

SHORT STORY

Agony

NADIA VRISHIBA HANIFF

Paranoia. A tirade of irrationalities invading my brain. No. It can't be. It must be because of my period. I leave it alone.

A week later, and I'm in the shower. My hand feels my left breast. It's still there. The mysterious lump. I resolve to see the doctor ASAP. I continue rinsing the suds of exfoliating aloe vera soap, which is supposed to be good for my blotchy back. I continue singing about being a girl for all the seasons, while fashioning a mini-snowman on my head.

Cleo and Cosmo beckon as I wait for my turn. I decide to ignore the anorexic girls with airbrushed skins and supersized bustlines. Give me Gerald Durrell any day. Durrell is in the midst of capturing some wild animal or other for his zoo when I hear my name. I hastily stuff my book into my backpack then follow the guy into the doctor's sterile room. My heart beats faster.

'What seems to be the problem, Nadia?' the guide asks, seating himself in front of a grungy PC. Shit. He IS the doctor.

'Erm... L...err... kinda... asked for a FEMALE doctor,' I say. He understands and immediately ushers me out of the room, back into the magazine infested waiting area. He tsk tsk the receptionist, before calling out another name. I resume my torrid affair with Durrell, while the receptionist spends her time fussing over her French manicure and giving me the evil eye.

Finally, a woman greets me, and takes me to her room. I find it hard to believe she is a doctor--her carrot coloured hair is bunned up, but still resembles the aftermath of a tornado. I contemplate running back into the male doctor's room and begging him to take me back.

Dr Cleary makes me lie down. She presses her fingertips gently onto me. I flinch the minute she touches the lump.

She feels the area for awhile. Squishing it from left to right. Up and down. I bite my vanilla flavoured lip.

'Hmm... looks like you have a lump there,' she very brainily concludes. She moves away from me, signalling me to get dressed. When I finally sit upright again, she is staring at her computer, furiously tapping away at the keyboard. Have you had your period yet? Tap tap tap. Do you have them regularly? Clickatay... clack clack clack. Does your family have a history of cancer? Click click... tappity tap.

After much more clicking, clacking and tippity tapittings, she turns to me. I discover that I have to go for an FNA, whatever that is, to determine the nature of the lump. She assures me that it is routine, and goes on to explain the procedure. At my age, it would be unlikely that the lump is malignant, she adds. Also, the lump is very 'mobile', she claims. Hmm... I didn't know I could move my lump around--perhaps I should wear it more to the right next time? If my lump is so bloody mobile and I'm too bloody young, then why the hell do I have to go for the check up?!

But I allow myself to get booked for an appointment at the hospital anyway.

The bus ride gives me a headache; I am certain that there is a bottle of vodka next to the driver. The green hut and its inhabitants come into view, and I hastily leap off the bus. I narrowly avoid falling flat on my face, much to the disappointment of a buck-toothed schoolboy.

The hospital is a good walk away from the bus stop. Yet, from where I stand, the sight of the elephant gray building is as daunting as attempting to mount the mammal for a ride. At least an elephant ride is more enjoyable than a visit to the hospital.



artwork by In Lisa

The nearer I walk to the building, the bigger it gets and the more jellied my knees become. At one stage, my nerves get the better of me and I retreat. Rationality and curiosity deny me from leaving though, and I soon find myself in yet another waiting room.

My eyes refuse to focus on the blurred words. The smell of disinfectant is driving me insane, prompting my hands to clap a fly in the middle of another Gerald Durrell expedition. Unable to deal with the thought of having to face a pancaked insect, I am left with no choice but to people watch.

The room is overflowing with activity. The youngest inhabitants of the room are adolescents, save for a few children noisy children. Nearby, a teenager has her head on her facially-vacant boyfriend's lap. Their lips

reveal nothing but their faces say all. She shields her abdomen with her arm. I wonder if my dread compares to theirs.

A nurse calls out my name, with a neutral intonation. Her voice reminds me of a duck. I half expect her to quack and ask me where the nearest pond is. She repeats my name, so I get up, and follow her as she waddles to a storeroom. She ransacks the piles of clothes, then hands me a pretty wine red gown. If it wasn't a dressing gown, I would have been tempted to sneak it home.

