

SHORT STORY

Barriers that remained*

VALI RAM VALLABH
(translated from Sindhi by
Moazzem Sheikh)

It had been pouring since the morning; the rain, thick sheets of water. She remained sitting inside her house; didn't go anywhere. Nor could she have. When the miserable rains come knocking, they ignite a fire in your heart. The streets suddenly are full of potholes; water collects in them. Her heart, too, was dotted with them, holding the water of memories; countless events, stories had come to float there. Wounds had opened, pain emerged. She tried to rein in her heart, tried to set up dams around it lest it too might just float away. Although her hands were busy performing chores, she was answering questions, was asking questions. But it wasn't she. For she had died by drowning herself in the whirlpool of the past. The husband was an officer. Went away in his car. The children were of school age. The bus came, and off they went. She took a deep breath. Now she was alone, quite free despite being enclosed in her fortress-like bungalow, but the rain had erected a wall around the four sides of the fortress and the bungalow got soaked standing like a crane in a state of melancholy. It didn't leak from anywhere; nor was it moist any place. The blue colour too hadn't peeled off...like a wet cloth. The leaves, flowers, and branches swayed in the garden; all had been washed clean, softened. Not a speck of dust anywhere, not any trace of patterns etched in mud but... The rain had pulled off the sheet covering her. and it had

drenched the other sheet, the sheet of honour. She had dressed up to go: sweater, scarf, gloves, socks, sandals, overcoat, yet she was naked still; shivering. Then a struggle began between her existence and her heart. There was no visitor. Nor had she been invited anywhere. Not even a message. No one had phoned. Today, something should happen today. An accident from the past needed to be tossed into her present. Accidents. Telegram. Illness. Shadows began to stretch. He'll come soon; followed by the children. She'll come to life again. But when evening comes, it comes to say farewell, not like a woman, who, willing or not, for the rest of her life laughs and weeps while dissolving into silence. Evening leaves, leaving her space for night. It is not a life sentence—one sole relationship, against will, violence. No difference, no change. Touch And Smell Speech The same old, stinking, rotten things. Time-tested, familiar, limp, lifeless. Mom, tell me a story. My raja, which story would you like to hear? A good one. Rajat Yes, she always addressed him as Raja. He'd say: How lovely you are...lovely. Mom. Yes? A story. All right, listen. Son, it rained so hard one day, so mercilessly...

Like today? Yes, son. What happened then, mom? She kept wondering what to say next, When the rain came, she began to remember. Then...? Mom. Yes, my child, listen...it was a downpour. The sparrow's nest was made of straw. The crow's was of unbaked mud. The sparrow's house withstood the rain, no worry about the dirt or mud... But, mom, the crow's house was made of mud, which washed away... What? No, son. If it had done so, where would the poor soul go? Whom can he call his own? Mom, is he still getting soaked in the rain? No, my raja. He comes to the sparrow's house and tells her...to open the door, sister sparrow. Yes, son. Did the sparrow open the door? No. Why? Don't know, son, I don't know. She should open the door. Our teacher tells us to always love our neighbours. To love one's neighbour, said your teacher. Your teacher, right? Yes, why? No, one cannot love one's neighbour, son. Why? Is it bad? No, very good, love... Yes, go on, mom. She said nothing more; kept caressing her son with affection. And the child kept making little noises. Later on, he fell asleep with his feet on her belly. She was lost in thought. The light streaked out from the study. She wished he'd go on working all night. She wanted to sleep alone tonight; didn't want to be touched tonight; otherwise her body would speak out. Her body

would become the tongue of her soul. But can everyone follow the tongue of silence? He could see through it. He could feel it by a slight touch. But this? He couldn't comprehend this vernacular. So what! He has the right. So what if he didn't comprehend the vernacular of silence? She felt like a prostitute, a helpless poor little thing, dependent, chained down with relationships. She longed to break all bonds, shred them to pieces, to finish them off for ever. She removed her child's feet from her. The child turned on his side and threw his milk-soft arms around her neck. Overcome with love, she stroked the silky hands of her child; tears welled up in her eyes. Could this web of silk be broken! Never... Perhaps that's why the sparrow had said to the crow. Wait, I am feeding my child now... He'll grow up, get married, bring his bride; only then will she allow the crow to come in. Today the web of my child is around my neck. Tomorrow a grandchild's. It was the same rain, pouring down without mercy. Thick clouds gathered. He'd come; she'd

