

SHORT STORY

Dreams came rolling down

SYED WALIULLAH
(translated by Khademul Islam)

Sometimes dream just come rolling down. It’s strange but true. It is as if they are frozen in the upper reaches of the mind, when God knows what heat descends on them and then they stream down like lava, or like clear, cold water, or even at times like the air that blows back after buffeting the sides of hills.

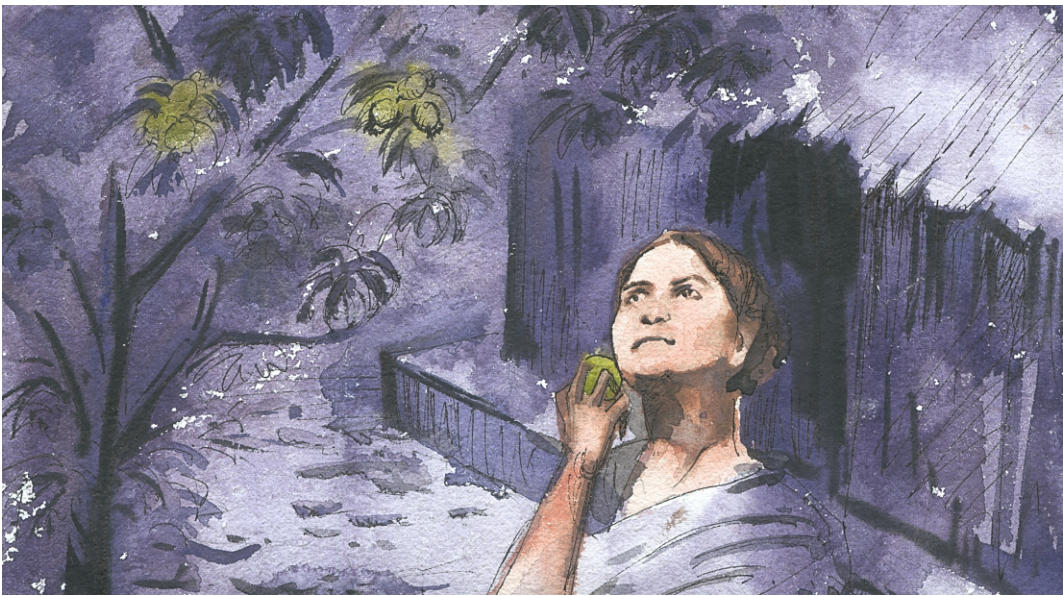
Akbar was by nature a quiet and modest man. He spoke softly, went about quietly. He had passed his intermediate exams in science, had quietly withstood his father’s death, and equally quietly began to work as a clerk. He spoke so seldom that oftentimes it seemed as if he had no mind to speak of, no thoughts of his own; and yet when one realizes that every waking moment a human being usually is thinking of something or the other, then to look upon him was to feel surprise.

His family was small--his mother, he and one younger brother. The brother was too young to converse with; on the other hand his mother was too old to talk to. Perhaps this was the reason for his silence, and maybe he would have gone on like this forever had not suddenly dreams started to stream through his mind.

So many lives every day were turned upside down by the tumult of war. Though Akbar’s household was unaffected by it, nevertheless they felt its jolts. Three human beings--relatives by some distant connection--from Burma came to live with him. One was Akbar’s uncle, the other his aunt and the third their daughter. They asked for shelter, a request that really was more of a demand, a demand that had no validity, and though Akbar in his quiet way acceded and gave them shelter, who knows what went on in his heart?

Well, good then! They were in desperate straits and giving them shelter was the right thing to do. A few days went by. Quietly. And doubtless would have continued on in the same way had not suddenly dreams started to cascade through Akbar’s mind.