She leaves me in a cubicle to change. I change my mind about sneaking the gown home. As I slip it on, the paper-towel texture grazes my skin. Goosebumps make their mark on my arms when I tighten the sash around my waist.

Arms folded over my chest, I exit the changing room. The duck leads me down a silent corridor to another room, and makes me lie down on a black leather bed. She leaves me alone with my thoughts.

How much I miss my aunt. When I was little, her goal in life was to stuff my ever-willing face with food. She loved nothing more than to see me tucked into a specially-prepared meal. She always claimed I needed to put some meat on my bones. The last time I saw her alive, she was lying in a hospital bed, whiter than usual. It seemed like she had aged overnight. Cancer filled up her lungs with two litres of fluid daily, and made her apologetically spew out fungus green phlegm. A week later and she was gone.

A woman with a clipboard enters the room. She is professional and distant--from the crisp coat to the neatly parted bob, without a single strand out of place. Yet, her face is a complete mismatch. Eyes which persuade you to tell your life story, and an engaging smile.

Joanne, my sonographer, puts a black foam block under my back, so that I am resting at forty-five degrees on my right side. She delicately unravels my gown, then applies a clear jelly which suspiciously, resembles hair gel. The coolness of the gel makes my skin tingle while Joanne cautiously navigates the device over me. She doesn't say a word and I can't see the screen. I have to rely on her face for clues. Concentrated glances. A sudden frowning of eyebrows. That can't be good. She takes her ruler out and measures something on the screen twice.

'I'll be right back.'

She leaves me with a mess to clean up. Anna enters, dressed in the standard white, with only a cardigan to blot out the starkness of her attire. I suspect she's meant to distract. There doesn't seem to be an apparent role for her in the procedure yet. We talk about what I'm doing; she laughs that I have to read Mills and Boon for one of my units.

Another woman comes in with a tray of needles. Somehow, I don't think she's going to use them for cross-stitch. She hands them to Anna, who then goes about digging up some gauze. While she polishes her weapons, Joanne returns with a male accomplice. Behind them is another woman with another tray of clear glass.

'Hi, I'm Dr. Brown,' the man says. Mmm... mocha chocolata yaya indeed.

'This is Clara, she will be doing the slides,' Joanne adds. While Joanne does another ultrasound on me, Dr. Brown looks on. Again, I have no idea what is going on. Their fingers point at the screen. In disbelief, Dr. Brown snatches the scanner from Joanne and manhandles my breast. When he is satisfied, he turns to me.

'We've found another lump,' he says, without sympathy. He rattles on monotonously about how it's unlikely to be cancerous, but

I don't listen. I don't want to hear his theories. I want accuracy. I want a clear answer.

Instead, all I hear is rubber being snapped on. Dr. Brown adjusts his gloves before he sticks a needle of local anaesthetic in me. Then it's time for the other needles. Anna is now by my side, her soft hand holding mine. She tells me to feel free to squeeze her hand.

Why do I have a bad feeling about this? The first needle penetrates my skin, and doesn't feel all too bad. I become confident and think nothing of the future jabblings. I start to daydream of gaudy musical sequences. In particular, a clinical version of Beauty School Dropout. Suddenly a sharp pain enters me, piercing my bravado.

I gasp. Dr. Brown apologises (insincerely). He goes on to jiggle my breast. My leg is tempted to shoot up and demasculinize Dr. Brown, but is unable to elevate more than a centimetre off the leathery surface. I curse my lack of conviction, then glance at the doctor's hands.

No ring. Why am I not surprised? I look at Anna instead. But looking at her doesn't quell the discomfort. My cheeks feel warm and my eyes are moist. I feel my hair being pushed away from my face by Anna's crushed hands. One more lump to go. I close my eyes. I take the plunge. Anna is still holding my hand.

I can feel the sweat trickling down my brow, but my hand is too engrossed with Anna's. Did my aunt's face flush in an artificially cooled examination room as well?

Then it's all over. Everyone streams out but Anna.

