded breasts. A face as beautiful as the full moon. The first thing that attracted me were her intoxicating eyes.

Somehow, beauty flowed through every part of her. She was a serious little person who never smiled. I liked her seriousness very much. At that time, I hated girls who walked around laughing all the time. I would stand on the verandah of the topmost floor of my house every evening to eagerly watch the wonderful spectacle of her walking like a female swan at the edge of the road with her eyes downcast, wearing a coarse green skirt of khadi and a white khadi blouse with red dots, a huge bundle of books pressed tightly to her chest and a small umbrella with a handle shaped like a cashew fruit hanging from her left hand. She did not know I worshipped her. Pushing my homework sums filled with logarithms, co-tangents and such rubbish to one side, I began to compose poems about Malathikutty, her gait and her bundle of books:

Seeing her breast grow like mushrooms,  
My heart burns...

Bravo! I appreciated those lines myself. But although I wrote poems like this, I was determined not to think about her in sexual terms. A divine love, faultless and ideal. And it had to hold within it a sorrow, a feeling of disappointments love like Madanan. I visualized the scene where Malu would fall on to

my shoulder 'like a flag flapping down on a flagpole'.

Malathi lived in a two-storeyed house set in a huge compound about two furlongs to the west of our place. There was nothing more than a casual acquaintance between her father and me, confined to the formal exchanges of 'How are you?', 'Fine, thank you.' It was doubtful whether Malathi had ever seen my face.

I used to go for a walk after dinner at night. The path that cut across the fields started from the road and ended at the huge gate on the west of Malathi's house. In the corner of the compound, four yards from the gate, someone had planted a thick bush of *nishaagandhi* that had grown dense and high. I once discovered that if I sat right inside that bush, I could see Malathi seated in her room, reading, through the shutters.

The glow of the table lamp revealed the expressions on her face clearly. She wore a blouse that lay partially open, exposing her breasts. Since her unbound hair hung down over her shoulders on to her breast, covering the blouse, only part of a fair breast was visible, bursting out like a waterfall. Her English reader open in front of her, she would lean downwards slightly over the table and begin to read--no, to recite. 'And Sita wanted to go with Rama,' she would murmur carelessly. The poor girl would sometimes read so much that she would feel sleepy; as the weight of sleep grew heavier, her face would droop lower and lower like the pan of weighing scale and when it finally swung gently against the table, she would put a stop to that journey to Vaikuntam.

open her eyes, raise her head and examine her surroundings. After that, she would sit for a long time gazing out of the window into the darkness. As I watched all this from the bush, an impulse of love would make me feel like calling out: 'Enough darling, now go and sleep.' But after rubbing her eyes for a while, she would begin to read again. Holding my breath, I would



stare steadily at this sleep-dazed goddess of my heart, and the intense, exciting fragrance of the *nishaagandhi* would fill my nostrils and flow into my heart. every second I spent in that cave conferred the bliss of nirvana upon me...I felt as if the perfume of the *nishaagandhi* permeated all my thoughts and dreams.

Sometimes she read Malayalam

poems. She recited verse in the manjari metre beautifully:

...not only a mother but anyone at all would feel like picking her up and kissing her...  
Ah! you had to listen to her sing those lines...I would want to kiss her lips then.  
And so I silently worshipped

that beauty, hidden inside the cave of that *nishaagandhi* for an hour every night for three whole months without missing a single day. The scent of the *nishaagandhi* and Malathi's lotus-like face imprinted themselves on my heart. I savoured that beauty every day.

The rainy season began. The Thiruvathira season, when the rains were at their heaviest, began.

Storms were no hindrance to my expeditions. But sometimes, when the rains were very heavy, she would close the window. Ayyo! Disappointed, drenched in the rain, I would return home, my heart dark and heavy.

One day, as I sat in my cave, I happened to overhear her father tell her brother, 'Tomorrow we must cut down the plants in the garden. Parts of the compound are overgrown--we must clear all that.'

A fire ignited in my heart. In their attempt to cut down all the branches and twigs and clear their garden, it was certain they would cut down the *nishaagandhi* bush. It had grown very dense and high and spread over a large area. If my love-refuge was going to be destroyed what would my condition be? How would I be able to sit gazing at that face all by myself again?

There was no other alternative: I decided I would send Malathi a letter appealing to her to spare the bush.

