

SHORT STORY

Culture

By SYED WALIULLAH
(translated by Asrar Chowdhury)

Seeing that it was pouring rain outside Kamrul Hassan folds his legs under him, sits down, lights a cigarette and says : So you have to understand, this culture thing seems to have a smell that hits you in the nose. And that smell isn't the fragrance of *rajanigandha* or *hasnahena* , but rather like that of limes. And the colour? The colour isn't as lustrous or eye-dazzling like, say, a Basra Rose, sunflower, or the Red China Rose, et cetera, or even of that genre; it is rather very much like the brilliant azure sky on a moonlit night.

Saying this, Kamrul closes his eyes and puffs hard on the cigarette. Today the gathering has failed to pick up steam; due to the sudden rain hardly anybody has shown up. Still, Kamrul is lucky that Russell (Rasul) has turned up. Rasul's name is now Russell because of his frightful crush for the church. And this love doesn't stem from affection for the magnanimity of religion, or from an appreciation of the church's beautiful hand-engravings it stems from the attraction he feels towards female churchgoers. When all the dark and plump female native Christians head for church on Sunday, then Russell--his hair cut short, wearing a clean suit--also hurries to join them like a devotee choked with emotion, and there is never be any exception to this rule. Till now, it hasn't been possible to figure out which one of these large, dark women has tamed him, and he also keeps this issue concealed. According to some, he's still casting an eye around, but hasn't been successful till now, the reason being that in his eyes all of them are pretty; none is less so than the other.

Russell listens to this explanation of culture and remains silent. He always has a terrible yen to listen to big matters, but after listening his heart would tremble in fear. But even though he fears it, he still listens, listens with a studied patience. In fact, he is a veritable mountain of patience.

Kamrul opens his mouth again after a little while, and says: Pascal, the humanist intellectual, said that the history of the world would have been written differently had Cleopatra's nose been a little smaller or a bit larger--Oh! Russell?

-Yes, Russell responds in a low voice

- Do you notice the affinity between culture and Cleopatra's nose?

- No. Russell pauses, then replies in an even lower voice

- This culture thing is so astonishing that if there's even a hair's breadth deviation, it turns into something totally different. Understand?

- My God! Yes. It really is terribly delicate. There is amazement in Russell's eyes and his heart fills up because he has been able to pronounce on something. Kamrul smiles on hearing this, and closes his eyes again. He has finished what he had wanted to say.

The next day is Sunday. Russell is present at the church on time. It would be better to call it a warehouse rather than a church. At its top, a piece of iron looking like a plus sign bore the only sign of Christianity (and even that was a bit crooked).

Yesterday's 'culture' word is still spinning in Russell's head, and making his whole being shiver, and he keeps thinking: My God! How delicate it really is. But that was all--he cannot go beyond that thought. It is as if his mind can't proceed any further, and would suddenly lose itself in thin air. In the meantime, many women are coming in, none of whom looks at him; but today he is too absorbed with culture to even notice whether they are looking at him or not. And yet, repeatedly, through a hundred such cultures, a single thought pokes at a corner of his mind, and which is that he's been coming to this church for such a long time, and what precisely has he gained from all these trips? His only gain has been the display of



the fat padre's teeth stained brown from the smoke of innumerable cigars. But the women, astonishing how many women, but whose teeth have never been on display for him. Not even for a single day. Ah, but let it pass. In other words, although his heart sometimes weeps at the thought, would weep because it can't bear it any more, still, how delicate a things is culture, and suddenly he can't stand that too and is on the verge of something very much like crying. Now Kamrul is a pundit. If Cleopatra's nose... and if the nose of the girl sitting beside the pillar--?

And whatever else it might be, Christianity is not delicate. In fact, it is as hard as iron. Kamrul has said that Bernard Shaw once pronounced that Christianity had become barbaric in the process of converting barbarians into Christians. Shaw was a pundit, which is why he had gotten it right. Not only is the religion itself not delicate, but in fact is a fundamentally hard pyramid of barbarism. If it wasn't so, astonishing, if it wasn't so then how could the hearts of so many women been rendered so hard, so unyielding (as well as so impregnable)? But let's also let that pass, and listen to the padre's sermon. Ah, what Jesus was, there's no arguing. You can't find the likes of him anymore. Doesn't one's eyes well up with tears listening to the stories? Yes, they do, they do, how can they not? And so that evening sitting among the group gathered around Kamrul, Russell can't control himself and bursts into tears. Kamrul, about to launch into a tall tale, suddenly stops, and asks in amazement: What's the matter, Russell? Hey, Russell?