While I quickly rewrap my freezing body, she offers me a cup of coffee. I've never had a good experience with hospital beverages--so I decline. Maybe it's the scent of antiseptic infused with diluted ash and synthetic creamer.

My breast feels sore, and I see blackish yellow bruises on it. If I were younger, I would have been tempted to steal my sister's magic pen and convert the bruises into bumble bees.

I stumble out of the changing room and pay my dues. The teenage couple has been reduced to one. He is too preoccupied burying his face in his hands to notice me. I leave the staunch building, tempted to regurgitate my tuna sandwich.

At the bus stop, an old woman notices me as I feel for the seat. She comes up to me, her trolley of vegetables trailing behind her.

'Are you alright dear?' she asks, peering into my eyes. 'I'm fine,' I answer, forcing a smile.

She examines me like a Van Gogh painting before shuffling off. What is the point of me telling her about my day? What can she do? What can I do?

There's nothing I can do. But wait.

There's nothing I can do. But wait.

Nadia Vrishiba Haniff is one of Singapore's younger writers.

Book Reviews

Of History and Haze

*Sikandar Chowk Park* by Neelum Saran Gour; New Delhi: Penguin India; 2005; pp. 286; Rs. 295

NUZHAT AMIN MANNAN

I read the first ten pages of Neelum Gour's *Sikandar Chowk Park* under a sort of haze. *Sikandar Chowk Park* clearly did not pretend to be just any other yarn. Gour's novel opens a few years before 9/11, i.e., in the vainly-prophesized, apocalypse-hyped December 31 of 1999. She ambitiously seizes goals that become larger than her stated plot (the story revolves around a bomb blast and eleven people) and the book sets out to examine history as seizures in time or explain fleeting connections as defining stories. Gour fixes her gaze on the discordant pulses or tremors of life that compete with the broad, bland flourishes offered through discourses like journalism, history or even truth. In *Sikandar Chowk Park*, Gour creates her own violence-strewn version of the Grecian urn. Like Keats's forlorn lovers, pipers and heifers, Gour has her own imbrogiology of faces--sweet, fragile, mutilated people who have vanished but not quite gone because Gour sets out to recreate 'old human stories in new ways.' And with quite a few a startling twists, too, one may add.

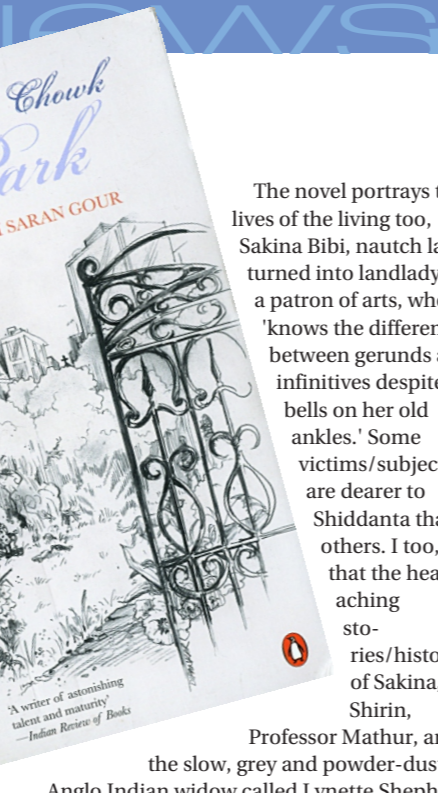
The narrative begins with Vakli Shadib Mahendra Chandraji watching from his balcony as a funeral procession on 31 December makes its way through the streets with what looks like a corpse in the Vakli's 'old kutchery coat-pant'. The 'soul-shaking spectacle of his own dissolution' makes the Vakli contemplate making his own unique joke by bluffing on as the Millennium Corpse. He could throw his own funeral feast, better yet fashion it as a Millennium banquet. They could have a 'rip-roaring, belly tickling guffaw of a party'. Alternating between English and Urdu, Professor Mathur in an expansive mood, sips tea and explains to his landlady Sakina Bibi, 'The Darkling Thrush', a poem Thomas Hardy had written on the last day of the nineteenth century. On the first of January, Masterji Hargopal Misra wakes up with a start. His small bitch Kurkuri returns, wet and shivering, her 'lozenge eyes' glowing as she nudges him for the Parle G biscuits her master keeps handy for hapless hungry beasts. After that Masterji checks his precious violin, tenderly pawing the writing on the case: *Antonio Stravivarius Cremonenfjs, Faciebat Anno 17*.

