

SHORT STORY

Chameleon Girl

ABEER HOQUE

..* Trenchcoat fall, 39F *.*.*

Not all of us can gather our insides into one package that comes out the same every time

You could call it being a chameleon - fronting - but I'm not

I really do have many faces inside and everyone who crosses my path brings a different one to life

It was the way I learned to survive in America

I'm ready to leave home. I've been ready for years now. Last year, Mrs. Bedansky asked our 11th grade English class to start a writing journal. Little did I know that this cheap yellow note pad would be only the first, soon at the bottom of a quickly filling drawer. Finally, I have an outlet for the thoughts I can't express anywhere else. One, in particular, haunts me, and for days no other words get through: "I can't wait." These three words fill the last few pages of the journal. College. I can't wait for college.

Outside our three bedroom, two and half bath, yellow aluminum sided suburban house is a neighbourhood that hasn't yet accepted us. Two years in a row, our house was the only one egged on Devil's Night. Our family is not so much offended as resigned. We almost expect it as the only brown family on the block. But it doesn't bring us together. I am only more eager to leave.

The phone rings. It's my best friend, Todd. We only have one phone and it's in the kitchen, so private conversations are pretty much out. Todd asks if I'd like to go to a movie this weekend. It's Friday afternoon and we've been home from school for a couple of hours. I glance at Amma. She's pulling the skin off chicken legs. We're having a big dinner party for the Bangladeshi community tonight, and the house is filled with the smell of spices. She won't have time to think, which means she'll just say no, so I don't even bother asking. Sorry, I tell him. Maybe next week when I have some lead time.

The operator breaks into our conversation--an emergency call needs to be put through. I say good bye quickly and take the other call. It's Abbu, calling from work. He's wondering why the phone was busy. He wants to know if Amma needs anything from the grocery store on his way



artwork by mustafa zaman

back from work. And by the way, who was I talking to for so long? "Jessica," I say. "Just French homework stuff. Sorry...." "Didn't you see her all day at school? You have to talk to her again?"

It's 9 p.m., and I'm wearing a blue silk shalwar kameez that shimmers as I move through the guests. An adorable child in a red kurta runs underfoot as I bend to offer one of the uncles a soft drink. My voice automatically lowers, softens, when I speak to the adults. The party is a huge success. Somehow, Amma has managed to cook more than enough food for forty guests, and it all tastes like heaven. The table is laden with fragrant biryani and chicken korma, a huge salad, lentils with squash, shrimp, catfish, and eggplant mash.

Afterwards, my sister, Muri, and I will clear away the entrees and bring out ice cream, home made pineapple upside-down cake, *firni* (rice

pudding), and that beloved South Asian dessert, sweet red spongy balls of *gulap jamun*. These parties take up most of our weekends. One family or another in our growing community in Pittsburgh throws a lavish and rich dinner party pretty much every week. For our parents' generation, it's the only kind of gathering in this foreign country where they can relax. Muri and I attend these events reluctantly, as there are almost no kids our age. We don't know how American families spend their weekends but we'd rather be home reading or watching some forbidden TV. Our only conversations with adults involve academic pursuits. And we have all the right answers to the questions.

"I'll be studying engineering, Uncle," Muri says earnestly. "Business and mathematics, Auntie," I tell them with equal and tragic fortitude.

It's 7 a.m. A claustrophobic winter sky looms above. Muri is banging on the bathroom door. "Hurry up!"

I emerge, dressed in a black mini skirt and a tight grey blouse. She rushes in. I can hear Amma calling from downstairs, "The school bus will be here soon!" I pull jeans under my skirt and grab a long sweater that covers both the blouse and the skirt. By the time I put on my winter jacket, my secret outfit is completely concealed.

The school bathroom smells sticky sweet and smoky. Jenny is spraying her already three-inch-high hair higher. Her perfectly red mouth purses as she sprays. Tracy, Kelly, and Leah are going through their crammed purses for cigarettes. I sneak into a stall and unpeel my layers. By the time I reach homeroom, I'm transformed, and by the last period, I'll be back in disguise.

We have a no-TV-after-7 p.m. rule, so it's always quiet in the house at night. Amma and Abbu usually read downstairs, while Muri and I do our homework and talk in our bedroom until we fall asleep. I look cautiously

into the living room, debating whether to bring up the movie. Amma looks up and asks whether I've finished my homework. Her tone of voice deters me, and I don't say anything else.

