

SHORT STORY

The Daughter-in-law's Vote

KRISHAN NAMBI
(translated from by V. Surya)

Tomorrow was the election. A two-way contest between the Cat and the Parrot. Parrot candidate Veerabaagu Konaar and Cat candidate Maariyaadum Perumaalpillai were giving their very lives to the effort. The town stood riven in two.

Pillaiyaar Temple Street in the Brahmin quarter, full of cooks and temple attendants, was the Parrot stronghold. Veerabaagu Konaar supplied milk on credit to several families in that fortress.

Meenakshi Ammaal had a cow of her own. From every milking, she kept a fourth of a measure for household use and sold the rest, after diluting it judiciously with water. For cash, of course. If anyone wanted credit, there was always that wretched creditor Veerabaagu Konaar, wasn't there?

Meenakshi Ammaal wasn't exactly poverty-stricken. She was the owner of the house in which she lived, and of sixty-six cents of wetland at the end of town. Her husband, the taluk office peon, who had died some years ago, had made over to her the deeds to this property. Ramalingam was their only son. A harmless fellow whom government gave his father's job out of pity. And Meenakshi Ammaal had got him married as well. In her doddering old age, she would need a daughter-in-law, wouldn't she?

Though Rukmini was a wisp of a girl, she wasn't one bit a shirker. From early dawn, when she would sprinkle the house-front with cow-dung water and make the daily *kolam*, she scrupulously carried out all the chores until bedtime. As for cooking, there was fine aroma in her very touch. (Though mothers-in-law are always pointing out some fault or shortcoming, it's all in the cause of their daughters-in-law's progress, so that they get better and better at everything, isn't it?)

Rukmini also knew how to milk a cow very well. Milking can make your chest hurt, that's what the neighbour-women said. But then, so many people say so many things. One mustn't let it in one's ears. No should one make any reply. Why, the very best thing was not to talk to anybody about anything at all. Such were the wise counsels imparted by the mother-in-law to the daughter-in-law on the day the girl arrived.

She'd been skinny, then, too...If doctors had examined her, they would have said it was tropical eosinophilia...But why have such an examination done? Those who came to you offering 'I'll treat you! I'll cure you!' will do anything for cash. Now, was there anything Meenakshi Ammaal didn't know? Consider her age! Her ripe experience! Once a child is born, everything will become all right, declared Mother-in-law. After all, there's no need to rush to a doctor just now, as though somebody here is on their deathbed!

It wasn't as though Meenakshi Ammaal gave the orders to her daughter-in-law and just folded her arms and did nothing. She, too, had her tasks. Adding water to the milk, measuring it out and selling it, receiving all income (including Ramalingam's salary), counting the cash and locking it away, watching and considering before spending on anything—all these were her exclusive responsibilities.

Every day, Rukmini and her mother-in-law ate together. As Meenakshi Ammaal dished out the food, she would recite:

*A woman adds to her loveliness
By simply eating less and less.*

It seemed to Rukmini, as those syllables were being uttered in ringing tones by Meenakshi Ammaal, that that precious maxim had been brought forth by that lady herself, out of her own wisdom. The daughter-in-law had to admit that there was some truth in her mother-in-law's pronouncement that eating too much would make a person put on flesh. (Rukmini herself had only very rarely been



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driven to snatch a few morsels without anybody finding out.) Without provoking a fight between some daughter-in-law and mother-in-law, the women in town just can't get to sleep each night, can they? Poking right into a girl's mouth they pull out something to take to her mother-in-law, tell tales to each of them in turn and watch the fun! But none of their stratagems worked on Rukmini. It was a big disappointment to them. 'The girl's a voiceless creature!' they said, and ignored her.

In the evening gossip sessions outside the front door, when anyone prodded her with the question 'How's the daughter-in-law?', Meenakshi Ammaal would reply, 'She? What about her? She's just fine!' She would then move on to the next topic. With a kind of envy, the women of the town used to say, 'That woman! Who can ever get the better of her?'

On the night before the polls, it was not surprising that the dominant note in the conversational concert was the election. Knowing full well to whom Meenakshi Ammaal's vote belonged, one woman mischievously asked, 'Your vote's for the Parrot, isn't it, maami?'

'Ei, di... You know already, and yet you're teasing me, is it?' said Meenakshi Ammaal.

'Wonder who your daughter-in-law will be voting for?' said another, with a wink. Meenakshi Ammaal grew wrathful. 'You girls! How dare you try to split us up with that kind of talk! She and I are one single unit! Mud in the mouth for those who don't know it!'

Everyone laughed loudly at that bit of bluster.