One morning Akbar was reading the newspaper when after some time he put down the pages and began to stare out of the window. A glittering sunlight fell on the inner courtyard, and it was there that his gaze first went. Then, all of a sudden, he saw the girl--his uncle’s daughter--trying to hang her wash on the bamboo rail up above. The pole was fairly high up and though she kept flinging up the sari in her hand, she couldn’t make it catch the rail. All these days Akbar hadn’t seen the girl clearly--but now he did; in other words, today he saw her because he wanted to see her. He hadn’t really noticed her before, had only glimpsed her inside in the shadows. Today he got a really good look at her, in bright sunlight, in need of help. Previously, she hadn’t seemed wholly human and alive to him, just some thing, and today in the bright sunlight his gaze took in her slim body, her hands and feet, which were moving--moving in the service of



artwork by apurba

work, a work at which she was being repeatedly unsuccessful.

Though at last the sari did hook itself on the pole, as did the bedsheet, after which she disappeared from his view. Akbar continued to stare out of the window, then after a while realized with a start that the sunlit courtyard was now empty. It was as if something had been present that till now had succeeded in hiding the whole scene from his gaze, and now the mind kept going back to that thing-that-was-no-longer-there.

When a storm comes it does so without warning. The girl’s name was Rabeya and now this name began to drift inside him like some huge, gaudy billboard. And escaping free from that name and his body, his mind like something indistinct and hazy began to spread smokily upward.

It was a Sunday--he had always liked Sundays. In fact, he liked all other days, too--even workdays, even days when leisure time was stifled. But today he began to feel empty and listless. He sat in his room reading the newspaper for a long time, then laid silently on his bed; laid there all right but soon his mind began to yearn for something, as if it would feel good if somebody came near, but that somebody wouldn’t come, wouldn’t come near at all. Finally, he got up, and aimlessly paced through the two rooms. In the adjoining room--the room occupied by his mother, aunt and Rabeya--he saw the girl’s orange--coloured sari draped on a rope, and nothing else. His uncle had gone out to meet some gentleman who had also just fled from Burma, and the other three were in the kitchen, from where snatches of their murmured conversation came floating through the air to him.

Again, quietly, he returned to his room and laid down again. Though outwardly he was his usual calm self, inside he suddenly reeled from the impact of some unknown force. Without any warning his insides roared out and struck its tail against the ground like furious snakes. So much anger pent up inside him? He had had no idea that he had this much anger hoarded inside him.

He felt depressed. He closed his eyes and tried to go to sleep, and indeed after a while sleep did come. But that sleep was broken by the raucous cawing of crows. The whole day, he raged to himself, you can be awake, and not once would you hear a crow’s or an eagle’s screech, but fall asleep for a moment and right then that scream would pierce your eardrum.

Eventually, he did rage out loud. Directing his voice in the direction of the kitchen, he yelled out: ‘It’s two-thirty now. Mother, the cooking’s not yet done?’

Again, everything fell silent. So silent, in fact, that Akbar had an overwhelming desire to jump up, run over to the cat that was walking by and kick it so hard that it would be flung into the distance and its bones smashed to pieces. And Rabeya? Suddenly he was reminded of Rabeya’s thin body, how fragile it had seemed.

Then he ate. And later slept, too.

Waking up from sleep the first sound he heard was the shrill cry of an eagle soaring far up in the sky. At a great distance high up above--perhaps almost out of sight--and yet like a sharp spear its scream flew through the sea of silence. So, beyond this curtain of silence amid the open air there were still more horizons!

Dreams flowed through into his mind, through and down into his mind. The whole house was silent, perhaps they were all asleep. Who knew where was Rabeya? After a while Akbar stood up, walked out to the other room. Yes, they were all asleep--but Rabeya was not there. Where was she? That she was not sleeping, this thought suddenly struck him and filled him with pleasure.

Rabeya was standing beneath the guava tree in the little garden at the back of the house, looking up at it while chewing something in her mouth. She was holding a guava in her hand, and had gathered a bunch of them in the loose end of her sari. In that silent garden in the still noon Rabeya’s

mind was so absorbed in working along the groove of her task (an absorption usually not possible in the presence of others) that when Akbar spoke to her from behind (‘Eating a guava, eh?’) she gave such a violent start that all her guavas tumbled onto the ground from her sari end.

‘Oh my! Look, all your guavas have fallen on the ground.’