Russell doesn't reply to the question; just wags his finger in the air and while crying seems to be murmuring something to somebody: Today I'll tell, today I'll definitely talk about it.

- Yes, of course you will. You must.

- Yes, I'll definitely talk about it.

- Say it.

At first, Russell is a bit confused. He has to tell, true, but to

whom? But then as he looks at Kamrul's fixed eyes his mind recovers. He pauses for a moment and asks in an unusually thin and meek voice: Shall I say it?

- Say it.

Again he pauses for a while and then in a strange voice makes an admission: I am in love.

But Kamrul explodes in rage when he hears about love. Love? What is love? Love is a poison made of Endrin and Genesin: love awakes in the minds of Man from their admixture; and therefore, love is lethal. And besides, love for whom, for those rodents? They are rats, absolutely vile! Can't you see how their dark skins glitter?

Russell can't go on anymore. He collapses into tears, and the evening gathering seems to become muddled with his weeping. When it comes time to leave, Kamrul talks with him, says something in a low voice. Russell replies:

- The one with the curly hair.

- Come on, what's the name?

Kamrul seethes.

But everything has its limits. Without limits, everything else is unbearable. This is why this time Russell rebels, and screams with explosive eyes--(Kamrul is worried about what he is going to say): I don't know.

Kamrul lets go of his shoulders and says softly: Fine.

The next day Kamrul explodes again:

- The one with the curly hair on her head! That? Russell is unmoved.

- Russell, I'm telling you, this is not good. Either you have to take leave of us, or you have to put a stop to your affection for that pumpkin-faced rat.

Again, Russell is silent. But Miah Hesabuddin takes his side. In a melting, liquid voice he starts to give Kamrul advice on love's actual form. He talks about the transformation wrought on the suitor and the beloved. He goes on to say that the bridge over which the suitor and the beloved cross, i.e., love, Russell is now standing on that very bridge of love, and that in such a crisis moment there's the possibility of a devastating consequence if Russell is further hounded. Therefore that woman with the curly hair--

- That pumpkin-faced muskrat? Russell!

Russell bursts into tears again.

- Rascal! Kamrul hisses between his teeth.

But Russell is a human being and Kamrul is also a human being, and humans do feel affection for each other. Which is why, before he leaves, Kamrul puts a hand on Russell's shoulder and says in a low voice:

- All right, let me see what I can do.

The next day Kamrul rages again. He will see to the matter, but how to go about it? There is no way to get introduced with that female muskrat, not directly at least. Miah Hesabuddin attempt to

console him, Russell keeps on weeping, and in the end Kamrul presses Russell's shoulder gently before he leaves. And the next morning, Kamrul rages again, utters imprecations a few times while sipping his tea, but in the end he, clamping his hat on his head and attired in white shirt and trousers, starts for the padre's house. The face beneath the hat was frightening, though.

All the women are orphans (the very thought tears at Kamrul's inside). They work in a missionary driving school and live in the adjacent boarding house. The priest's residence is also very near. However, he is not at all unaware about the fact that between these two lies Matron's house. His mind begins to soften. If this didn't work, what else could be done? The poor wretch, weeping and sobbling and carrying on every day! That is such an innocent fellow! And though he may have something cracked in his head, one has to feel sorry for the man.

A field. At the edge of the field there's a small jungle. The space is full of various types of bushes and trees, and over on the other side is their boarding house and the priest's residence. One can see the red tiles between the trees. There the road curves by the side of the jungle in a crescent shape. Kamrul first gazes at the red tiles, then at the road ahead, slowing down his pace, and does a final rehearsal on how he would put the matter to the padre, while muttering to himself, ah, but what a poor fellow, really what a poor fellow!