wiped his hair with the wet corner of her shawl, then they had embraced. He'd whispered, Now please add a little kohl too...such a child I am. Who is it? Mother had asked. No one, mother. It is my girl-friend. All right. The blind mother kept on counting her beads, sitting in silence. Both had their tea while it rained, had breakfast. Both had lent warmth to each other with their embrace. As the rain relented, he left. Did she deceive her mother? Her mother, or herself? Or the world? Perhaps all of the above, but not him. Really? She could not go to his house. His wife stood blocking her way. Raja, I will have to marry now. Mother won't listen to me anymore. But we have promised to be each other's, life after life. True, my Raja, but you are trapped in a relationship. But, my Rani, that relationship is only outwardly. I am alone. But it is she who has the right. How long will you keep on reminding me of that? She tried and tried, but mother wouldn't listen; finally she said: I am leaving. Do take care.

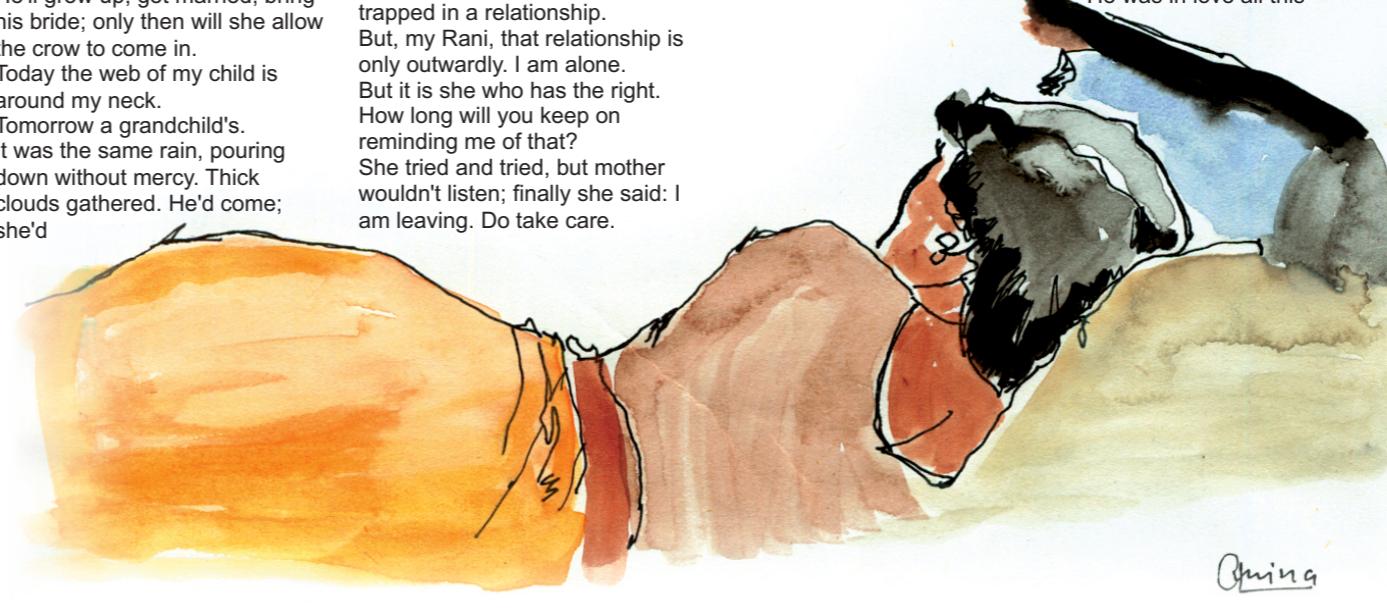
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Protect our falling house. If I ever showed up at your door, will you let me in? Of course, you can come any time. No, you won't be able to do it. Why not? Why would I not be able to do that? Our youths will pass somehow, but we'll need each other in old age. If we couldn't live together, we could die together at least. No, I don't want to live that long-tired, bent out of shape, coughing, what will I ask for at your door? What will I be able to give? Raja, please, don't say such sad things...for my sake. He never came again. Nor did he run into her anywhere. With such restlessness did she pass all those months! Even moments of happiness were spent in a struggle. Now even the memory seemed too old. If he'd showed up then, she would've given everything up to leave with him. If he came now?