Three days later, I finally gather up the courage to ask. By this time, I have an army of answers: *Becky will pick me up. Just the two of us are going. We're going to see a PG-13 movie at the Mall. The movie is an hour and forty-seven minutes. I'll be back in exactly three hours. Yes, I did already go see a movie this month, but this one is supposed to be really good. Thank you, Amma and Abbu!*

More often, I get an unexplained refusal, or the thwarted agreement. "Abbu, I have to attend the School Spirit dance because the student government organised it and I'm the vice president." I'm trying to keep the correct balance of dignified pleading and firmness in my voice.

"Why exactly do you have to go?" "I'm helping check the tickets at the door. It starts at eight." "How long will that last?" My father hasn't looked up from his newspaper yet. "I don't know..." He looks up at me and waits. "Maybe till nine?" I say uncertainly. "Ok, your mother will pick you up at 9:15," he looks back down at the paper.

I can't show how sullen I feel, not if I want to go out every so often. Not only do we live in the suburbs, but we're on the outskirts on top of that, and so not having a driver's license is a huge drawback. Would they let me borrow the car anyway? The closer it gets to my leaving for college, the less and less I ask my parents for permission for each prized outing. I have had to be so good for so long, ask so very nicely, and still be prepared for immediate and likely rejection. It's seems too arduous a process. Once I move out, I won't have to ask anyone anything. Still, sometimes, I can't help myself.

"Since when do children defy their parents?!" Amma and Abbu exclaim in horror, each time my angst gets the better of me.

"Since you brought us here, that's when," I say recklessly. "You don't have to be here. We can always send you to Bangladesh. You can do college there, and it will be far less expensive anyway. And then you can marry a nice Bangladeshi boy."

There's nothing to say to that, is there? Together, we unfairly and fairly blame America for our troubles. They turn their backs. And I join the ranks.

Abeer Hoque is a Bangladeshi living in San Francisco. She recently won the Tanenbaum Award for Nonfiction.

Letter from HIROSHIMA

GPS-ing to a Japanese village

MANOSH CHOWDHURY

The trip had long been due, before I came here, yet when Yuko told me that she would take us to her home, it meant something special to me. There were five of us--three from Bangladesh and one from Taiwan--with Yuko as the guide-cum-host-cum driver.

It is often said, especially among the foreigners in Japan, that one is handicapped here without a car. This one feels the most when paying a lot for public transport just to travel a short distance. But when you are in a personal car, especially sharing it with others, traveling can be comparatively cheap. True, you need to buy fuel, and pay toll/s for the highways (which are pretty high, with people always complaining about it), but it is still cheap compared to public transport. Yuko had rented a five-seater car for 56 hours, and then we were on the road.

This was totally a different Japan for me, or for anyone who didn't travel much by road.

All areas of Japanese cities and suburbs tend to be the same--no definite localities or neighborhoods. To us in the cities--except for knowing about 'agricultural areas'--it is easy to assume that there is no rural Japan as we Bangladeshis tend to understand the term. Traveling by Shinkanshin (the bullet train) can be a sheer thrill for a Bangladeshi. Discussions can center around whether one has experienced a ride already, or is going to. But those trains do not provide any sense of Japanese countryside. Local trains are of course local. I don't know why, but when I rode a local train here for the first time, I thought of the music played by the metro rail authorities in Kolkata. I missed those tunes.

It is by car that one gets to see the Japanese landscape. Fabulous hills in so many shades of green. A green that, of course, turns to yellow in the winter, then reddish and finally brown. Drive along, and all of a sudden you enter a valley with typical two-stored Japanese houses. In their compounds--you can even see it from far--are carefully planted fruit trees. Agricultural lands are there also. This is of course modern technocratic Japan, still the outcome of Meiji Restoration. Bangladeshis often are surprised with their use of land--even a one-decimal flat land is cultivated. But sitting in a car waiting for the next valley habitat, you come upon a hill with a hundred houses delicately grafted onto its body. Looking at the countryside architecture in Japan can be confusing. You see the mighty bridges, tunnels, highways--solid concrete or steel. Then you see the fragile-looking wooden lodgings.