Though Rabeya did look down at them she made no attempt to retrieve them. Akbar did not say anything else and remained silent. Then suddenly he laughed and said, ‘Will you give me one of your guavas?’

Rabeya did not say anything, just stood there looking confused. There was a reason for this. She had known Akbar to be a man of few words, solemn and quiet. While she had acknowledged the reality of his presence her mind not gone beyond it. It had said: this man is like a photograph hanging on a wall, doesn’t talk, doesn’t laugh. And now when that person came into this garden and began to talk and laugh with her, it seemed unreal to her, as if the photograph on the wall had suddenly climbed down and transformed itself in a flesh-and-blood creature that had begun to talk. A strange sight, and she could not fit the two halves together.

But dreams were coursing through Akbar’s mind, and that too with some speed. Which was why he suddenly grabbed her by the hand and asked: ‘Won’t you really give me a guava? Won’t you?’

Rabeya was transfixed. But the stream within Akbar began to flow even faster. And suddenly he drew her near to him by tugging on her hand and cried out: ‘I love you, I love you dearly.’

A bewildered Rabeya’s eyes turned red with embarrassment and she cast her eyes down momentarily before lifting them to look directly into Akbar’s eyes. In a trembling voice that yet had the authority that truth lends, she said ‘Oh, how can you be this low?’

She then turned and went inside, the guavas still scattered on the ground.

Akbar again became quiet inside. The flow of dreams stopped, and lay in a heap on the peaks of his mind.

And so dreams sometimes roll down through men’s minds. And sometimes bear fruit, and sometimes do not. Sometimes they see that below there is no sea which they can flow into, and sometimes they catch sight of an infinite, unbounded ocean. In the first instance the dream-flow fades away, but those over whom fate has a hand their insides become so cold that their flow freezes and becomes still to later flow again. But the others find themselves destroyed: dreams keep rolling through, flowing down, and then slowly die out, and all is finished.

This is the norm, because the dreamless man is a man without meaning.

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.

Book Reviews

Existentialism in a Bangladeshi village

KAISER HAQ

Tree Without Roots by Syed Waliullah (translation of the Bengali novel *Lal Shalu*). Edited by Niaz Zaman, with an introduction by Serajul Islam Choudhury. Dhaka: writers.ink; distributed by UPL; pp. 136; Tk. 350.

It was at the SOAS library in London that I first chanced upon *Tree Without Roots*, the English version of Syed Waliullah’s classic Bengali novel, *Lal Shalu*, in the UNESCO-sponsored translation series. It was a revelation. Translations from Asian languages can be annoyingly lumpy, with indigestible culture-specific material swallowed wholesale. But here was a novel set in a backward Bangladeshi village whose English version read remarkably smoothly. The few local words retained in italics wouldn’t hold up any reader because they have been neatly and inconspicuously explained in the text.

Intriguingly, the translation differs substantially from the Bengali original. The overture is longer and the finale completely new--the whole of Part Four, all of twenty-six pages. Within the main body, at least one incident--Majeed’s encounter with the pir--has been left out, and throughout the text bits of detail have been altered or added. Glancing at the two texts side by side, one can only be amazed at the looseness of the

correlation.

Who but the author himself could take such liberties? Though four translators are named--one of them is Anne-Marie Thibaud (Madame Waliullah), who had very little Bengali. They were obviously a smokescreen behind which the author performed his second act of creation with the same basic plot, the same setting, the same characters as in *Lal Shalu*. And that makes *Tree Without Roots* as canonical as, say, Beckett’s English versions of his own own work; and indeed, the first novel in English by a Bangladeshi writer.

On my return home I enthusiastically told friends that Bangladeshi universities offering courses in postcolonial or South Asian writing in English ought to include *Tree Without Roots*. If only someone would reprint it! It’s the only wish of mine that promptly came true.

Dr. Niaz Zaman, Professor of English at Dhaka University, has quietly added another colourful feather to her hat by launching writers.ink, a publishing house committed to the promotion of good writing, with UPL as the distributor. The maiden title of her imprint is a handsomely produced *Tree Without Roots*, with the same cover design as the London edition: a reproduction of a painting, illustrative of the text, by the author himself.

