

SHORT STORY

The Jungle Major*

Temsula Ao

In the predawn warmth of togetherness, they made love again with the fervour of lovers meeting after a long absence. They were indeed meeting after a lapse of about five months, but lovers would be a misnomer to describe these two. They were a most mismatched couple. When their marriage was first announced in the village, people gaped in wonder at the sheer improbability of this match. The girl's father was soundly berated by his clansmen: Why was he condemning his beautiful daughter to life with such a man.

The relatives', as well as the general public's, indignation over the proposed marriage was due to the immense disparity between not only the outward appearances but also the family positions of the girl and her betrothed. The man was short, dark and had buck teeth. He was a mere driver who was employed by a rich man in town to drive a one-ton vehicle. He could speak some Hindi and a smattering of English, and came from a minor clan in the village.

But the woman? Ah! She was quite another story! She was fair, slim and possessed of the most charming smile. Not only that, she came from a good family and belonged to a major clan. Her elder brother was studying in the engineering college; her sister was married to a Dobhashi in Mokokchung. It was rumoured that this beauty had had a string of suitors who courted her but every single one of them eventually drifted away to marry some other village girl much inferior to her in many ways. The villagers were amazed that any sane man would reject such a comely girl and marry dowdy-looking 'village' girls.

But then there it was, the apparent mismatch was on, and the marriage took place in due course. The couple moved to a house of their own, and seemed to be leading a normal life. The man, whose name was Punaba, earned enough to keep his wife in relative comfort. The woman, who was called Khatila, seemed happy and content as a housewife. Many years passed, but the couple did not have any children. At first the villagers did not pay much attention to this fact. But soon rumours began to circulate: he was either impotent or sterile; or the woman was barren. Just as the initial announcement of their marriage had produced adverse reactions, now their childless state became the subject of many lewd comments and absurd speculations.

All through this period, the couple ignored the snide remarks and appeared to be totally absorbed in each other and their own household. Punaba went on regular trips to nearby villages and after collecting the fares, would go to Mokokchung to give the money to his boss and to receive his salary. Khatila cultivated a small field on the outskirts of the village and grew some vegetables in her kitchen garden. Married life seemed to suit her; her beauty remained as fresh as ever.

It was after a year or so of Khatila's marriage that the entire land was plunged them into a struggle, which many did not even understand. This particular village also became a part of the network, which kept the underground outfit supplied with information, food and occasional arms. The subject of independence became public talk; young people were eager to liberate their homeland from 'foreign' rule. Some actually disappeared from the village and their names henceforth were spoken only in whispers. Skirmishes were taking place close to the village and the atmosphere within the village became one of fear and mutual suspicion. It seemed that a pall had descended upon the entire land.

Some villages to which the underground leaders belonged were severely punished. The houses were ransacked by the security forces, the grain in their barns was burnt and the people themselves



artwork by temsula ao

were herded inside areas fenced in by bamboo stockades. This form of group incarceration was the infamous 'grouping' of villages which the Nagas hated and dreaded even more than bullets. Numerous stories proliferated of women being molested by the security forces and the obstinate ones who refused to give information being severely beaten. But so far, Khatila's village was not touched by any of these horrors as none of their boys who joined the underground movement was of any importance in the eyes of the government.

One day, Punaba did not return from his usual trip but Khatila did not seem unduly worried by this. A month passed and then another, but there was no sign of this quiet man. When asked about his absence, Khatila replied that he was plying his business in Mokukchung. Before long, however, the village grapevine brought news that their very own Punaba had joined the underground army. It was also reported that strange people visited Khatila with provisions when the adults were away in their fields and disappeared before their return. She became more reclusive and her visits to her parents' home also became less frequent than before.

Not long after the news of Punaba joining the underground army reached the authorities, the government forces came to the village and began questioning the villagers about him. Even Khatila was summoned and asked where her husband was. She replied that she did not know and she did not care. Judging from the description of the man given by the gaonbura, the officer concluded that a beautiful woman like her did not care about a man like Punaba. So they went away after threatening the villagers; they even cautioned Khatila that if she was lying to them, she would be punished. "We know how to deal with women like you," the officer said lasciviously. In the evening some of the village elders came to her hut and asked her to send word to Punaba not to visit her. Khatila meekly replied, "I shall try." She knew that her husband would surely come to know about the incident through the underground grapevine. But she had to play the part of a dutiful woman because she knew that she could not afford

to antagonize the village authorities in any way.