Polling was a little dull in the morning, but it picked up by mid-day and became very lively. Meenakshi Ammaal was the first to go and cast her vote and return home. On his way home from bathing in the river, Ramalingam was waylaid by party workers, pulled along and forced to cast his vote in wet clothes.

After the noon meal, Meenakshi Ammaal was overcome by her usual postprandial stupor and lay stretched out on the floor. Rukmini

was in the cowshed, feeding the cow bran-and-water. Watching it eat and drink was Rukmini's greatest joy—a joy that lay outside the boundaries of her mother-in-law's authority.

'Carass! Heap of dung! However much you eat, your appetite won't come down!' she would say, stroking its forehead tenderly.

'Never think of it as only a cow. It's Mahalakshmi herself! Never ever allow that stomach to go dry. Otherwise the milk will also dry up.' These were Meenakshi Ammaal's standing instructions.

'Cow! Aren't you a woman, too? How is it that only you and mother-in-law don't have to go by that rule of "eating less and less"? Won't you tell me? Rukmini asked, a fit of giggles bubbling up in her. 'I'm going to vote today. You don't have to bother with such things, of course. Now tell me, will you, for whom should I vote? The parrot's such a dazzling green, so beautiful! To fly like that—oh, how I wish I could! I like the cat, too...but I like the parrot even more.'

The level of water in the bucket having gone down, she tilted a pitcherful into it and added handfuls of bran. 'Drink properly, can't you without making a mess?' she said, giving it a little slap on its cheek. Without sucking up the water, it thrust its head deep into the bucket, searching for any lump of oilcake that might be lying up to the surface. Growing breathless, the cow abruptly drew up its face, raised its head and stared around, puffing and panting. At the sight of the circle of wet bran-flecks around its face, she laughed. 'Cow! Listen...it's not enough for you to give milk like you're doing now. You have to go on giving lots and lots when I have my baby! My baby should drink your milk, isn't that so? Will you let my baby drink as yours does—straight from your udder? Like my husband says, I have no breast at all. Just pain in the breast...'

'Pooh! The cow plopped down a gob of dung and squirted enough urine to fill a water pot. With a deft movement of the hands she quickly scooped up the dung, carried it to the dung-pit and dropped it in. She wiped her hands on the grassy earth and picked up the pail and the water pot with the water remaining in them.

'I'm off. Going to vote! I'll come back and let the calf suck.' The udder was hard, swollen with milk.

As Meenakshi Ammaal had arranged, some neighbour-women came to take Rukmini along to the polling booth. They were all dressed in their best clothes. Rukmini washed her hands and face at the well and came indoors. 'All right, all right, just smooth down your hair, put a dot on your forehead, and get along,' said her mother-in-law, cutting short her toilette. Rukmini opened the almirah, took out a voile sari dotted with tiny green flowers, and clutching it in her hand, she ran in search of a private corner to drape it around herself.

When Rukmini had descended the frame steps, Meenakshi clapped her hands and beckoned, 'Here, I forgot to tell you...just come here a minute and go,' she said, taking her into the house. Lowering her voice: 'Remember, don't vote wrong...They'll give you a paper with a

picture of a cat and a picture of a parrot. You put the stamp down right next to the cat picture.'

It was calm at the polling station. There was a line of women, with many curves in it. Another, straighter line of men. The women's queue was full of colours, and looked like a creeper abundant with flowers, while the men's line resembled a long pole. Rukmini was happy. Very happy. She just loved it all. Here and there on the grounds of that school building stood neem trees, growing and flourishing. She gazed ardently at them. The heat had mellowed. The gently rippling breeze felt soothing and pleasant not just to her body but even more, she realized, to her mind.

'Have I ever been as happy as I am today?' she asked herself. 'Ah! An alicam tree! Over there! There it was, in a corner, clinging against a well! Was it really an alicam tree? Yes, it was, without a doubt. Rukmini could not contain her delight, she wanted to shout out loud, Alisa tree! O alicam berries! That taste—how different from anything else! At Vempanoor, in those days when she was studying up to the Fifth, how many alicam berries she had eaten! Countless! Vying with the boys, she'd climb the tree with her long-skirt pulled up between her legs, both her thighs showing...'

The trees were swaying in the breeze. Rukmini had not the slightest expectation of it, but a green parrot with a red beak flew up to that alicam tree, perched on the tip of a branch, and screeched, making the branch swing up and down. How extraordinary! How did this bird get here, now?