On 22 March, 2000 a bomb blast rips their lives apart. The guffawing lawyer, the poetry-analyzing professor, Kurkuri's mild master all lie in mangled heaps, their stories gaping to be reclaimed and filled in. The occasional narrator Siddhanta, a journalist by profession with a feel for literature, enters Gour's narrative, packing it with his nervous energy and frothing passion for reconstructing the lives of eleven people in the Sikander Park blast. Siddhanta's stance and vocabulary will vacillate curiously between that of a scientific trail-finder and an ardent artist:

'Much high-powered technology was set in action before the hieroglyphic of their essence was decoded and their mislaid names subsumed. I was angry on their behalf. I felt one with them, one of history's ciphers, unchronicled potential history-fodder.' Gradually Siddhanta begins to piece together 'their personalities, lives, stories of pain and love and betrayed trust and fantasies and forgiveness and fresh resolves.'

The media reports on the blast spin off tired phrases. But to Siddhanta, the blast has become a blatant particle of history. He compares history to a drizzle, a thrashing downpour, the squelching puddle beneath one's feet. 'Do you hear that sick buzz, behind all the other noises? That's history, its engines never switched off.' All one can do is 'clutch at a single news item, a micro-moment of all the essential tale, to my mind at least, a minor, practically trite bomb blast in a certain park in the middle of a certain crowded market of an obscure small town.' In a pseudo-formal tone he explains his method: 'I went postulating, anticipating, where necessary inventing and that's how I wrote out their approximate stories. But I have always, to the best of my power, fine-tuned it to the last knowable milli-pulse of truth.' Siddhanta's method and manner is anything but clichéd: 'If history has only taught us how to make the old mistakes in new ways, all this literature stuff has trapped me' he says, 'into recounting the old tractable sub-truths and flexible personal meanings in new ways.'

*Sikandar Chowk Park* is the story among others of Shirin, the convent-educated secretary with an alcoholic husband sick at home with cirrhosis. As he turned into a nervous junky fighting his addiction, she becomes the steel-headed care-giver. Strong and unrelenting as a person, she describes her love as a fraught emotion, one that gives uncomfortable power and intimacy, but also is composed of dull mistrust, a lasting grievance. As the man suffers a relapse into drinking, Shirin discovers her love 'without a drop of soda or lime or water to muffle its potent blow'. There is Suruchi Chauhan, Secretary of the Allahabad Development Authority who has a dalliance with a physically-challenged, urbane stranger who brings her a strange token in the form of uncashed cheques transacted between their ancestors. There is Swati Maurya, a Dalit woman, and also Neelsh Trivedi, a man who sells his blood for cash. They come together seeking to work as parents on hire for the benefit of a precocious but difficult child.



The novel portrays the lives of the living too, Sakina Bibi, nautch lady turned into landlady and a patron of arts, who 'knows the difference between gerunds and infinitives despite the bells on her old ankles.' Some victims/subjects are dearer to Shiddanta than others. I, too, felt that the heart-aching stories/histories of Sakina, Shirin, Professor Mathur, and the slow, grey and powder-dusted Anglo Indian widow called Lynette Shepherd make poignant impressions. After sifting through old papers of her dead husband, Lynette Shepherd discovers the full extent of her husband's involvement with another woman. But it had struck her three decades too late. Retrospective injury it may seem but the magnitude of Lynette's loss is not lost to us. Betrayed or disenchanted, many of us have felt the raw panic Lynette reels in as a lifetime's faith is 'lost' and all of one's memories 'have gone wrong.'