I sat up till three that night, composing this letter:

Queen of my heart,  
It has been three months since I began to crouch inside the *nishaagandhi* bush near your room every night and worship you. It was my desire to spend years like that as a silent devotee, not letting anyone, even you, know. But can 'anyone break fate's decree'? Ah, I cannot even think of it--tomorrow morning that cave is going to be destroyed by your father!  
Respected lady, I appeal to you: save that bush and, through it, this person, me. Only your mercy can help me. Om Shanti. Rest later.  
Your slave in love, (Signature)

I set out early morning for

Malathi's house with the intention of getting the letter to her as quickly as possible. I entered the compound on the pretext of asking for the branch of a white Prince of Wales plant. A commotion of some sort seemed to be taking place there. A handful of people who lived in the neighbourhood were gathered in the yard. I pushed my way in through them to peer in.

An enormous serpent had been beaten to death and flung on the ground. It must have been about three feet long.

A poisonous snake of the most vicious kind!  
'Look at that--the fellow was inside that bush that "gives off a scent at night". When we cut down the bush, we saw a huge hole. We dug into it and the fellow jumped out! The incredible thing is that this serpent was so close to us all this time and none of us knew!' said Velu Ashri, who had beaten the creature to death, looking at me, his finger laid on his nose in a gesture of astonishment.

Seeing its tail twitch slightly like a telegraph wire, the carpenter said eagerly, 'What? The rascal isn't dead yet?' he started to hit its head again with the big palm branch he had in his hand. Blood sprayed out from the snake's crushed head.

I did not stay there any longer. I have no idea how I got home. The more I thought about it, the more I felt that someone was pouring fire over my heart. I thought I was growing insane with fear when I realized that while I had sat in the darkness of that bush savouring Malathi's divine beauty, a fearful serpent had been next to me, its mouth wide open to breathe in the fragrance of the *nishaagandhi*.

That very night, I began to run a

temperature. It grew steadily higher. I had terrible nightmares and became delirious. I felt there were serpents everywhere I looked. A snake on the canopy of my bed; innumerable snakes crawling in through the bars of the window; a poisonous snake poised on a box with its hood raised; a snake hanging upside down next to me. 'Ayyo! A snake, a snake!' I screamed.

In these nightmares, I saw Malathi as a *nagakanyaka* with a serpent's body and a woman's face. While looking at her face gave me pleasure, her body frightened me.

I lay in bed a month with fever. Then I grew better. When I went out for a walk, I saw a board saying 'For rent' hanging outside Malathi's house. I made enquiries and found out that her father had been transferred to Kannur and that all of them had moved there a week earlier.

I never saw Malathi again. I heard recently that she is married and the mother of two. A week ago I took out the letter I wrote her from among copies of my old letters and destroyed it.

Whenever the fragrance of the *nishaagandhi* wafts out to me from anywhere the old, pleasant memories of my mad seventeen-year-old passion arise in my mind. Through that fragrance, I see simultaneously the images of a schoolgirl sleepily learning her lessons and of a poisonous snake poised with its hood unfurled...It is because of this unreasonable fear that I never allow the *nishaagandhi* to enter my garden.

S.K. Pottekkat has won awards for his short stories and novels in Tamil. V. Abdulla was a translator of note from Malayalam to English.

## Book Reviews

# The Thinking Person's Guide to the New Millennium

FAKRUL ALAM

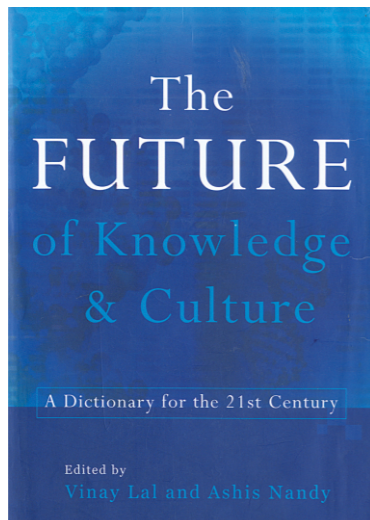
*The Future of Knowledge and Culture: A Dictionary for the 21st Century.*  
Edited by Vinay Lal and Ashis Nandy.  
New Delhi. Penguin Viking; 2005; 375 pp; Rs. 595.

By the end of the twentieth century, projects of modernity were becoming increasingly discredited in the realm of ideas. Postmodern thinkers had undermined most grand narratives and dismantled quite a few of the structures erected by enlightenment thinkers. Nevertheless, habits of thoughts shaped by well entrenched disciplinary apparatuses, models of development promoted by organizations pushing globalizing schemes and models, media blitzes sponsored by multinational capitalism, and constant ideological interpellation had blunted the sensibilities of most people. Many had started to believe that it was enough to live in a world of conspicuous consumption and have their desires satisfied instantly, endlessly.