But he cannot go further, cannot think. Suddenly he comes to a stop by a bush by the side of the road, thunder struck. He stands still and looks at it. A pair of eyes can be seen inside the bush and that pair of eyes were none other than those of Russell's. It is possible that Russell is also startled at the thought of being caught, and thus is frozen in place, unable to move an inch. Slowly, gradually Kamrul's two eyes start to become explosive. Who knows whether the Kamrul's eyes turn red or blue but he silently looks at the eyes floating eyes in the bushes very well--he gazes at those eyes for long moments, then turns around and marches away with his two feet, not looking anywhere, the face beneath the hat even more frightful.

In his heart, he also feels somewhat fearful. God only knows what Russell is going to do. In the end, he shocks Kamrul by not coming to the evening's gathering, doesn't not come at all. He doesn't come that day, he does not make an appearance the following day; in fact, he doesn't come at all. Kamrul opines, ah, the poor fellow, the poor fellow is been terribly embarrassed. Then he shuts up.

In the end, Kamrul begins to have some respect for him. One evening amidst a spectacular gathering he lights a cigarette and keeps his eyes closed for a while. It could be that in the distance Amjad has started to play Indian classical music, and so he is listening intently. But at that very moment when Amjad, his face contorted, is about to loose off a note, Kamrul opens his eyes, he opens his eyes and says, the boy had a little bit of culture.

- Who?

- That rascal. Russell. It seems the boy had some culture. None of them knew anything, nor had they been provided with any explanation, about his culture, and so nobody said anything, and Kamrul too refused to elaborate on it.

Amjad contorts his face again and lets out a loud wail.

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TRAVEL WRITING

In the Land of No Worries

Part-I

FAKRUL ALAM

Australian Salute

My attention was attracted by it almost as soon as I stepped out of Sydney airport and pretty soon I was doing it too--the Australian salute! The gesture consists of the fingers of your hand raised half voluntarily as if to swat away something occupying facial space and upsetting one's mental equilibrium, but in the end the movement is obviously nothing more threatening than a half-hearted attempt to brush away the pesky, ubiquitous Australian fly. Indeed, I now realize I had seen it often in cricket broadcasts: Big Tony Greig, it is obvious, was doing it in the sidelines, while commentating, as was modestly built Rickie Ponting while taking guard, or brawny Bret Lee when darting in to bowl his lightning-quick balls. And my wife and I were going to do it again and again the three weeks we spent in Down Under Land whether in and around the cities of Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne, or Brisbane, where we were to spend 21 pleasure-filled "high" Australian summer (late December to early January) days!

The Australian salute! I was to see it in beaches, on mountains, outside houses as well as shopping malls, everywhere! It is almost an instinctive gesture, but also a conscious one, telling you that no Australian will attempt to hurt even so horrid, persistent, and irritating a thing such as the common fly. As a young boy growing up not so far away from the drains of old Dhaka, I had been trained to repel it by violent means, as an undergraduate at the University of Dhaka I had pondered the profound realization of the cruelty of nature reflected in Shakespeare's unforgettable lines ("As flies to wanton boys are we to the Gods, they kill us for their sport"), but here in Australia I was to find out that the aggressive fly always has its way; Australians will not hurt it or "apply desperate physic" as some other Shakespearean somebody had said somewhere. And that is why in Australia I saw wild birds stroll listlessly or indifferently by or swans swim languidly or daintily past Man, not bothered and secure in the knowledge that He had never used a boomerang or a gun to destroy him for quite some time now.

Brisbane River

From the air, as our plane descended on its flight path to Australia's third largest and economically vibrant city, I could see clearly that at least aerially the most attractive thing about it was the meandering Brisbane River, around whose banks it had obviously grown, and which wound its way at a leisurely pace into Brisbane Bay.