Even though by count there are twelve characters, including the narrator, it is impossible to miss the thirteenth one which I felt was Gour giving herself away through the text. It is impossible to read that text and not recognize that she is a professor of literature well-versed in literary polemics. In *Sikandar Chowk Park* issues of postcolonial identity or questions of mimicry, intertextuality and appropriation crop up rather unexpectedly. It is a strange world Gour takes us into where Sakina Bibi knows her infinitives and gerunds and what 'coppice gate' means whereas Professor Mathur's student Munna writes him an essay titled *My struggle with the English language*. The class-room drifts into *Sikandar Chowk Park*, courtesy of Prof. Mathur. Strolling one day with Munna by his side he works out why the Thums Up Logo says *I want my thunder*. He suddenly has an epiphany: 'Now I know. Thunder was thunda all the time. A pun. A piece of Shakespearean wordplay. What was that word you use-funda? Short for fundamentalso?'. After listening to Munna's excruciating essay the good Professor recounts to Munna his days in Scotland: 'In a combination language--Hindi, Urdu and English--he described the gently moulded hills, green and brown and blue-grey in patches with the mist floating across their crests in a big, fleecy fume. The brilliant green meadows, lochs full of swans and intricate

shadows, the water deep-green or silver. Cities of stone in many modulations of grey from chalk to slate to dove to charcoal. And the palest biscuit or faded camel-brown.' It takes more than a stretch of imagination to believe that someone like Munna should be able to make sense of his mentor's memory, or what Mathur poignantly says about histories interlocking through flags and medals left in museums or left etched on memorial stones, in churches and graveyards on preferred shores. For Munna (who asks a girl if he may eavesdrop her) to return triumphantly with a pretty poem celebrating his homeland and ending with the promise to make a language of his own reeks too strongly of Caliban infected with Ariel's disease!

The text however, has one of the liveliest mixes in terms of idiom and style. The slum at Fatehpur Bichhwa is described in one masterful stroke of genius: 'loud with TV blare and hooch brawl, baby-squeal and shrew shriek.' Then there are gems like: 'Why must we be hypnotized by history... We're only accidentally connected to those people in the past, so why should we share their follies?', or 'I am a Hindu because my being a Hindu allows me to be a Muslim or a Christian or a Buddhist or a Jew or whatever have you whenever I wish. It's a bit like carrying a remote control with multiple channels. I have an Islamic channel, a Christian channel, a Buddhist, a Jewish... there's this dish antenna in my head which freely catches vibes from any faith.' There are awkward lines like when Shirin describes her love: 'It's there--like the covert pain in my limbs. That's silent all day, gathered in a microcellular mist just beneath the level of sensation.' There is also a great deal of words from vernacular tongues which might prove a stumbling block to some. I don't read Urdu and have very little comprehension in that language, I was able to appreciate 'surmai tog' but had to wonder what the thrush singing away 'shigufia khair' meant. A state of bliss, I guessed but no way would I be able to appropriate it as blithely as Munna does his mislaid English words like 'funda'.

Neelum Gour's theme may seem a wee bit grandiose to some people. My conclusion is that *Sikandar Chowk Park* makes for a true hyper-text, with stories branching out and blossoming in ways that you can read them in fragments or all together and not miss the effect. Gour produces quite a busy novel: we get a raft of both vivacious and dull characters; the narrative shimmers with scintillating acuity, then nose-dives to become fitfully sentimental; Gour's wit, both hilarious and heart-aching, deftly mingles with scholarly observations. I started to read Gour under a haze. And then I was down with a week-long fever. I guessed the haze was connected to the fever-- unless of course, the haze had something to do with the unmistakable sparkle of Gour's sharp pen.

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Tagore Omnibus

*The Tagore Omnibus, Volume I*, (translators Sreejata Guha, Kaiser Huq, Hiten Bharya and Malosree Sandel); New Delhi: Penguin Classics, Collector's Edition; 2005; pp. 726; Rs. 595.

Cover is *Face of a Woman*, charcoal on paper by Rabindranath Tagore.