Faced with the obfuscations of the media and the ever-spreading tentacles of capital on the one hand and the skepticism engendered by the postmodernist turn on the other, the thinking person is bound to ask all or some of these questions: How, are we going to penetrate the miasmas created by totalitarian systems of thought and diffused by the media in the new millennium? How, indeed, are we to steer clear of the maze created by global networks of dominance? How is one to go through the twenty-first century with heightened sensitivity and a defogged vision and yet with some idealism intact and a commitment to not accept the world as it is but to do one's best to alter it any which way one can?

Without a doubt, answering any of these questions is never going to be easy. Also, there will be no single key that will help us open our eyes and allow us to see through the many myths about progress now in circulation. But surely one way for people in our part of the world to penetrate the fogs created by domineering systems of thought and negotiate the obstacles created by the abrasive and aggressive operations of capital at this time will be *The Future of Knowledge and Culture: A Dictionary for the 21st Century*. Edited by Vinay Lal and Ashis Nandy, this is a dictionary with a difference; indeed, a dictionary dedicated to differences, demystifications, and alternative visions.

Consider the contents of a continuously surprising work. The first entry is on "Apologies" and the last one is on "Yahoo". In between, we have entries on not unconventional topics such as "Cancer" "Corruption"



"Democracy" "Education" "Human Rights" "Literacy" "Marxism" and "Pollution", but all treated almost always unconventionally. Who would, however, ever imagine that a book dedicated to the future of knowledge would have essays on "Bollywood" "Coca-Cola" "Damned H2O/Ethnic Cuisine" "McDonald's" "Sacred Groves" and "Spin Doctors"?

A look at the "Notes on Contributors" reinforces the feeling that the reader is about to go through a book where she or he can always expect the unexpected. Contributors include freelance writers, academics, people involved with NGOs, practicing physicians, and members of "think tanks". They are from all over the world and the only continents not represented are Africa (a surprising and regrettable omission) and Antarctica (Bangladesh, it is good to note, is represented by a thoughtful entry on refugees by the University of Dhaka's Imtiaz Ahmed). In fact, some of the entries under the "Notes on Contributors" are positively intriguing: one contributor is identified as "a nomadic storyteller, a depersonalized activist and a grass-roots activist", another as a visual anthropologist, still another as "a poet, critic, and amateur gardener".

But if the contributors come from unique backgrounds and all sorts of professions and locations, they share many common assumptions. One is that we need to reject the "cultivated mediagenic optimism" and images of "unending progress and ever-expanding consumer choices" that we are fed daily and come up with alternative visions of development. Another is that the time has come to leave behind nationalism, embrace a "new cosmopolitanism", accept hybridity as "a cultural category, and subscribe to "a self-reflexive and perhaps more self-doubting politics of knowledge". Or to put it somewhat differently, the entries in *The Future of*

*Knowledge* are dedicated to both opening our eyes to overwhelming and mind-numbing frameworks of knowledge and to sensitize us to truly humane options we can embrace in the new millennium.

*The Future of Knowledge* thus begins with "meaningless (official) apologies" that nations often make but suggests that it is never too late for states to regret past brutal actions [when, one keeps thinking, will Pakistan apologize for 1971?]. The entry on architecture notes, *pace* Foucault, that "modern architecture is preoccupied with the management, distribution, utilization and surveillance" of space and proposes that the discipline should embrace "regeneration" as a goal and that "post-industrial culture" should build "vernacular homes" that have this quality incorporated in them.

The paper on consumerism almost ends up saying that Descartes's "*cogito ergo sum*" has now a variant, "One is, because one consumes" and notes that advertisement and marketing have now found a willing subject in the lonely, consuming individual created by modern liberal capitalism. I found the few pages given to "Democracy" luminescent with insights, as when the author, C. Douglas Lummis, notes that democracy has to be redefined in our time as the system where the voter doesn't have any power and merely helps "those who do, by voting for them". Majid Rahnema's lucid, thought-provoking entry on "Development" discusses the failures of the official discourse of development and points at "the unholy alliance between "corrupted 'developmentalist' regimes and interest groups in "socially developed countries" and comment on the way the market economy has fuelled "the creation of scarcity and various injustices". He declares with the conviction of experience (he was a minister in an Iranian government and has held major UN posts) that "true and deeper changes occur when the social actors constituting civil society are ready, first, to change themselves and, second, to use all their creative potential to finding new alternatives for better life" (he could, however, have come up with a few suggestions about how this could be done!) David Punter's excellent pages on "Mystery" make us aware that the ultimate mystery behind development, defence departments, dictators, and Disneyland is one ogre: the hydra-headed monster called multinational capitalism.