This

child...if he came now, she wouldn't go. The husband? Honour? Society? She pondered and pondered. She is not alone now. She has children, and people consider her an honourable member of society; the husband too is not a bad person. The house...all this furniture, jewellery, clothes, china, pots and pans...no, how can she leave now. So many ties, so many traps. She kept on thinking. Only God knows when she fell asleep. The light went out in the study. Two feet approached her; and returned after pulling the blanket over the mother and the son. She woke up. Eyes wide open. She could feel the breeze, heavy breeze. It rained outside. Oh...who's at the door? Who's knocking at the door? He? Has he come? Is this rain? Asking for shelter? Asking for help? He kept waiting all those years? He was in love all this time? Promise? Memory of touch? And she? Remained in the trap created by honour, money, children? Another knock came on the door. Suddenly she jumped out of her bed. The blanket fell away, leaving the child uncovered. She reached the door on trembling feet. He was getting soaked in the rain. He was standing. She would certainly bring him in now. The world...the motherhood...will destroy her aloneness. She placed her hand on the side of the door; she pulled back as though terrified. The corpse of Madame Bovary hung from the door of happiness. The mistress of Flaubert...Madame Bovary. The lover deceived her. She swallowed poison. Madame's body writhed. Her body had stiffened because of pain. The blood had dried on the corners of her lips. And Madame's husband, madly in love with her. The little girl, terrified. Standing at the door of death, Madame Bovary. She ran to her husband's room. She threw her arms around his neck, embraced him; how nervous she had become. Poor little Madame Sparrow. The sparrow's door is shut. The rain has no intention of letting up. He is sitting outside. Alone. The wretched crow.

*From Penguin India's *A Letter from India*, 2005, reviewed previously on this page.
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artwork by amna

'The Sign of Minor Toilet': An Exchange with Faruq Choudhury and K. Z. Islam

Dear Editor,
I enclose what one might call a blow by blow rebuttal of the points made by Khademul Islam on Monzur Mursheed's book, *The Broken Milestones* in The Daily Star, December 11, 2005 (Star Literature). With regards,
Faruq A. Choudhury (December 13, 2005 email).

"Mursheed's Folly"

This is the heading preferred by the reviewer. Even before he starts his review, he displays a personal rancour against the writer by this heading.

"The book seems to be self published. FLF Press stands for Florida Literary Foundation Press, which I haven't heard before."

The reviewer thinks the book is self-published. Why? Because he hasn't heard about the publisher before! Lame argument and stupendous ego.

"The novel is about Yusuf (no surname available, as far as my reading, albeit, strained, went) who is born, according to the blurb, in a small coastal village of Bengal towards the end of the British Raj in India." Note that 'in India'."

This is amazing, the lack of knowledge of the reviewer about the trend of novel writing. While writing a novel, the writer not failing out an application form for a passport so that the surname of the principal character is a must. The reviewer should have been aware of the novels written by Nobel Prize Winners like Ernest Hemingway, Gao Xingjian and Juan Ramon Jimenez. In 'Old Man and the Sea', there is no surname used, most of the book is a dialogue between the principal character (the old fisherman) and the Marlin he has caught. In Gao's book 'Soul Mountain', the principal characters have no names at all, leave aside surnames; he uses pronouns like I, He and She to denote the characters. And he has produced a very powerful book. Juan Ramon Jimenez, in his 'Platero and I', uses no name of the principal character (written in first person). Almost the entire book is a dialogue between the writer and his donkey, Platero. And there is poetry in that novel.

What's there to note 'British Raj in India'? Can't possibly be British Raj in Pakistan!

"Either Mr. Mursheed is ignorant of the current standards of English novels written by South Asians or else he is an intrepid, ambitious soul who is not to be denied his moment in the sun. Armed with nothing more than the bent lance of English language, or perhaps a variant thereof which maybe labeled as CSP English, the author has tilted full-bore at the windmills of novel-writing to produce this 634 page tome. It is a book that exhibits with aplomb the rustic infelicities of, say, a schoolmaster in rural Bengal."

Once again, the reviewer has made a venomous personal attack on the writer. If he had a quarrel with the English written by the writer, he should have elaborated on this point, pointing out the defects, if there was any. Instead, he preferred to attack the writer personally. And what is CSP English, pray? Is there any such thing or is it the unexplained hatred for the CSPs as a class?

"Sign of minor toilet! One is left wondering if that is a coded metaphor for the book. It is after all, six hundred and thirty four indefatigable pages of this stuff."