FARHAD AHMED

Volume I of this omnibus contains three of Tagore's novels--*Chokher Bali*, *Ghare Baire* and *Yogayog*--and two novellas: *Chaturanga* and *Malancha*. *Chokher Bali* (A Grain of Sand) and *Ghare Baire* (Home and the World) have been translated by Sreejata Guha; *Yogayog* (Nexus) has been translated by Hiten Bharya; Malosree Sandel is the translator of *Malancha* (The Garden), while, in what is possibly a first in terms of a Bangladeshi's

translation being brought out in the Penguin Indian Tagore series, Kaiser Huq (Department of English, Dhaka University) translated *Chaturanga* (The Quartet).

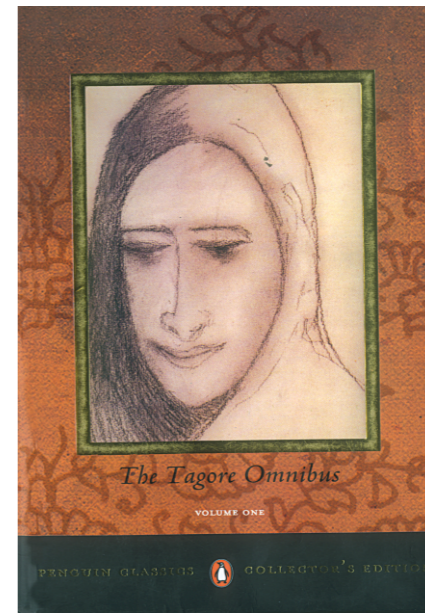
*Chokher Bali* is a classic exposition of an extramarital affair that takes place within the confines of a joint family. Asha, the simple, demure wife of the rich, flamboyant Mahendra, befriends Binodini, a vivacious young widow who comes to live with them; but both Mahendra and Binodini betray Asha's trust and elope, leaving the marriage in ruins.

Set against the backdrop of the Partition of Bengal by the British in 1905, *Ghare Baire* (Home and the World) is also the tale of a triangular relationship: between the liberal-minded zamindar Nikhilesh, his educated and sensitive wife Bimala, and Sandip, Nikhilesh's friend, a charismatic revolutionary who Bimala becomes attracted to.

*Chaturanga* (Quartet) traces the philosophical and emotional developments between Sachish, a brilliant young atheist, his friend Sribilash, and Damini, a young widow sheltered by the guru Lilananda, who Sachish and Sribilash become devotees of.

Set in the historical context of the decline of the landed aristocracy in Bengal and the emergence of the entrepreneurial class, *Yogayog* (Nexus) is the tale of Kumudini, the daughter of a cultured family that has fallen on bad times, who is torn between her loyalties to Madhusudan, her crass and self-serving husband, and Bipradas, her artistic and compassionate brother.

Finally, *Malancha* (The Garden) reveals the anguish of the sickly Neerja, who, confined to bed, suspects Sarala, her husband Aditya's childhood friend, of usurping her place both in Aditya's heart and in their beloved garden.



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Extract from Chaturanga (The Quartet)

Secrets of the female heart

I didn't have enough experience to know the secrets of the female heart. My superficial observations led me to believe that women are ready to lose their hearts where they are sure to be requited with sorrow. They will string their garland for a brute who will trample it into the horrid slime of lust; or else they will aim it at a man whose head it won't reach because he is so absorbed in a world of abstraction that he has virtually ceased to exist. When they have a chance to choose their mates women shun average men like us, who are a mixture of the crude and the refined, know women as women--in other words, know that women are neither clay dolls nor the vibration of veena strings. Women avoid us because we offer neither the fatal

attraction of murky desire nor the colourful illusion of profound abstractions; we cannot break through the remorseless torment of lust, nor can we forget them in the heat of abstraction and recast them in the mould of our own fancy. We know then as they really are; that's why even if they like us they won't fall in love with us. We are their true refuge, they can count on our loyalty; but our self-sacrifice comes so readily they forget that it has any value. The only baksheesh we receive from them is that whenever they need us they use us, and perhaps even respect us a little, but... enough! These words probably stem from resentment, and probably aren't true. Perhaps it is to our advantage that we get nothing in return; at least we can console ourselves with that thought.