

SHORT STORY

Eternal World

SYED WALIULLAH  
(Translation by Asrar Chowdhury)

The two of them were walking, Nawaz and his wife Hosena, by the banks of the *Kajali* river, leaving behind them the narrow zigzag crimson road, treading on the snowflake-like white flowers. They've left the village behind them. In front lay the deserted plains, the narrow river to their side, and above them was the horizon-extending, endless blue sky. It was the month of Magh. Nawaz was wearing a costly heavy overcoat; wrapped around Hosena was a deep red-coloured Kashmiri shawl. From the tender expressions on their faces, it seemed as if they've known the world to be only a celebration of joy. The blueness of the sky is like the bottomless cool waters of the sea; therein a wet-bodied boatman surfaces and one can enlarge one's heart in its infiniteness.

Hosena's beautiful pair of eye are sparkling flawlessly. Gazing at the *polash* flowers in the distance, she said in a sweet voice:

- Tell me why you were so late in coming. You'd been telling me for a while that you'd be coming. Do tell me, why do you act like this? You write to me you're going to come on a certain day, and then you don't.
- And if I don't come even after I say that I will, you do feel hurt, don't you?

Hosena's cheerfully-lit face instantly went gloomy. She said calmly:

- No, I don't.
- Oh, said Nawaz, and turning his face away from hers began to study the distant, deep green lines of the forest on the other side of the river; his face was blank, without questions.
- What do you mean by 'Oh'? Hosena asked in a restless manner. What does 'Oh' mean?
- What does 'Oh' mean? Very simple. It means Oh, Oh, Oh... Now, Hosena, see that forest line--
- Forget those forest lines. Tell me what you meant by 'Oh'. Don't you think I get upset if you don't come by? Can't you see that's what I really meant? That's a fine intelligence you have; worthy of the highest admiration.

Nawaz turned his face back towards her and laughed in a gentle manner. He said in an affectionate tone:

- Now we know whose head is clear... Good heavens, why are you getting annoyed?
- Why should I get annoyed? I'm the silly one, your head is the shiny, crystal-clear one.
- Your head, too.
- Look, don't you make me angry today.
- If you get angry, I'm going to flee by the night coach.
- So go on, run off. You think I'm getting angry? ... Ooh



artwork by amina

- Ooh...
- Hey, don't you mock me.
- You know, Hosena, I never did realise before that a person can be so joyful. I feel a violent delight within me. Do you know what I feel like doingsleep don't laugh at mebut I feel like dancing all over the place. Or just lying motionless at the bottom of the river.

Hosena was silent for a few moments and then vaguely murmured:

- And would you like to know what I'm thinking? I'm thinking that this world is a big illusion, nothing but a dream. Still, I'm happy. One can be happy within an illusion.

Nawaz came to a sudden, startled stop. He said in an surprised voice:

- How astonishing! You know, it could very well be that your happiness is pure and true, and mine the illusory one.
- Let's forget all that. Look over there, dear, and see how the setting sun is festively showering its hues while sinking at the bend of the river on the other side, as if to gladden the heart of mankind, an

flutes. Often they chatted aimlessly or remained sunk in a deep, intimate silence. At one point Nawaz said that they could not return home tonight because there wouldn't be any room for them; then again, after a pause, he said restlessly that quick, let's get back home otherwise we'll get lost in the azure skies, we'll melt away. Neither of them felt the urge to check their watches because at that moment the waves of time that were floating swiftly yet silently over them wasn't trapped in the eternal cycle of creation and destruction of the world.

The lines of the forest on the other side of the river looked mysterious in the indistinct and unclear moonlight. Nawaz gazed at the other side and said:

- Sweetheart, you're a spring, the source of all my joy today. Darling, listen, please never dry up or fade away.

Hosena didn't answer; she merely drew close to Nawaz's body while they were walking. A few lights were twinkling in the distance, most probably that of Madhupur village. Not too far away was that huge peepul tree and the ruins of the small, ancient mosque. Here

the *Kajali* river gradually narrowed down.