'Come, parrot! You don't have to ask for it. My vote is yours. I have already made up my mind. But don't go and tell my mother-in-law. She's told me to vote for the cat. If you come after my baby's born, it'll be wonderful! My baby will also see how beautiful you are, won't he? And when you come, parrot, bring berries for my baby!'

When she entered the booth, she found the proximity of strange men embarrassing, and oddly exciting. A pair of dark-skinned, smooth hands moved around on a large rectangular table. There were piles of paper, many red and yellow pens and pencils. She found herself standing behind a screen. Behind her, from outside the curtain came the sound of a woman giggling explosively. Ruku's chest thudded rapidly. She felt an unendurable desire to urinate. Lord, what torment is this! Her teeth pressed hard against each other. Ayyo! It must be milking time. She thought of the cow, its udder swollen and bursting with milk. Why was her body trembling so much? Ahh, the Parrot! A hand grabbed Rukmini's; she turned, startled, saying, 'Who is that? No one was here... But it was true, anyway, that another hand had taken hold of hers. A woman's hand...her mother-in-law Meenakshi Ammaal's hand! Her hand was taken and moved over to the Cat. Down came the stamp, bright and clear, next to it. Ah! The Cat has Rukmini's vote!

Hurriedly she left the polling booth. The women were waiting for her. As soon as they saw her, they laughed; she didn't know why. When she came near, one of them asked, 'Ruki, whom did you vote for, di?'

'For my mother-in-law!' She did not know how it happened, but the words stood up in her mouth and showed themselves. The women gathering around laughed loudly. Rukmini quickly walked away. Her chest hurt more than ever. She had great trouble holding back the grief boiling up within her, and the tears.

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Book Reviews

The Master sams the Magic

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Shalimar the Clown by Salman Rushdie; London: Jonathan Cape; 2005; 398 pp.

Salman Rushdie, in the novels that established him as a world figure of literature—*Midnight's Children*, *Shame* and *The Satanic Verses*—was a dealer mainly of the past. In more recent works he contends with some broad themes of contemporary life: fame and celebrity in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, and capitalist excess in *Fury*. Fundamental themes like rootlessness pervade them all. In his ninth and latest novel, *Shalimar the Clown*, Rushdie takes on the uber-issue of the moment: terrorism.

The novel is apparently a response to 9/11 and its aftermath; however, it does not deal with either 9/11 or any of its principal actors—neither the "Islamist" terrorists, nor their "Western" opponents. Rather, it comes at the issue circuitously through another point of sustained contention; namely, Kashmir.

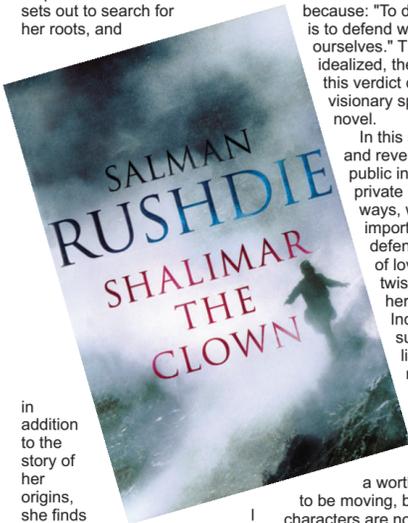
While the novel is named after Shalimar the Clown, a Kashmiri folk performer turned terrorist, it has at least two other protagonists of equal importance: Max Ophuls, an American ambassador, and India (a.k.a. Kashmir) Ophuls, his daughter. Indeed, this brings up a vital question about this novel: why name it after Shalimar the Clown, when his centrality is not clearly established?

The story is straightforward: Max Ophuls, French Resistance hero, and later an American ambassador to India, seduces the Clown's beloved, Boonyi, a dancing girl, producing a child. Ophuls' wounded wife, also a hero of the French Resistance, leaks the story of the out-of-wedlock child by way of revenge against her husband, and punishes the hapless dancer by taking away her newborn girl, Kashmiria, and raising her in London.

The dancer's simple-hearted husband, Noman, a.k.a. Shalimar the Clown, is so enraged that he joins the

Kashmiri resistance to learn the arts necessary to attain his revenge against the ambassador. The resistance also leads him to contacts with international terrorist networks, which he uses as a channel to reach his destination, while offering his services as an assassin in return.

Shalimar the Clown avenges himself over two decades after the original insult by murdering the ambassador in Los Angeles. The final section of the novel deals with Kashmiria's response to this murder. She sets out to search for her roots, and



in addition to the story of her origins, she finds love with a man. These are the resources that fortify her for a final confrontation with the Clown.