The editorial preface provides conclusive proof of the author’s hand in the translation (or, rather,

re-creation) of *Lal Shalu*. The late Anne-Marie Thibaud has left an unpublished memoir, ‘Wali, My Husband as I Knew Him,’ where she states that her French version of the novel was done ‘from Wali’s own translation into English.’ Significantly she does not mention any co-translators. Madame Waliullah also draws our attention to ‘a certain grandeur’ that the protagonist Majeed displays in the English version but lacks in the original. Professor Choudhury in his introduction passes a more general judgement--and quite rightly too--in describing *Tree Without Roots* as ‘certainly a revised and improved version of *Lal Shalu*’ and ‘a great artistic achievement indeed.’

Lal Shalu was written by a young man, probably when he was still a college student and was published in 1948. When he wrote *Tree Without Roots* he had matured, become better read, acquired a commendable mastery of the English language. He had also become an UNESCO official in Paris: this was perhaps the most important factor affecting his creative life, for in Paris he absorbed existentialism and successfully infused it into his writing. The Majeed of *Tree Without Roots* is more amenable to an existential analysis than his original.

Majeed hails from a southeast-ern district of the country (not named but easily identifiable) where the pressure of the population on the land--powerfully evoked

in a lyrical prose--drives the children of the poor to become mullahs and seek employment in other parts of the country. Majeed starts his career as a muezzin in the Garo Hills, where he meets a government officer out on a hunt. He sniffs an opportunity in what he learns about the officer’s ancestral home ‘in the area further north’--clearly North Bengal--and soon heads in that direction. He fetches up in a small, poor, remote village called Mahabhatpur, where he plays his famous confidence trick, convincing the people that an old overgrown, lichened tomb is that of a great saint. He becomes its self-appointed guardian and plays on the religious susceptibilities of the poor and gullible villagers to make a comfortable niche for himself.

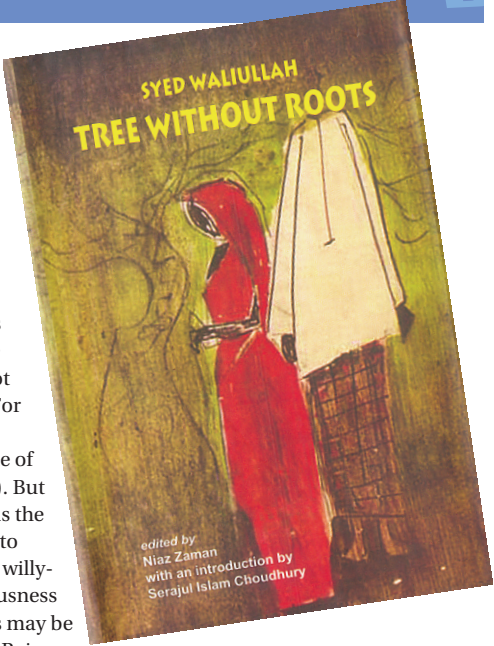
It’s no mean achievement. He make an ally of the local honcho, the landowner Khaleque (in *Lal Shalu* he is a *byapari*, a merchant or trader: I suppose the change is aimed at making his character more convincing to Anglo-American readers used to country squires), who becomes his chief patron, bullies and cajoles the villages into submission. There is a broad streak of sadism in his dealings with them and with the two wives he acquires. We are given a vivid sense of the workings of what Michael Foucault has called ‘micro power’ which operates at the most basic level of our inter-personal relations and provides anchor points for the larger power structure in society

and the state.

Majeed is anxiously aware of the ‘game’ he is playing and its attendant risks, but once he has embarked on it there’s no turning back. ‘It was he who had created the *mazar*, and he could not destroy it,’ he muses. ‘For he was now its slave’--which is a good example of *mauvaise foi* (bad faith). But when a deluge threatens the *mazar* his decision not to abandon it is not made willy-nilly but in full consciousness of his freedom. Readers may be reminded of Narayan’s Raju, another unlikely existential hero, but Majeed in the last four paragraphs of the narrative is much more of an exalté, closer to Sartre’s Mathieu in his final moments.