Yuko had strongly recommended that we bring all our favorite music for the trip just to avoid monotony. I don't know about Tehsan, our Taiwanese companion. But for us--Humayun, Seuty and me, the three Bangladeshis--the car windows were just too magical. We stuck onto it. Then I learnt something astonishing about our car. I had heard about GPS (Global Positioning System) before, but sitting beside Yuko, I found her looking into the multi-purpose screen, supposedly our CD player cum DVD player cum TV. It provided us with a satellite-controlled GPS image that showed every detail of Japanese highways and roads. We could even know how many meters away we were from a highway-cafe or a signal light. I sat speechless for a while with my eyes on the screen. I recalled the second-hand pen with an electronic watch I got as a gift from my parents during my last days of school, a very expensive item given our living standards then. Yet, the next week I had dismantled it--the result of my curiosity about it. Sitting in the car, I controlled myself from being inquisitive about the mysterious screen. It was hard, though.

We reached at our destination finally, after dusk. One or two hens were still moving in the yard. Hypothetically it was Japanese countryside. That is, neighbors knew each other, and there were no nearby shopping malls. Yuko told us later that for weeks the story would make the rounds in the neighborhood that the Mizuno family had some foreigner guests. A long time back her grandfather had come here, settled, and built a *futon* (mattress and blanket) factory which now was run by her father. 'Factory' actually would not be the right term since it was more the traditional cottage industry, nowadays fast disappearing. It is more kind of *dhunkar* in the Bangladeshi context. But no comparison is possible given the affluence of Japanese society.

Next morning, on the way to Fukuoka, we talked about that. 'Father is somehow disappointed that none of my brothers came to the profession.' Yuko was talking about her father. One of her brothers was in the fire service, while the other was in the navy.

'But that's understandable I guess. Does he have regular clients?' 'Long-time ones. But these days even they hardly come for a new one.' 'Why?' 'They ask for repair of their old ones.' 'So that's also part of your services?' 'Now that has become the only service.'

'Then how can your father really expect his sons to join him?' 'Right. Last year my father himself bought two blankets from Nafco.' Yuko was laughing. Nafco is one of the major chain shops in Japan. And among other items, they sell the *futons*--the readymade ones that are factory-manufactured and mainly synthetic. 'Cotton is expensive,' she added.

'What about Japanese cotton?' 'Well, Japan produces cotton. But the main source for traditional *futons* is imported cotton. My father developed an import chain from India. All by himself.'

A familiar story, I felt. And at the same time not so. The dying out of this cottage industry didn't really marginalize a whole generation of craftsmen. Well, perhaps in cultural terms, but not in financial terms. At least it didn't seem so.

Her parents were waiting for us to join them at dinner. Her mother and sister-in-law had been preparing food for us for hours. His brother and his wife drove down just for the event--to meet his sister's foreigner friends. We sat down at Japanese short tables loaded with food. *Soba* (noodles), *onigiri* [a cake made of rice and fishes], *sushi* [raw fishes with some sauce], boiled shrimps, chips, cakes, cheeses, beers, fruits juices, *sake* [traditional Japanese wine] and some more I couldn't follow. Everybody was keen to know their guests. The language divide was great: Yuko spoke Japanese and English. Her parents, brother and sister-in-law knew only Japanese. We three Bangladeshis spoke Bangla and English. And Tehsan spoke Taiwanese, Chinese, Japanese and a little English. Now, except for me, the other two Bangladeshis--Seuty and Humayun--could follow some words and phrases in Japanese. Yuko's father somehow had learnt some Bangla and Hindi words. Yuko could follow a simple Bangla conversation very roughly. Yuko's mother learnt Chinese in a language school and now had largely forgotten it. And Yuko's 2-year-old nephew was still struggling with Japanese. Very soon the dining table turned into enthusiastic language exercises.

The place where we had dinner was actually the guest house, though Yuko had a room in this. We five were to stay in this house. Yuko's brother, his wife and the little one went off. After they left, her parents also went to the main house. Both of them were early risers. *Futons* came out from wardrobes. "These are our factory products," Yuko said. Everyone got a single bed with a thin blanket, placed on the wooden floor. Tehsan was the disciplined one, so she went to bed. But we four went on with our *adda* till midnight. We had been so distracted after we reached her home that none of us had thanked Yuko until then.

'So you like it?' 'I feel like I am visiting my grandparents at my home village.' Humayun said. He had told me this twice, and now he told this to the others as well. 'Honto? really?'