It was not long before the oppressive measures adopted by the army to quell the rebellion backfired and even those villages, which were till now not directly involved in the conflict, became sympathetic towards the underground forces. By this time, Punaba's village became one of the main conduits for supplies and information to them. Punaba sent messengers to Khatila regularly and she knew all that was going on in the underground outfit that her husband was now heading. He rapidly rose in rank and after only three years of service, was made a captain in the rebel army. During these years he even managed to visit his wife several times, even though the visits were short. While he was in the village, lookouts would be posted at strategic points to note the movements of the other army. This was one such visit when Punaba had come to see his wife

after a gap of five months and recovering from the most recent bullet wound on his right arm. The restful stay with his wife after the arduous activities of underground life seemed to be doing wonders for Punaba; he felt healthy and happy for the first time in many months. But all that was too soon to be over. That morning, before they could get up from the bed exhausted from the morning's bout of ardent lovemaking, urgent thumps on the bamboo walls were heard, with the whispered warning, "Sir, sir, wake up. The army is coming. Our sentries fell asleep. Run away, sir." Punaba's orderly joined in, "Sir, throw your gun and uniform to me and I will wait for you on the northern bank of the third well." The voices then melted away.

Khatila was in a quandary: what should she do? She could hear their voices and the sound of their footsteps on the path leading to their house. For Punaba trying to escape now was out of the question; he would be immediately spotted and shot down like a dog. He would never surrender and their small thatch house had no hiding place. She bundled up his uniform and gun in a sack and threw it down to the orderly who grabbed it and vanished into the jungle. Next, she fished out some old clothes and ordered him to get into them; then she smeared his face, hands and feet with ash from the hearth, and began shouting at him, "You no good loafer, what were you doing all day yesterday? There is no water in the house. Run to the well immediately or you will rue the day you were born." At the same time she emptied all the water containers through the bamboo platform at the back. By the time the soldiers reached her house, she was loading the water-carrying basket with the empty containers and showering more abuses at the hapless servant. Someone thumped on the door but Khatila continued with her tirade. When there was another loud thump she shouted, "Who is it now? Don't you see what I am doing?" Taking her own time she opened the door. "What do you want?" she growled at the young captain who looked somewhat surprised at her manner. Whereas he had expected to see a cowering woman, he was confronted by a disheveled but defiant

person who seemed to be utterly oblivious to any danger. He stood there in confusion; surely the intelligence report was right; that Punaba had come to the village on his periodical visits to his wife and this was his house. But where was he? He could not have escaped through the tight cordon that was put in place by his boys.

Just when he decided to affect a sterner stance, Khatila turned her back on him and began to shout again, "Hey, where is that lazy so and so? Haven't you gone yet?" The servant, with the water-carrying basket on his head, proceeded towards the front door. The young captain tried to stop him but Khatila was prepared for this; she said, "Sahib, no use talking to him, he cannot talk. Besides, don't you see there is no water in the house? What do you want with a servant?" So saying, she gave a shove to Punaba with some more choice abuses and he hurried out onto the path leading to the third well. Soon he and his small party vanished into the jungle and out of the cordon set up by the soldiers. The captain did not actually have a clear idea about the person they were looking for, except for the fact that the woman's husband was the wanted man and this house was the target of the search. Watching the retreating back of the ungainly 'servant' he thought, surely he could not be that person. The young and inexperienced army officer did not realize that the beautiful but simple village woman had thus foiled a meticulously planned 'operation' of the mighty Indian army and that a prized quarry had simply walked away to freedom.

Alone in the house now, she assumed another pose, asking the captain coyly whether he would like some tea; she could get that much water from her neighbour. The officer was temporarily dazzled by Khatila's beauty and would have sat down for tea, but his JCO firmly reminded him, "Sir, aor bohut gharka talasi baki hai, hame chalna hai." (Sir, there are many more houses to search. We have to move now.) Though irritated, he said "Thik hai, chalo" (All right, let's go.) Reluctantly he led the search party away from the house. Only after the entire search party left the village could Khatila relax and she was never more grateful than on that particular morning for the ugliness of her husband which had saved not only them but the entire village. Had he been killed or captured that morning the entire village would have been punished for harbouring a notorious rebel and not informing the government forces about his presence in the village. But thanks to the audacity of Khatila's ploy, the entire village was saved from such a fate.

Meanwhile the struggle between the rebels and underground forces continued. So did Punaba's periodic visits to see his wife. It was never discovered whether one of their own villagers informed the authorities or the information was supplied by someone else. He continued to serve in the outfit for some three more years and was promoted to the rank of major in the underground army. When a general ceasefire was announced, Khatila persuaded Punaba to come overground and be with her. She told him that life was becoming too lonesome without him. It also happened to be the period when the government was trying to rehabilitate the 'surrendered' cadres of the underground army, and Punaba was given a job in the State Transport Department as a mechanic and was posted at Mokokchung.

Years later, the real story behind this 'exploit' of Punaba, the jungle major, soon became the favourite subject whenever friends dropped in to share a drink in the evenings. Every time the story was recounted, Punaba would ask his wife playfully, "Aren't you glad that your jungle major is so ugly?" and equally playfully she would answer, "So, where is the water I sent you to fetch that day?"

*This story has been abridged and taken from *These Hills Called Home* by Temsula Ao, reviewed below.