Tree Without Roots should appeal to the common readers, academics and students alike. A research student looking for a worthwhile M. Phil topic could profitably compare it with the Bengali text. For Dr. Niaz Zaman this is the first step in what I hope will be a long adventure in publishing. But I’ll be failing in my duties as a reviewer if I don’t point out editorial lapses. The publisher of the London edition is given as Heinemann on the copyright page and as Chatto and Windus in the editorial preface.

The text, though eminently readable, has a few oddly used



words that should have been commented upon: ‘huskies’ (for strong men); ‘arroyo,’ a very American word, used in an image describing Majeed’s thoughts; ‘*mazar*-room’ for the Bengali *mazar-ghar*; ‘unceremoniously,’ when the author means that there wasn’t much ceremony; ‘scavenger’ for the Bengali *dom*, for which ‘untouchable’ would have been appropriate. But that’s about it--remarkably little to quibble about in a full-length novel.

And Dr. Niaz Zaman, I’m sure, will be more careful next time round.

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Old Dhaka

FAKIR MOWLA

Afterwards she smiles, and asks ‘One teaspoon or two?’ while in streets below in the gutters strands of piss stream like sunlight amid glass bottles...

‘Such a coarse age nowadays...’ her mother intones on a big teak-wood bed like a boat afloat on a river of opium....

‘One,’ I say, and stare at the pyramid of sugar the grains coarse as the soles of her feet...



A tiny bathroom where she disappears after we catch our breaths, a red cement floor, a tin bucket to hold the water the roof so close...

Downstairs the bottles greenly knock and Mohammedan Club pennants ripple black on tenement rooftops I turn my nose downwind yes, my zipper is closed. Thatari Bazar, Shakhari *patti*, Rishipara, the old Hindu buildings squat, knackered, three kitchen stoves to a room...

She had panted, ‘Quick, quick, Mother’s in the next room.’ And later fried brinjal lifting it up, holding it for a moment poised between white teeth (sunlight skipping barefoot on spangled fly wings) then s-i-n-k-s her teeth into turmeric-stained flesh its juice squirting sssshhhh oh the red tongue she had used on me with the sun hitched at twelve o’clock. She had giggled in between the loving: ‘She sleeps light we ought to finish *thaka thak* fast...’

But no, Mother was dozing on the *shegunkaat* -strong bed dreaming of a blue-bodied muezzin with a hand-wrought silver *paan-batti* sinking by her side so I had paused (as curses bloomed in Maulvibazar lanes and Sunni men henna-dyed their hair) and whispered back, ‘Sssshhhh it’s Friday don’t hurry a good Muslim on a slow Buriganga ride...’

Fakir Mowla is a writer/translator.

EXTENSION

The last date for the submissions of material for the projected Daily Star literature page anthology has been extended to October 30, 2005.

NOTICE

This is to inform readers that due to unavoidable reasons the literature page will not be published next Saturday, 29 October. We will resume publication after the Eid holidays.

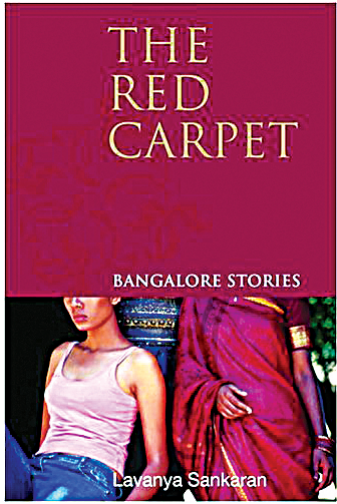
--Literary Editor

THE RED CARPET

The Red Carpet: Bangalore Stories by Lavanya Sankaran; The Dial Press; May 2005; \$23 (hardcover).