They kept on walking; apart from the sound of their footsteps and the indistinct and unclear moonlight there was such a silence that perhaps had it been another night they wouldn't have been able to carry on. But today, all that entered their ears over the brooding silence around them was the mysterious, impatient sound of their feet.

- What's that?

They came to a sudden stop. What was that?

Nawaz stood at the edge of the steeply falling, crumbling bank of the river and looked down at the rippling water, where a white object appeared to be glittering. After failing to discern what it was, he made sure Hosena stood on the shore while he clambered step by step down the broken bank.

It was a naked corpse. Half of the body was submerged in the water, half of it was on land. The corpse no longer had a human form; it was deformed and horrible-looking. Looking at it sent shivers down one's spine; it made one feel loathing and disgust. The smell of decay hung in the air around it. Beside it the river flowed on, hummed on; its waters glittered and dazzled over one half of the corpse.

Nawaz took in the ugly sight with a clean heart. But just as he was about to climb up the bank he felt as if his insides had been dealt a tremendous blow, and had become lifeless and inert. He succeeded in climbing up to the shore, dragging himself, only with a huge effort. It seemed as if too him an entire age to do so. Hosena asked anxiously:

- What? What is it?

Nawaz didn't respond; he wouldn't have been able to at that moment in any case. Slowly, very slowly, he came and stood still in front of Hosena. There was an unbearable silence everywhere, a desolation! Because the noise from their footsteps had ceased. In the light of the full moon Hosena's body looked incomparably beautiful; the lovely slender face, the two big black eyes which became deeply mysterious, acquired an unparalleled grace. It was at this figure that Nawaz looked at closely, but his gaze became hazy; his eyes kept closing; waves of drowsiness swept over them. It was as if he was dreaming. A few moments later Nawaz's lips quivered slightly, and he asked Hosena in an mild, slurred voice:

- Who are you?

Hosena was speechless, bewildered. In her eyes astonishment mixed with fear. How could she give an answer to this question? That was beyond the ability of human beings.

Syed Waliullah (1922-1971) is considered one of the foremost of Bengali writers. Asrar Chowdhury teaches Economics at Jahangirnagar University.

Letter from MUMBAI

MENKA SHIVDASANI

Rummaging through my bookshelves the other day, I found a slim white volume that has sunk without a trace in Mumbai's poetic spaces. It's called *After Kalinga and Other Poems* and has been written by Akil Contractor, a friend I haven't seen for many years. When I met him last, he was running a family business making ink; in between the demands of manufacturing it, he found the time to use some of it for his own poetry.

It was this seemingly insignificant volume of poetry, and another called *Spirit Song*, also by Akil, that proved to be the catalysts for a group that has survived for close to two decades. With too many other pressing demands, it has sometimes felt like a shaky survival. The fact is, however, that next year, 2006, marks the 20th anniversary of the Poetry Circle in Mumbai.

Sometime in mid 1986, another friend Nitin Mukadam, called me out of the blue. "There's this chap I know who's written two books of poems, and he's asking, 'Is there an audience for this sort of thing?'" Nitin said. "Is there anything we can do about it?"

In those days, Nissim Ezekiel used to run the Indian P.E.N, organizing literary events once a month. If you were lucky, you even got published in the P.E.N. journal that he edited. Kavi, edited by Santan Rodrigues, was still around as well, battling various odds, as 'little magazines' tend to do. Yet, if you were a young poet, taking your first uncertain steps in the minefield, you were unlikely to find much support. Nissim Ezekiel was always a willing listener, and a sharp but supportive critic, but there were few spaces where young people could meet to share their work and receive the much-needed feedback.

Nitin, Akil and I met at the Parisian Restaurant, a spacious and quiet café in the busy commercial Fort district downtown, and discussed the possibility of starting an organization for young poets. Nitin was the practical one; as an advertising man, he knew the importance of 'branding'. "Poets may not necessarily think about these things," he said, "but it would make all the difference if the organization had a letterhead and logo. If you want a newspaper to carry an announcement about a meeting, they will take it far more seriously if the note comes on a letterhead."