In typical Rushdie fashion, personal stories are deeply entwined with public history, but the ironic or playful ties here lack the *frisson* of discovery, and the authentic insight that gave his early works so much power. In recounting Indira Gandhi's Emergency in *Midnight's Children*, the shenanigans of Ziaul Huq in *Shame*, or the London race riots in the *Satanic Verses*, Rushdie was writing history-as-fiction at its highest: he was giving life to histories that had yet to find full expression in the genre of

history itself. However, the history of the French Resistance here reads like overheated journalism, and the portrait of pre-partition Kashmiri life reads more like fairy-tale than history.

Certainly, the literary Kashmir is not just the historical Kashmir, but also the symbol of an ideal. It is a place where Hindu and Muslim were mere "descriptions," not automatically "divisions." In this pre-Partition idyll, when Boonyi and Shalimar the Clown's under-aged affair is discovered, the panchayat decrees that they get married because: "To defend their love is to defend what is finest in ourselves." Though absurdly idealized, the sentiment of this verdict constitutes the visionary spine of this novel.

In this story of love and revenge, where the public intersects the private in devastating ways, what remains important is the defense or possibility of love. Despite the twisted burden of her inheritance, India/Kashmiria is supposed to be liberated or redeemed by her renewed capability to fall in love.

While the sentiment is a worthy one, it fails to be moving, because the characters are not well-rounded with any feeling of reality about them. Rushdie, true to his penchant, makes much of not only the naming of Kashmiria, but all significant characters, even places, making them laden with symbolic weight. Yet, his heavy-handed characterization is not enough to make the symbols resonant.

Questioning the credibility of characters may be critiqued as a dated way to read fiction, but this novel is not premised on magic realistic terms, and the conventions of realism demand that characters come across as rounded creatures with an illusion of autonomy and depth. None of that is achieved here, because the characters are

subjugated to the service of a pre-meditated schema; but by failing to develop them properly Rushdie fails the scheme as well.

The novel is rife with events that stretch credulity, most visibly: the sophisticated ambassador Ophuls, and his super-sophisticated daughter India, falling in love with half-educated Kashmiris. More distressingly, for a novel ostensibly about terrorism, the personal revenge quest of the Clown does not illuminate us about modern terrorism. Is personal desire, rather than ideology, really the prime motivator for the self-exploding hordes? If the point is that all terrorists are driven ultimately by some personal motivation, or that both terror and revenge are born of love corrupted, these points are rather too banal for a novel-length treatment.

Rushdie went into hibernation after the infamous *fatwa*. His first forays back into literature were treated with kid gloves by the literary world for obvious reasons. The faithful have waited ever since, however, to hail a new Rushdie book as a ground-breaker on the scale of at least *Shame* or *Satanic Verses*, if not *Midnight's Children*. Sadly, not one book since then comes close to fulfilling such an expectation.

I cannot speculate what would give the master his magic back; but possibly its recovery lies in trying something new, not in reworkings of the same template. What made Rushdie a world figure was his ability to find an entirely new idiom, and the thrill of that discovery gave his inventions and his language their unique, electric charge. It does not happen here; but fans will wait to see if he can approach fiction again in the spirit of discovery that is the form's greatest purpose and invitation to its highest practitioners.

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Indian Muslims and Communal Conflict

AZFAR AZIZ

Tremors of Violence: Muslim Survivors of Ethnic Strife in Western India, by Rowena Robinson, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2005, ISBN: 0-7619-3408-1, Paperback Price: Rs 295

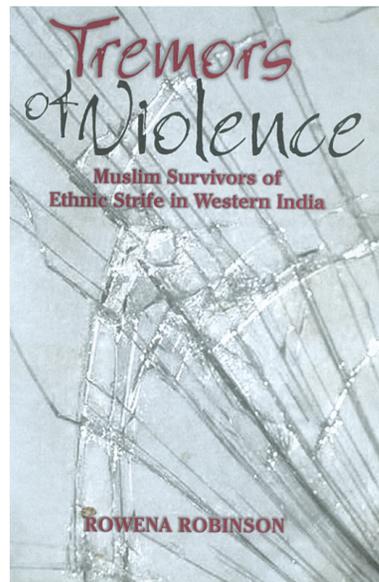
Tremors of Violence: Muslim Survivors of Ethnic Strife in Western India is the latest, and a milestone, addition to the already impressive list of research publications by Dr. Rowena Robinson in anthropological, sociological and, to some extent, psychological dimensions of religion and communalism in contemporary India. While her previous studies were predominantly focused on Christianity and Christians, this one zooms into, interacts with and examines the riot-devastated Muslim communities of Mumbai, and Ahmedabad and Baroda of Gujarat. Her mission, as Robinson says, was "to walk the spaces and cross the thresholds of homes in an effort to comprehend the ordinary worlds and tragically extraordinary experiences of Muslim survivors of communal violence in contemporary urban India." It is also a courageous attempt to demystify the Muslim, who, "categorized as 'Other', taunted as Pakistani if not vilified as terrorist", is an "anonymous and frightening figure" in India.