'Me too. I feel like I am in Syedpur in my maternal grandma's house.' Seuty had been raised in her grandmother's house for years, and now she was thinking of her. Yuko felt happy providing this at-home feeling to her friends and classmates. I was thinking of it too. How our memories were always seeking referents. Was it by chance? Otherwise how could a village in Japan, absent any sensible linguistic exchange, so strongly re-generate old emotions? All of us no doubt were thinking about the inevitable drift of later generations towards the city. Yuko also told us about how she decided to go for a distant university, not the one near by. She asked me, 'And Manosh da, you?'

'I am enjoying myself thoroughly. And I am thinking of it too.' 'Don't you feel the way they feel?' 'No.' 'Why?' 'I had never been to my village except for my grandfather's funeral when I was twelve. And before that I saw him once for two hours.' 'Honto? And don't you have some other memories?' 'Nothing comparable. My maternal grandparents also didn't live in their village home. Then they left Bangladesh long back, in 1981.' 'And didn't you ever visit any of your friends' homes?' 'That is what I am thinking about right now. No. This is the first time that I am staying in somebody's home village.'

'How can it be?' Seuty and Humayun also waited for my response. But I couldn't find the right answer to the question. I knew what I wanted to say, but it was hard to translate it into language.

Manosh Chowdhury is on study leave from Anthropology department, Jahangirnagar University.

Book Review Twenty-Five Ways of Imagining India

FAKRUL ALAM

India in Mind. Edited by Pankaj Mishra. London: Picador India; 2005; pp. 335.

Pankaj Mishra's anthology, *Imagining India* offers us twenty-five remarkable ways of looking at India, and, inevitably, imagining it. The viewers, alphabetically arranged in Mishra's capacious collection, range from the whimsical and endearing Englishman J. R. Ackerley to the equally idiosyncratic and engaging but more famous American Gore Vidal. Chronologically, the entries span over a century; the earliest is Mark Twain's characteristically sharp account of his visit to Bombay at the end of the 19th century to Pico Iyer's 2003 elegant fictional ruminations on the much-traveled tourist triangle of Delhi, Jaipur, and Agra (although the extract from Vidal's novel has him conjuring an encounter with Gautama Buddha in fifth century India). Most entries describe India in the twentieth century, encompassing turn of the century Raj, the waning days of empire, the period of transition when Indians finally took over their country, and the closing years of the last millennium when intermittently "eternal", occasionally exquisite or esoteric, and often exasperating India still claimed the itinerant, alienated or exilic writer's attention.

Mishra's list of contributors includes some of the best writers of the West: know-it-all Anglo-Indians like Rudyard Kipling, bemused Englishmen like E. M. Forster and W. Somerset Maugham, the ambivalent George Orwell, the mostly jaundiced but occasionally wonder-struck and always hyper-anglicized V. S. Naipaul, the meditative, lyrical German Herman Hesse and the rhapsodic and flamboyant Andre Malraux. Mishra's list contains other famous continentals: Claude Levi-Strauss turns a caustic, analytic eye on fifties Pakistan (there are a few snide paragraphs on Dhaka middle-class life and Bengali cuisine) the brilliant Italian filmmaker-writer Pasolini dissects Gwalior and the south with an innate fastidiousness veneered with Marxism. Famous American writers in Mishra's book include Paul Bowles, Peter Matthiessen, and Allen Ginsberg. Peripatetic authors who made travel writing one of the liveliest genres of literature in the second half of the twentieth century the *Granta* school of writing, so to speak are represented by the Englishman Bruce Chatwin, the Australian Robyn Davidson, and the American Paul Theroux. *India in Mind* has one piece by the non-resident Indian, Ved Mehta, and one by someone who was a longtime resident alien in India, Ruth Praver Jhabvala. Women, I dare say, are underrepresented in the list of contributors, and so the crossover Jan Morris's excellent piece on Delhi is especially noteworthy. Octavia Paz, man of letters and diplomat, is the only poet chosen by Mishra. He is represented by his verse meditations inspired by moments spent in India when he was ambassador of Mexico in the country.