Over the last decade or so, South Asian women have become some of the most prolific writers published in their countries as well as in the West. A new voice is Lavanya Sankaran, with *The Red Carpet: Bangalore Stories*--eight short pieces set in her hometown. Sankaran, who grew up in Bangalore and has lived in the U.S., presents the changing times in her world. She’s not exploring the India of snake charmers, exotic women or the *Kama Sutra*. Her main characters are cosmopolitan, trend-conscious, scotch-guzzling, Western-appetizer-serving Indians who could hold their own anywhere. However, they are traveling between tradition and modernity.

“Two Four Six Eight” is about a ten-year-old who attends an all-girls school to get a ‘convent education’



and learn ‘How to Be English and How to Be Good.’ The main theme is the girl’s relationship with her ayah, Mary, who has two faces: a deceptively sweet one for her employer, and another for the little girl, often getting her in trouble at home and at school. What’s striking, even troubling, here is the

schoolgirls’ strong desire to be English--fueled by a steady diet of Enid Blyton’s stories of children solving mysteries and eating scrumptious ham-and-watercress sandwiches and pie--and their confusion over having to recite the ‘Lord’s Prayer’ at school, where they suspend their individual religious beliefs for eight hours. They receive a valuable education, but at the cost of trying to figure out if they are ‘English enough.’

In ‘Bombay This,’ we meet Ashwini, whose life in the even-more-Westernized city of Bombay has given her a confidence and sexuality that many of her peers lack. Men want a woman like Ashwini to hang on their arms at parties and possibly to sleep with, but at the end of the day, she’s the type of girl who’s considered inappropriate because she’s not a ‘traditional Indian girl.’

Which brings us to the issues of premarital sex, smoking and drinking--all frowned upon in conservative societies. In ‘Birdie

Num-Num” (yes, a tribute to Peter Sellers; Sankaran refers to his role in *The Party*), the author presents the generation gap, with the typical Indian parents whose soon-to-be-PhD daughter, Tara, is spending the summer at home. The mother is a contradictory character: She’s serving pesto canapés alongside minced mutton kebabs, imported sherry and wine at a cocktail party, but her aim is to introduce her daughter to eligible bachelors. ‘Tara is twenty-seven, and no matter how many PhDs she earns, it is time now for her to learn to be a good wife and mother, just as her mother and grandmother have done in their turn,’ sums up her philosophy. Tara, who’s been intimate with her American ex-boyfriend, has no desire to follow in her mother’s footsteps. It’s a problem many young women in the East face--for a better education, they are sent to America or England, where they battle between the values drilled into their heads from childhood and the ones they encounter in the

West. Then they are expected to come home, settle down with a ‘nice boy’ and have babies.

In ‘The Red Carpet,’ Sankaran’s strongest story (which debuted in *The Atlantic* magazine), we witness the juxtaposition of the lives of the socialites and their help. Mrs. Choudhary and Raju, her driver, come from vastly different backgrounds but share a strange bond. Although Raju disapproves of ‘May-Dum’s’ (Madam’s) revealing Western clothes and her penchant for smoking and drinking alcohol (he considers her behavior ‘immoral’), he has a strong commitment to her. There is poignancy in the details, such as the time May-Dum promises to visit Raju’s home, and he spends money cleaning and preparing (‘His family had used precious water to scrub themselves clean . . . His wife had prepared a sweet and a savory with ghee . . . he had bought specially for the occasion.’). He worries that May-Dum will forget or that she’ll show up in yet another indecent

getup. But she comes through, dressing and behaving with decorum. Another touching scene is when May-Dum visits her mother-in-law, who lectures her on her attire and hands her a bag with saris for her and dresses for her daughter. May-Dum, in tears on the drive home, gives the clothes to Raju for his family. He protests: ‘But May-Dum, they are brand-new,’ after all, he’s accustomed to hand-me-downs.

Sankaran draws upon her experiences in both the East and the West, painting a picture of a progressive Indian city (more effectively in some stories than in others) in which a section of society is just as cosmopolitan as its counterpart in New York or Los Angeles. And she leaves the reader wondering: How are we surviving with our feet in both worlds?

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