First impressions are often not wrong. The best thing about Brisbane, it seems to me, is its river and the City Cat service from which one can view it perfectly, the service being part of TRANSLink, the efficient, sensible, user-friendly public transport system of the city. City Cat, in fact, is a ferry service, that will take you all the way from the University of Queensland campus at one end of the city, through downtown Brisbane and South Bank,



Photo by author

the eye-catching cultural complex, to Bretts Wharf, where one can begin to see the ships in the Bay. It is cheap too (a daily ticket that also allows you to use the buses and city trains cost only five Australian dollars and let's note in passing that approximately 50 taka will buy you the country's dollar). One memorable evening we took the one hour ride from one end, the University of Queensland landing station, to another, where the harbor is on view. When we started the sun was beginning to set splendidly and by the time we had reached the harbor it had disappeared smoothly; as we went back, downtown skyscraper lights glowed and wowed the eyes.

One function of travel, at least for a Bangladeshi, is to remind him how drab and dismal things have been made to be at home. Every time I took the City Cat thus, I thought bitterly of our Government and City fathers, for not too long ago, BTV featured with great fanfare the opening of a city ferry service from Ashulia to Sadarghat, which was eventually to encircle Dhaka city and provide commuters comfort and an easy way of crisscrossing the city. Alas, the promised service never outlived inaugural day and the ferry disappeared as no doubt did the lacs of taka sanctioned for the scheme. Civic responsibility over the decades has made Brisbane the very livable city it appears to be; uncivil perspectives, the politician's hypocrisy, and irresponsible governance has made Dhaka the dysfunctional city it now is, and the more is the pity!

Canberra

We drove into Canberra on a hot, still, sky-blue day. The streets were absolutely empty because these were the New Year holidays, and since we were lost we desperately needed to stop and take directions from somebody to reach our destination. That, in the end, involved driving for miles, for in this purpose-built federal capital of sparsely populated Australia, on such days you will see almost as many people on the streets as you will wild kangaroos and birds!

Canberra, of course, is the capital city of Australia, built in a valley, and surrounded by modest-sized mountains. As befitting the capital of a proud and prosperous country, it has an impressively designed and

relatively newly built Parliament, a must-see old Parliamentary building now converted into a museum and a portrait gallery, and the delightful Australian National Museum.

The Parliament complex is made distinctive by its exquisite granite Aboriginal mosaic and ceremonial pool, the spacious marble Great Verandah that functions as the main public entrance, the eucalyptus tree-like pillars of the foyer, the delicately crafted panels, the ceremonial Great Hall which our guide told us can be rented out by private groups (imagine Kahn's centerpiece in Sher-E-Bangla Nagar being rented out!), the elaborately woven tapestry imitating an eucalyptus forest dominating it, and the two Chambers where Westminster-style debates take place (unlike the farce carried out year after year in the place that we have learned to ignore!). The old Parliamentary Building preserves Australia's political history in loving detail (no distortion, occlusion, and repression here!). The library of the Old Parliament has been converted into the National Portrait Gallery, modeled after the one in London, but more eclectic in its collections. But the best thing I saw in Canberra was the National Museum, especially the part of it displaying in great and fascinating detail the rich and fascinating culture of Australia's first people, the Aboriginals. I consider myself especially fortunate in visiting it at a time when it had on show some brilliant and unique works by contemporary Australian aboriginal artists, eloquent testaments of the colorful, rhythmic and vibrant ways in which they viewed their reality.

Didgeridoo

We first heard it as we walked on the sidewalks close to the Sydney Harbour on the second day of our trip: two big, sprawling-bellied aboriginal artists playing this unusually long instrument sounding like no other musical instrument that you have heard: insistent, solemn, loud, mesmerizing, *alive* ! It is as if the street musicians were proclaiming through their fascinating instrument that the first people of the country were not to be denied and must be heard.

I was able to examine and see elaborate collections of didgeridoos later not only in the Australian National Museum and the Queensland National Museum but also in a shop selling Australian gift items in downtown Brisbane. There are many such shops in the cities we visited and I found them to be just right for gift shopping: containing all sorts of likeable items, including some fairly inexpensive one, coasters done in aboriginal art motifs, boomerangs, T-shirts, etc. What would budget-conscious tourists like us do without such shops!

Emerald Lake

The last stop in the ride we took on Puffin' Billy, the name of the nineteenth-century steam train that huffs and puffs its way in what I think is the suburb of Belgrave just outside Melbourne, emitting coal dust in the face of the excited tourists who are now its only passengers, moving through stations that have been rebuilt to look like the ones of yore, past hand-waving car-drivers, at least one of whom we kept meeting because he was bent on delighting his grandchildren who were on the train with us. With us on board in our car was the excited attendant: like everyone else running Puffin' Billy, he was a volunteer and in it because of the thrill of preserving a Melbourne tradition.