Proves nothing except that the reviewer is prone to using indecent and abusive language! Abominable!

"The central character's life unwinds against the vast panorama of national politics, where lest we not get the point, various figures are one or two cards shy of a full deck. 'Sheikh Najib' for example for Sheikh Mujib or (another favourite) 'Iftekhar Ali Sutto' for just guess who."

We don't get the point. What's wrong in camouflaging the real names in a novel? After all it's a work of fiction. Salman Rushdie in his novel 'Shame' has disguised real names of prominent characters in Pakistani politics, rather thinly at that.

"It is a mystery why all manner, and races of 'scintillating' women are so smitten with Yusuf. We never know what he looks like, nor does he do anything extra-ordinary to merit such attention. Yet they fling themselves at him by the bucketload. Maybe it's the mystique of that absent surname. Maybe all he needed to be was a joint

partner."

Here the reviewer is caught cheating; he hasn't read the book in its entirety. There is a good physical description of Yusuf in the

beginning of the book. If physical attributes is the sole reason (as the reviewer thinks crassly) of a woman falling in love with a man, Yusuf has plenty of it. Then the reviewer once again starts the hackneyed chant of the absence of his surname, wrongly, to direct a calculated personal blow, albeit, below the belt, for the writer. Then again, the mention of his being a joint secretary, patently displays his prejudice for government officials.

"But all is not lost. There are nuggets to be mined here. To give just one example, if the reader is interested in anthropology, as I am, he/she will be fascinated by the passage about the recruitment interview ('viva voce') of the would-be CSPs by the members of the Pakistan Public Service Commission."

What has the recruitment interview of the CSPs to do with anthropology? Doesn't make sense.

"At the end, one has to ask: is this life in Pakistan civil service was like? If so, it does explain certain things, not the least of which is that all those trendy theories about class and feudalism and the military bureaucratic oligarchy being responsible for the break-up of Pakistan are just so much bunkum. Lay the blame instead on the CSP interview, and the subsequent academy training. No state, least of all the fragile formulation that was the old Pakistan, could have survived these mandarins."

Colossal theory but difficult to understand what the reviewer is trying to say. His slip shows, though, when the old prejudice peeps out of his political theory. Is he reviewing a book or is he talking politics in the attitude of a pontiff, trying to make everybody believe he is the repository of all knowledge in the world.

"If the reader is idling her/his engine on a Sunday afternoon, he/she might thumb through Mursheed's folly as a prime example of how not to write the South Asian English novel. Which is too bad, really, for if one discounts the language, there are glimmers of an interesting read here—the author does display the sharp eye for the odd details. But then, the tale's in the telling, isn't it?"

Idling the engine on a Sunday afternoon? Where does the reviewer think we are? Can he tell us how to write a South Asian novel? Or can he define what exactly a South Asian novel is? He has not given one example of bad language in the book yet he quarrels with the language.

General comments

This is hardly a book review as it fails miserably to go into the depth of the book. The reviewer has a lot of quarrel with the book but never says exactly what he is quarreling about. Instead, he skirrds around the book and comes back again and again to launch vitriolic attacks on the writer personally. This shows not only his bad taste and prejudices but his total failure to write what can be termed as a sane and erudite review of the book.

The Literary Editor Replies:

Mr. Choudhury's letter argues about substance while my review was based on principle, and a single one at that: that Mr. Mursheed's linguistic resources are laughably inadequate to the task of writing a novel in English. For me therefore to answer the letter on a line-by-line basis, a "blow by blow" rejoinder, would be an exercise in futility.

It is the principle that has to be refuted, and the rest will follow. Besides, I'm not sure, even if I did write a point-by-point rejoinder, whether Mr. Choudhury would get it. He writes that "(the reviewer) has not given one example of bad language in the book yet he quarrels with the language," that "if (the reviewer) had a quarrel with the English written by the writer, he should have elaborated on this point, pointing out the defects, if there was any" (italics are mine, the "was" is his). These are mind-boggling assertions in view of the quotes from the book in the review. What more evidence does he need? How high and deep does he want it piled up?

To take yet another staggering example, my quoting the line "I made the sign of minor toilet" is "indecent and abusive language" on my part! But that is a line from the book itself, a quote that I am using to make my point about the utterly strange and ludicrous, to put it very mildly, variant of English that Mr. Mursheed so blithely deployed. How can that be "indecent and abusive language" on my part? Obviously there is some deep disconnect here.