We decided on the Yin-Yang

symbol, representing harmony, balance and perfection, and Nitin got his artists to put together the logo and the letterheads. Doing this was not as easy as it would be today; the computer revolution had not yet transformed the industry. He was right, however; when the newspapers carried our first announcement, the conference



Menka, Akil, Aroop and Nissim Ezekiel

room in his office at Gannon Dunkerley was jampacked. Clearly, despite all we said about nobody being interested in poetry, there was a deep-rooted need somewhere. In fact, there was some disappointment when people realized that this first meeting was purely administrative; they had come with poems they wanted to read out and share.

Logos and letterheads were of course only the initial, very basic steps. What was more crucial was actually drawing the audiences. I had been attending poetry readings for long enough by then to be extremely skeptical about anyone wanting to come and hear young poets. Our initial strategy, therefore, was to have one senior poet reading, and a few of us non-entities sharing the platform too.

As someone who had had the good fortune of meeting Nissim Ezekiel, and through him, many other young poets, I was in a position to pass the word around. Among those who joined us at that time were R Raj Rao, now a professor at Pune University and author of several books; Marilyn Noronha, a banker; Charmayne D'Souza, a counselor; Prabhjanjan Mishra, a customs officer; and T R Joy, a professor of English literature. We were young and enthusiastic, and there was much to do. Nissim Ezekiel provided unstinting support, including at a later date, a space at the P.E.N. for our meetings every second and fourth Saturday.

The initial discussions that Nitin, Akil and I had took place in May 1986; it was on October 3,

1986, that we held our first 'big' event. Dom Moraes, winner of the Hawthornden prize at age 19, had been making news in the city; could we possibly dare to ask him if he would read at a function that we organized? Dom had, in fact, been in poetic hibernation for 17 years, but to our amazement, he agreed to do a reading--the first, he told us,

the country, is the most visible symbol of a new revival of Indian poetry in English sweeping the literary scene."

In the first year, we organized a competition, with prize money coming from our own pockets. It was meant to be a small local event, but when the newspapers announced it, entries came in from all over the country, and even Dubai!

For the first anniversary function, we wanted to do something special. Could we ask Kamala Das to come in from Trivandrum for a reading? Of course not! Where was the money? Who would pay for her air ticket and the hotel room? And would someone of her stature think we were worth her time anyway?

We had heard vaguely that she had a son working for The Times of India, so decided to drop in at his office. "We wanted to call your mother for our anniversary function," we told him a little hesitantly. "But we were wondering how to manage it." He was delighted. "Don't be silly," he said. "She's my mother, I'll be happy to do anything to bring her here. And of course, she will stay with me!" And so, Kamala Das came to Mumbai for the Poetry Circle. Sydenham College gave us their auditorium, gratis, and Dom Moraes was among those who attended.

Those who still make it to the monthly Poetry Circle meetings today will never have heard of the support provided by an adman called Narain Sadhwani. I wanted to bring out a newsletter and didn't know how. Then one day, someone took me to Sadhwani's home-cum-office, and I found three or four computers there. (Remember, the computer revolution had yet to hit us, and if you owned one, you treated it like God!). I asked him, a little nervously, whether he would put together a newsletter for us--on commercial terms, of course. (Though who knew where the money would come from, if we actually had to pay him!).

Sadhwani--or Sadi, as he was known--was not the sort to particularly mince words. "I don't do that sort of s\_\_\_\_\_!" he said, glaring at me. Then he added: "But if you like I will show you how to use a computer and you can do it yourself." And that's how our very first, extremely amateurish, and very short-lived newsletter, 'I to I' was born. The well-known graphic artist Sudarshan Dheer designed a dozen covers for our use, and another friend, Rajesh Chaturvedi, printed the newsletter for us. None of them expected anything in return.

Much later, the Circle was to bring out a magazine called *Poeisis*, edited by Prabhanjan Mishra and T R Joy.