As for the lake itself, it was small but just as its name

announced: emerald green and beautiful. There were innumerable grey swans on it, and for a moment I fancied I was on Swan Lake, and the swans were floating gracefully into the distance to the invisible but tranquil tune of a Tchaikovsky!

Footie

As I traveled across Australia, it became obvious to me that it was not cricket that obsessed this sport-loving nation as one would have thought, especially if one is from a cricket-obsessed country oneself, but footie (Australian football, also called footy). It is not like soccer or the football that we love, nor like rugby or American football, though it seems like a cross between these last two games.

I kept glimpsing the game in my travels: in the field next to the house where I stayed in Brisbane, on the tube, on billboards and in newspaper sports sections, it fascinated me: it's more free-flowing and less intimidating than American football (none of those man-mountains or tank-like gear on view!), less public-schoolish but more combative than rugby. The games nation play reveal a lot about a nation's psyche; Australian football confirms to me that the nation's mindset can be located between England and Wales (where rugby originated) and the USA (American football also uses a similar-looking ball and field): Australians have managed to carve out their own unique space between their pommie ancestors and their domineering cousins in North America.

Gabba

There were three public spaces in American that I had dreamed about going to before I entered the country: the Sydney Opera House, the Melbourne Cricket Stadium or MCG, and the Australian Open tennis stadium. In the end I managed only to do a guided tour of the Opera House, but I also saw a cricket match in the Gabba, or the Brisbane Cricket Stadium. And although the match I saw was not part of a test match (the only form of cricket worth watching for the purist) or a one-day one (the Aussie invention which the philistines have embraced) but the gimmicky twenty-twenty version, I was thrilled that I had got the opportunity to view the match..

The match we saw was between the Aussies and South Africa. The game was not very interesting; the Australian team was without Bret Lee, Glen McGrath, and Shane Warne and yet it managed to beat the South Africans easily. The stars of the game were Damien Martyn and Andrew Symonds, who between them manage to pommel the South African attack.

The interesting aspect of the evening for me, however, was the Gabba atmosphere. I can say, in fact, that it literally rained empty beer paper glasses and left-over beer at one point. I was also part of Mexican waves and witness to the high-spirited and nonstop sledging of the South Africans from the galleries. It was good to be part of the event where everyone was excited and yet the excitement was wonderfully contained by the elaborate security arrangements made by the stadium management and the Brisbane police. Equally impressive is the transport arrangements made by TRANSLink so that you can go the game and return from it without any hassles or waste of time.

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Dhaka Hanky-Panky

FAKIR MOWLA

A verandah with mosquitoes
the kitchen next door
the song of the steaming wok--
"little bastards" you say
playing hot footsie--
the waiter glides in
lays down shrimp curry
mindful not to
look down her cleavage
you'll have to tip him good

Fast food shingaras
corner stops
no-loo hideaways
upper-storey ice-creams
gossipy glass-fronted
hole-in-walls, internet
cafes, once even a
'biryani palace'
mall burgers
run a finger
inside her upper arm
quarter-sleeve blouse
the skin dipping
so
slightly
the bruised hours slip by
a wan winter sun
drizzles light
brittle days and leaves fall
she fishes out her pack
you shuffle NGO papers--
'poverty reduced by 9 percent...
absolute number of poor the same'--
the smoke clings to walls
four teens enter
their T-shirts blaring

Inside the dark room
she bends
to pick up
her crumpled Kerala sari
says in coolly licit tones
(she does detest intensity so!)
"Darling, did you
see Pervaz at the far
corner table today?"
"Was that him?"
"Yes."--next door
children wail
and old men fall backwards
as the sun sets--
"That woman with him..."
"Yes," you say, "pretty lady."
"And not," she smiles
mishki achaar on lips
"his wife."
"Shhh," you smile back
"my dear, not too loud
else your husband might
overhear..."

Fakir Mowla studies in the United States.