In view of the above, how do I take Mr. Choudhury's outburst seriously? If I did, I would then have to lead him through simple explanations such as that the phrase "British Raj in India" contains a

small but noticeable redundancy, that "British Raj," or "the Raj" automatically means the British empire in undivided India, that that "in India" on the back cover blurb was being "noted" as a harbinger of things grossly misappropriated to come within the covers of the book. There is a limit to what I can achieve here.

There is one issue that I do feel compelled to clarify at some length, simply because it was brought up in another context. It concerns that one line in the review: "The book seems to be self-published." Given the magnitude of the mangling of the English language in the book, the numerous typos and misspellings, the grievous errors of syntax and grammar, its shoddy production values, I thought that conclusion was self-evident. The questions this book raised were numerous: How could this thing have been produced in America? What kind of a press was it that couldn't care less about what went out under its imprint? What kind of a publisher was it who made not the slightest effort to ensure a standard product? Where was editorial quality control?

There are presses in the United States, known as "vanity presses" or "subsidy presses" or "co-op presses," who will publish a book provided the author in some way bears the cost/s. They run the gamut from those that demand a flat fee (99 dollars, for example, with some) to ones with seductive, high-flown declarations and slippery contract language. Mr. Mursheed's book had all the hallmarks of being one of these deals, but even then I gave it the benefit of doubt by saying it "seems to be." Surely I am allowed that much, given the book's production values. Or total absence of them!

After Mr. Choudhury's letter arrived I checked the publisher's (Florida Literary Press) website. It contains some interesting language: "FLF is very much an activist press; with the help of a dynamic editorial advisory staff, it seeks to identify areas in which new books and materials are most needed, and to commission books to fill those needs." Seems to me they are signaling that we'll help you publish stuff others won't touch, and as for that "dynamic editorial advisory staff"—they're "advisory," they don't seem to do the actual hard work. It goes on to say, "Our commission program is in the form of subsidies, grants, "co-op" publishing, and consulting services for new authors." The words "subsidies," and "co-op" publishing, alternative terms for vanity presses, are actually used. Then it slips in the phrase that "at FLF, any profit earned on a particular title does not go to owners, but back into the production of other books." Who are the "owners" they are talking about here: the owner of the press, or of the manuscripts? All this is double-talk. I think it is fairly clear what this press/publisher is about. If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, chances are it is a duck! Plus Mr. Choudhury doesn't come right out and flatly deny that the book's publications costs were borne by the author.

"Self-published" should not automatically be interpreted in a pejorative sense. Andre Gide, I believe, not only published his first book himself, but also peddled it from door to door. Nabokov's first book of poems was self-published. There are major poets today who paid the bill for their first effusions out of their own pocket.

But as I read through Mr. Mursheed's book, it was hard not to come to the conclusion that he represented the other end of the spectrum.

Postscript

After the above exchange was set to go for publication I received another letter dated December 20 from Mr. K. Z. Islam. It is a glossed-over version of Mr. Choudhury's letter, covering the same ground in the same manner, with even one whole paragraph being identical, word for word, with the former. Clearly a collaborative effort, but sent under a single, different signature.

Mr. K. Z. Islam's letter, however, does exhibit certain features which are uniquely his own. The first are his misspellings of only South Asian authors' names: "Rohinton Mistri, Arundhoti Roy, Salman Rushdie." Rushdie especially suffers, though some might opine that he deserves it.

Then he writes, "Sign of minor toilet. Surely reviewer has heard of the word euphemism. Instead of saying 'I am going to the loo' most of us say 'I am going for a walk.'"

Hmm! R-i-g-h-t-o! Whatever you say. Mr. K.Z. Islam goes on to say, "The *piece de resistance* is women fancying Yusuf throughout his life. Obviously, the reviewer does not know much about being a Casanova. There are men who without much physical attribute are born with charisma, captivating smile, glint in their eyes and charm who seem to attract women all their lives. Just watch in a party you will watch some bald man not handsome by any remote imagination surrounded by women while a

tall, dark and handsome man is nursing a drink and standing all by himself. If the reviewer gives me sometime I can recall some of my own escapades (privately of course)."

My God, what do I say to this? 'Ah, you poor literary editor,' he seems to be meaning, 'you ink-stained wretch with your un-glinting eyes, your dead smile and charmless ways, you may know a lot of things, but you don't know about that, do you, about how to make them faint in your arms?'

Maybe only a woman could hammer out an