Since the pre-Partition and Partition-centred riots, Gujarat has suffered a series of major communal clashes in 1969, 1981, 1985 and 1990, in 1992-93 in the wake of Babri Masjid demolition and again in 2002, and several flare-ups in between. The frequency of communal riots is slightly less in the case of Mumbai, but in terms of intensity it outflanks the Gujarat towns. It is why the past is always present in the mind of riot survivors.

"Every story of communal conflict leads back to stories of past conflicts, past violence," reports the author, and once again, "Every time someone speaks... there is a reference to a certain past experience of violence. Mumbai 1993, Gujarat 2002: for Muslims, for us, these are signposts of a nation out of hand. They present without any doubt two of the most horrendous attacks on Muslims in the post-Independence period. While the violence of Partition always lurks in the shadows of any discussion on communal riots, no experience may ever be wholly erased. Ahmedabad 1969, Gujarat 1985, Mubai 1974, Jogeshwari 1991, Baroda 1982, Bhiwandi 1984: the spectres of the past mercilessly haunt the present."

As the book unfolds, it shows step by step how communal violence has changed the psychological divide between Hindus and Muslims into a physical one. In the heart of Ahmedabad, there are now 'border' areas—streets and neighbourhoods partitioned on strictly communal lines. Families have moved and are still moving out of mixed neighbourhoods to live in single community areas. No one, she shows, appears to be willing to risk being isolated in a polarised society. It is this ghettoisation of body and soul, the rupture in time and space of riot victims as well as the actors, factors and dynamics of the 'pogrom' that constitute the core theme of this excellent work.

She begins the first chapter, 'Inaugurating responsibility', with the rather harsh observation that in the "brutal" communal discourses in the last few decades, the Indian Muslims have been treated and scorned as Pakistanis, who should "go to Pakistan". "Indeed," she says, "as the social geography of Indian cities manifests, the Muslim



in fact lives in Pakistan, many Pakistanis, *mini* Pakistanis." In vivid detail she illustrates how over the last decade Mumbai's social space has been deeply divided into communal pockets, where green and saffron flags are being increasingly used to demarcate 'Muslim' and 'Hindu' residential spaces, not just religious ones.

Avoiding unnecessary generalisation, Robinson with admirable skill weaves the tales told by individual riot survivors of their shattering losses, painful attempts at ever-eluding recovery, and relentless struggle for survival into a colourful, multifocal, lucid and all-encompassing picture to let the readers have an almost first-hand knowledge. She does not tell but shows how the embodied markers of Muslim identity such as circumcised penis or a prayer cap or henna-dyed beard are jerked into the glare of ridicule and made violently noticeable. For instance, she makes the situation almost tangible by commencing the chapter 'Space, Time and the Stigma of Identity' thus: "Alighting

at Sion station prior to walking down to Dharavi's famous '90 foot Road' I unobtrusively move my hand across my forehead and remove my *bindi*. I am entering Social Nagar, Muslim space on the social map of Mumbai." And then: "While riding to Juhapura on the back of a friend's two-wheeler, she urges me to pull my *dupatta* over my head. We are about to enter Ahmedabad's 'Pakistan'."

In this study, partly funded by a Ford Foundation fellowship, the author scrutinises the differences between the communal riots of the past, which had a more intermittent and sporadic quality with the more methodical and deliberate persecution that has set in since the 1980s. "It was the 1980s and 1990s, during which Hindu-Muslim hostility and communal violence began to seriously take political centre-stage," she also observes.

Based on the witness accounts of the interviewees, Robinson confirms the widely held accusation against the police and paramilitary forces of active collusion or passive concurrence with Hindu rioters in many cases, which, she points out, have devastating implications for India as a state. "Muslims," she remarks, "even more now than in the past, suffer both at the hands of rioters and the police: indeed, in Mumbai's terrible violence of 1992-93, the most deaths occurred due to police firing and incidents of stabbing."

As a citizen, the author rightly emphasises the urgency of correcting the situation to safeguard India, as an idea and also as a polity. "This is now for us a work, a labour in which, as scholars and writers, we have a crucial and critical involvement," she says with conviction. Dr. Robinson should be unreservedly commended for this superb demonstration of how bodies, space, time all get bruised and altered by violence.

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