It is easy to see that the contributors of *The Future of Knowledge* subscribe, on the whole, to postmodern assumptions about most subjects. The entry on economics thus posits indeterminacy as the essence of

contemporary economics; according to its writer, Roby Rajan, "Economics is best understood as [a] set of beliefs about... (non)-belief about others' belief about economic reality." Rajan stresses the need for the political to reassert itself globally "across the entire space of economy." In another essay on "Imperial Economics" Rajan gives us a dystopian account of the new world economic order where "econopolice" institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank and the WTO have enforced policies to direct "the movement of capital order" and declares that the task of the twenty-first century will be to reclaim economics from these "imperial economic formations." However, postmodernism too is critiqued in a number of contributions to the book. For example, while writing about Islam, Ziauddin Sarkar, sees postmodernism itself as the last stop of the imperial world order and recommends "transmodernism" as a genuine alternative to the cynicism and nihilism of postmodernism. Sarkar assaults postmodernism frontally in the entry devoted to the subject: "Under postmodernism, distinctive cultures are hybridized, ethnicities are appropriated, sacred spiritual practices are turned into mass products, local cultures are arrogated by the global entertainment machine." Perhaps even more scathing is Frederique Apffel-Marglin's comment that postmodern critiques are carried out by people who "sit in a mirrored closet imagined as an endlessly refracted world".

The contributors of *The Future of Knowledge* seem to have come together in this volume with the brief to carry out cultural critiques. This is why the book has entries such as the one on the Jamaican reggae star Bob Marley. My first impression on encountering this essay was "Why him?" By the time I finished reading it though I realized that its author Charles Carnegie was upholding Marley's music as an example of how "a transnational political consciousness" can be created and how culture can take us across barriers created by conceptual constraints such as communities, race, and nation. On the other hand, Raminder Kaur, the author of the essay on "Spin Doctors" deconstructs a cultural phenomenon that has come to dominate politics in the age of the simulacrum by molding politicians into media savvy people, wittily explaining en route how the success of Blair in nineties Britain is an example of the "soft shell, yet hard sell of New Labour."

Not surprisingly, not all of the sixty-plus entries of the book are illuminating or worth reading. I found the entries on Bollywood and Calcutta, for instance, merely interesting, and I do intend to damn them with faint praise. Entries

such as the one on "Coca Cola" and "McDonald's" promise more than they deliver. None of these entries, it seems to me, contribute to the future of knowledge. As a Dhakaite, I don't know whether I should react with incredulity or pride to Ashis Nandy's claim in his pages on "Ethnic Cuisine" that "Kasturi in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, is arguably the best Bengali restaurant in the world". Occasionally, a populist strain mars the tone of some of the writing as when Nandy claims in his entry on "Nuclearism" "it is the most depraved, shameless and costly pornography of our times."

Nevertheless, *The Future of Knowledge* is a book well worth reading, almost always readable, and immensely stimulating. One can dip into the book at random and come up with amazing observations, amusing comments, and astonishing insights into consumerism, neo-capitalism, and mind-forged manacles. For a Bangladeshi reader in particular, there is much here to learn from. Thus though the editors somehow forgot to mention us in their roll call of South Asian countries wielding state power in their Foreword, shouldn't have we got pride of place when they say that "the state sector and the public sphere" in this part of the world "are becoming arenas of increasing violence, intolerance and, sometimes blatant incitement to human slaughter"? After all, which other South Asian country can claim such flashy example of state terrorism as our RAB, complete with Zorro-like outfits, bandanas, hunt dogs, and tank-type vehicles? Don't we daily see proof in the handiwork and oratory of our fundamentalists the truth of Ziauddin Sarkar's observation that in the name of the creation of an Islamic state, "the integrated, holistic and God-centered world view of Islam is [being] transformed into a totalitarian, theocratic world order, and a persuasive moral God replaced by a coercive, political one"? Isn't it easy for us to agree with C. Douglas Lummis, the author of the entry on "Military", that that "the chief function of the military in most states is to establish and protect the government's power over the people"?

*The Future of Knowledge*, then is a book that should equip us to navigate the new millennium with the right mindset. Quite reasonably priced, and available in Dhaka bookstores, this is a book to look out for the next time you are there!

Fakrul Alam is Professor, English department, Dhaka University.