Over the years, there have been many people who have nurtured the Poetry Circle in different ways--Nissim Ezekiel, Marilyn Noronha, Charmayne D'Souza and R Raj Rao, among them. The Circle has also seen the emergence of younger, extremely talented poets like Ranjit Hoskote, Jerry Pinto and Arundhati Subramaniam, who have contributed significantly to its continued existence. If it lasted so long despite all its ups and downs--it was because the Circle had grown far beyond the three people who originally started it. Many members of the Circle have gone on to publish their collections, and build very strong reputations for themselves. In the introductions to some of their books, they have acknowledged the role that other Circle members have played.

The restaurant in which we had our first discussions has long since become a bank, and many of us have moved on to more responsibilities than we had in those early heady days. The Circle, however, still meets once a month--and, it must be said--with great difficulty, in a city where space and time are at a premium. Nissim is no longer with us; neither is Dom, and the world seems like a very different place.

New groups have come up in these two decades. There is Loquations, started by Adil Jussawalla and now coordinated by Jane Bhandari, among others. Bengali writer and editor Mandira Pal and Malayalam poet P B Hrishikesan have brought together poets from different languages; the second meeting was held last week, on Christmas Eve.

Twenty years ago, when the Circle began, people had to come from across the city to a central point for meetings. Now, technology has changed all this; ask Caferati, which organizes 'read-meets' at different venues. Caferati started as an online forum, and continues to be a very vibrant one.

The Internet has transformed even our literary spaces, and who knows what changes the next 20 years will bring? I hope I am around to see them!

Menka Shivdasani has published two volumes of poetry: *Nirvana at Ten Rupees* and *Stet*.

Book Review A Lesbian Lolita

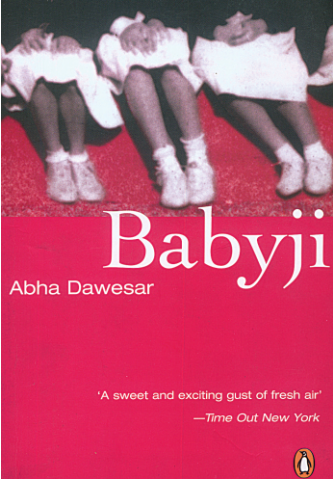
FARAH AMEEN

*Babyji*, by Abha Dawesar; New Delhi: Penguin India; 2005; Rs. 295; pp. 399.

From the land of the *Kamasutra*, we have a bold book that explores same-sex love. *Babyji*, Abha Dawesar's second novel, is a lesbian *Lolita* set in Delhi. Its heroine, Anamika Sharma, is the Head Prefect of her school, an ace at quantum physics and a brilliant student who secretly reads the *Kamasutra* in her family's scooter garage. When her parents drag their teenager to parties, she passes time imagining the women "minus their small, tight blouses." As Anamika explores her sexuality, she faces moral and emotional dilemmas that are heightened by her attraction to women in a conservativessociety.

The book begins by setting the scene: "Delhi is a city where things happen undercover . . . In the Delhi I grew up in . . . Married women fell in love with pubescent girls, boys climbed up sewage pipes to consort with their neighbor's wives, and students went down on their science teachers in the lab. But no one talked about it." The reader then follows the short-haired, pants-and-shirt-wearing Anamika through some far-fetched events, starting with her meeting an older, elegant divorcee (whom she nicknames "India") who's instantly enthralled by the high-schooler. What ensue are passionate daytime and late-night trysts.

After her first sexually-charged rendezvous with India, Anamika sees a beautiful young woman at a construction site who moons her. This fascinates



the girl, as she'd always thought that lower-caste women were more conservative than their educated middle-class counterparts. In an unbelievable coincidence, the same person, Rani (real name: Basanti; here, she's Anamika's "queen"), shows up seeking work at the Sharma house, and begins calling Anamika "Babyji." Once she's hired, Rani does the dishes and then massages Anamika's legs. While this is common in South Asia, here it's foreplay. It seems that whomever this Indian Lolita covets reciprocates her affections.