Taken together, Mishra's selections are able to represent the length and breadth of the subcontinent, the megalopolises and the byways, the highways and the railways, the mountains, deserts, rivers, and plain lands, the tourist spots and the out of the way locations accessible to backpackers and intrepid lonely planet types (I can't imagine though what Orwell's superb "Shooting an Elephant" is doing in an anthology titled *India in Mind*, unless, that is, we stretch our historical imagination and backpack to the time when Burma was part of Britannia's India). Ackerley's account is about a state in zany, princely India. Forster dabs his feet in the River

Supra trying to imagine Kalidas doing so in "out-of-the-way-Ujjain". Maugham in Kerala is also seeking proof of the life of the spirit in India he had read about, for example, in the Upanishads. Ginsberg's journal jottings are about the sights and sounds of Benares and its riverscape whose burning ghats image his anguished mind.

Kipling's chameleon Kim walks along the Grand Trunk Road with his mystic lama. Malraux finds in the caves of Elephanta confirmation of the "Ancient Orient" of the European soul and is bewitched seemingly not so much with what he sees but with what he had read about taking shape in front of him (Edward Said, of course, would have a different take on this). Bowles and Theroux travel down south, the former by bus, and the latter by rail. Davidson encounters the nomadic Rabaris of Rajasthan's desert lands. Matthiessen scales the Nepalese Himalayas above Pokhara in an excerpt from what is surely one of the most beautiful and meaningful books in English on any part of the subcontinent, *The Snow Leopard* (although the pages reproduced in Mishra aren't enough to make one realize that Matthiessen is also scaling what Hopkins had discovered while mental mountaineering: "O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall/Frightful, sheer, no man-fathomed. Hold them cheap/May who ne'er hung there"). Paul Scott depicts a club in his fictional Mayapore (brought so vividly alive in the splendid television series *The Jewel in the Crown*) when the British have left but where there is "residual awareness" of Englishness everywhere. Alan Ross, the inspirational editor of *London Magazine*, remembers his Indian childhood with what Mishra characterizes in his prefatory comments as "fierce nostalgia".

On the whole, Mishra has done impressive work in *India in Mind* by assembling some of the best writing in English on the subcontinent under one cover. He has done especially well in bringing to attention exceptional writing that would have perhaps escaped most people's notice because of the transient forms in which they had first appeared. I am thinking in particular of the Cape Comorin escapades of Paul Bowles, which was printed in a book called *Theirs Heads are Green and Their Hands are Blue* that few people will come across. And yet, as is obvious from the excerpted pages, Bowles is a wonderful writer, his prose immensely readable, his ear for dialogue sharp, his mind alert and receptive, and his sense of the oddities of life out of the ordinary (as an example of his wit and humor please see the essay on the cow that he discovered during his Indian sojourn that I hope our literary page editor will print in this page). Similarly, Mishra deserves praise for not going to *A Passage to India* for Forster extracts but to the less well-known *Abinger Harvest* from which he has come up with two specimens of the clarity, the acuteness, and the wit with which the great English novelist viewed India.

It is precisely because Mishra has made *India in Mind* unforgettable by often selecting out of the way pieces by great and not so great writers that I regret that he did not do so consistently. I can't understand, for example, why he went to *Kim* and not to Kipling's notebooks and letters where he is often much more vivid and himself in describing India. Also, Mishra would have done better by going outside "literature" more often and by excerpting pages from some of the innumerable fascinating and vividly written dairies, memoirs, and journals left behind by Anglo-Indians, whether "memsahibs" or Raj officials (Ginsberg's remarkable jottings on Benares are proof that the most powerful prose is not always to be found in conventional "literary" forms). I can think of writers like Eliza Fay and Lady Eden in the nineteenth century who imagined India more memorably than, say, Maugham or Pico Iyer. Similarly, I feel that writers like Geoffrey Moorehouse and Eric Newby have represented India better than Jhabvala (an Indian by choice for a long time) or Mehta (an Indian by birth).

But I suppose compilers of anthologies can always be found guilty of acts of commissions or omissions. Better to end by congratulating Pankaj Mishra for giving readers twenty-five very lively testimonies on the way India fascinated and/or exasperated interested Westerners throughout the last century with its oddities, ambiguities, attractions, and diversity. Mishra, I am sure, deserves kudos for giving us through *India in Mind* absorbing glimpses of twenty-five fascinating minds encountering and imagining the amazing thing that India has been and still is.

Fakrul Alam is Professor, English department, Dhaka University.