# Unforgettable depictions of turn-of-the-century Bengal

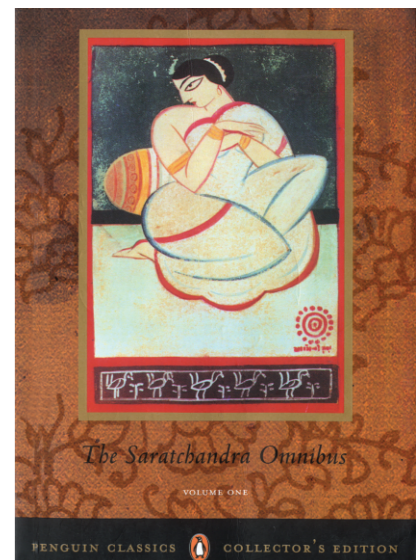
FARHAD AHMED

*The Saratchandra Omnibus* (Volume I)  
translated by Aruna Chakravarti, Sreejata Guha, and Malobika Chaudhuri; New Delhi: Penguin India; 2005; pp. 739.

This Omnibus, Volume I of a projected double-decker publication, takes the right step in having selected for its first volumes some of Saratchandra's most well-known and widely read novels, namely, *Srikanta*, *Devdas*, *Parineeta*, *Palli Samaj* and *Nishkriti*. As one can well imagine, it makes for a fat volume. Saratchandra Chattopadhyay is widely acknowledged as one of the greatest Indian novelists of the twentieth century. His novels, serialized in periodicals and subsequently published in book form, earned Saratchandra immense fame in the early decades of the last century, and established him as Bengal's master storyteller. Even today, a full seven decades after his death, Saratchandra remains a perennially favourite author. He has been widely translated in the Indian vernacular and regional languages and year after year proves to be one of the best-selling novelists across India. Saratchandra's appeal transcends state, regional and linguistic boundaries. This collector's edition of Saratchandra's works in English translation brings together the writer's most renowned and best-loved novels in two omnibus volumes. The production values are excellent, and the translations are smooth and easy to read. Here it has to be admitted that translations in India from their languages into English are beginning to acquire a sophistication not witnessed, regrettably, in the rest of South Asia.

All Bengalis--the ones who read novels at any rate--are familiar with the broad outlines of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's life. Born into rural poverty--poor as only the rural poor can be in Bengal--in Devanandapur on 15 September 1876, a village in West Bengal meant that it instilled in him a lifelong empathy, or perhaps the more appropriate term would be solidarity, with Bengal's dispossessed and marginal classes. He was almost entirely self-taught. After spending some of his youth in Bhagalpur and Muzaffarpur. Saratchandra left for Burma in 1903, and it was from there that he began to send his stories and novels to magazines in Kolkata. Sensitive and daring, Saratchandra's writings almost immediately earned him an adoring readership, and he soon became Bengal's most popular novelist. Saratchandra returned to Kolkata in 1916, and dedicated himself to writing. He is also famous for being India's first successful professional writer--an author who earned his entire livelihood only from writing, whose income solely derived from writing. Saratchandra died in 1938.

*Srikanta* recounts the story of a man with a wanderlust who is an acute observer of people as well, and it is through them--especially the women he encounters, the women who make up the heart of the story aside from the



main character Srikant, ranging from the sacrificing Annada Didi and the rebellious Abhaya to the housewife Rajlakshmi and the courtesan Pyari Bai--that he attempts to arrive at an understanding of life. *Devdas*, on the other hand, is the tragic tale of a man who drinks himself to sickness and death when he is unable to marry his childhood sweetheart Paro. In *Parineeta* (*Espoused*), and here perhaps the title has been deliberately chosen to retain the flavour of the old vanished order), the orphaned Lalita is secretly in love with her guardian Shekhar, but circumstances conspire to drive the two apart. *Palli Samaj* (*The Village Life*) has Ramesh, an engineer, coming back home to the village of his birth to try and rid it of the backwardness, even as he tries to revive his childhood ties with Rama, now widowed. In *Nishkriti* (*Deliverance*), the strong-willed Shailaja, the youngest daughter-in-law in a joint family, is made an outcast as a result of a misunderstanding; much later, her elders realize their mistake, just in time to save the family from falling apart.

Each of the novels showcases the qualities Saratchandra is famous for everyday stories told in a simple yet gripping style, strong characters, meticulous plotting, true-to-life dialogue, and unforgettable depictions of life in turn-of-the-century Bengal, as can be seen in the extract published below. These translations, done especially for Penguin, should broaden his readership even more.

Aruna Chakravarti is principal of Janki Devi Memorial College, Delhi. Her translation of *Srikanta* was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award. Her novel *The Inheritors* (reviewed in these pages last year) was published in 2004.

Sreejata Gupta has translated the writing of Saratchandra, Tagore and Taslima Nasrin. Malobika Chaudhuri's translation of *Parineeta* was published independently in 2005.

Farhad Ahmed is a free-lance editor/translator.