Anamika persuades her parents to let Rani live there (so her husband can't beat her to death) and sleep in her room, supposedly on the floor. They embark on a torrid affair, with the maid sneaking onto her little mistress's bed every night and the parents (mind-numbingly blind at this point) not a bit "suspicious" even when Anamika starts locking her door.

Not content with juggling two older lovers, Anamika seduces her classmate Sheela, who can't

understand how girls can love each other in a sexual way but is curious enough to eventually permit the intimacy. To make sense of these life-changing events, Anamika asks her best friend Vidura's father, Adit, questions about life and sexuality. Attracted to the tomboy vixen young enough to be his daughter, Adit responds but makes inappropriate advances toward her; Anamika is strangely drawn to this sophisticated man and he becomes her confidante.

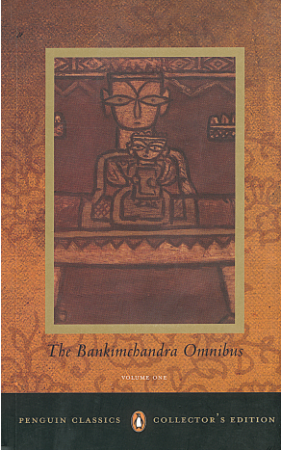
Dawesar depicts teen angst and the taboo surrounding lesbian interludes in a society where homosexuality is not widely accepted. Meanwhile, in this coming-of-age book, which at times devolves into a series of sexual escapades, none of the adults appear overly concerned about sexually manipulating the adolescent Babyji--a lively, likable character to whom everything seems to come a little too easily. For someone raised in a Brahmin household, Anamika pursues her love interests without much of the soul-searching common among many teen lesbians. And though she ponders the inequalities between the middle class and their servants' bridging the gap by encouraging others to treat her "lower-caste lover like a family member" her relationship with Rani seems too pat to be credible. Her budding affair with Sheela is the only plausible thread in the story. *Babyji* deals with important social and sexual topics, but left me wanting more introspection.

Farah Ameen works as an editor in New York City.

BOOKNOTES

**The Bankimchandra Omnibus, Volume I** (*Kapalkundala* translated by Radha Chakravarty; *Bishabriksa* and *Indira* translated by Marian Madden; *Krishnakanta's Will* translated by S. N. Mukherjee, and *Rajani* translated by Sreejata Guha); New Delhi: Penguin India Collector's Edition; 2005; 535 pp. Cover drawing is 'Flight to Egypt' by Jamini Roy.

Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay was born West Bengal in 1939. In 1858, he became the first Indian to earn a BA degree. He served in the Indian Civil Service as Deputy Magistrate and Deputy Collector between 1859 and 1891. Bankimchandra wrote his first novel, *Rajmohan's Wife*, in English. His first Bengali novel *Durgeshnandini* appeared in 1865. He went on to write thirteen more novels. Bankimchandra was the editor of *Bangadarshan*, perhaps the most influential literary magazine of his time. He died in 1894. Often referred to as India's first modern novelist, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay fused the formal, Sanskritized Bengali with the colloquial idioms of the



spoken language to forge a prose that everyone could read. His novels were at once instructive and entertaining. They fall into three genres: historical romances, novels of nationalist fervour, and those reflecting the social conditions in nineteenth-century Bengal. The first volume of this collector's edition brings together five of Bankimchandra's best-known works in English translation: *Kapalkundala*, *Bishabriksa*, *Indira*, *Krishnakanta's Will*, and *Rajani*, the last being the first Indian novel where characters narrate their stories in the first person. The translations have generally been well done, though at times, perhaps to match the original Bengali's meaning and movement closely, the occasional awkward phrasing surfaces: "the protectorless girl," or "smoking from the bubble-bubble" when instead of the Anglo-Indianism the word used could have been 'hukka.' Clearly written explanatory endnotes have been provided which should be invaluable to readers not acquainted with older Bengali customs and culture. All in all, a valuable translation effort, which should bring Bankimchandra to those readers who have not been able to access him because of his 'difficult' language.