Book Reviews

Summer Romance

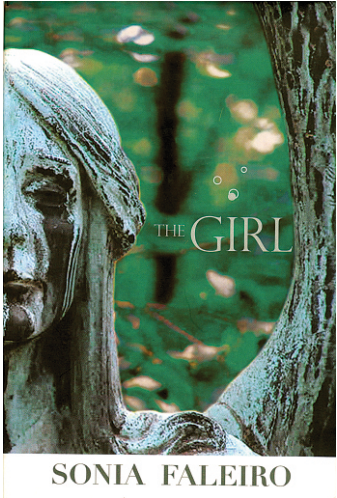
NUZHAT AMIN MANNAN

The Girl by Sonia Faleiro (hb); Delhi: Penguin Books India; 2006; pp. 124; Rs. 250.

One would imagine that one could breeze through a 124-page novel and get a quick review job done in a jiffy. I was able to do neither. I stumbled from page to page. The novel was an odd one with great lines snuggling next to flat, puerile ones. Here were passages dexterously done and then there were more that were utterly uninspiring! So, I read this short novel with a great deal of perplexity and chewed on my pencil end - witless on how to do a just review. Every time I wanted to critique the 'breathlessness' Faleiro writes with, I stopped, admiring the sensuality of the terrain or atmosphere she was able to conjure. Every time I wanted to commend an un-nameable charm that this first novel of hers had, I stopped, feeling irked that she had not given the novel more unity. It could have been something had that been given.

Never have I been more misled by what a blurb says. Based on the blurb, I expected a love triangle of a girl and two men "who are achingly curious to discover what made her give up her life to the sea." It promised a "tender and disquieting story about love and its infinite capacity for betrayal." Even though I didn't exactly feel I could warm up to a story that had love triangles, deaths in the sea and diary- ridden revelations--I was still in an expectant frame of mind, wondering what the book would be able to unfold "about hope so powerful that it negates reality and opens the doors to a future that is never to be." *The Girl* is not a "disquieting love story"; it is a disorienting one. There are no betrayals except what the reader might feel. And finally, I "achingly" failed to see how the girl's self-willed death could become a symbol of "hope," powerful or weak.

Luke is the narrator for the most part with bits from the girl's diary thrown in, separated by italics. The strength of this novel is of course, the girl and Luke's relationship which is done artfully.



It could have been a "tender" love story but that too is foiled by a weakly managed love triangle. The girl and local shopkeeper Simon's relationship seems to have come as an after-thought. Simon and his friends make an eclectic bunch of *fashionistas*. One of them sports a red corduroy and baby-blue sneakers, another capers in black-and-white checked shirt with matching pants and a green felt beret. Simon wears black drainpipes, a pale pink scarf and a silk shirt. The deplorable fashion sense aside, I think, Simon -who "couldn't handle the girl and was afraid of [his mother] Mama Lola"--is a buffoon whom Faleiro is audaciously asking us to take seriously as the man in a love triangle. When Luke has gone off, the girl asserts that Luke had given her "life," which makes Mama Lola retort back in indignation. Her son responds to the situation by not paying attention to this small talk: "He saw himself sitting in a five-star hotel sipping a cold, pink drink through a straw. Sucking on a cherry, his tongue reluctant to shred this unexpected treat. Nice."

Imagine my indignation, when Father Costa, "a young man in a hurry to do God's work," who has potential to be a member of the triangle, simply disappears from the story and the text without cause or reason or explanation. So even though women feel uneasy around this priest, even though he has searching green eyes and there is after-Mass gossip and rumours about him, it

is Simon not Father Costa who gets to be the romantic hero!

I had settled for the fact that this was going to be a plain story about heartache. Boy meets girl, they spend a couple of nights together, boy leaves, the girl mopes...all that is understandable. If that had driven her to the sea ...that would have made sense too. But Faleiro has other plans. After a catatonic fit in the abandoned Pereira-Costa home the author has the girl trying to get back to her life. Faleiro had a chance of making the girl the symbol of 'hope' here, but that opportunity is missed. The love triangle is supplanted by stories of the girl's isolation, madness, losses and deaths, her mother's car accident, her grandmother's death, her grandfather's death, her unborn child, her self-lacerations, her torpor, her *Wuthering Height*-esque anguish, her demons and her sadness.

The most bizarre twist must be the symbolic weight placed on the girl by Luke, the man who abandons her and returns after her death to read her diary and to claim the house the girl has bequeathed to him. The girl catapults into Everyman who has ever suffered the rubs of tragedy. "To be all she was worth, which was so much more than you or me or all our dreams together. The girl was our hope. The collective hope of all those in Azul who knew her or wanted to be her." Melodious as this sounds, this is rant.

I couldn't make out what the genre was. Was it feminist gothic, existential romance, a melodrama with a psychological twist, a woman's crisis wrapped around a thriller-tragedy, an absurdist fusion? Whatever it is, Faleiro uses language felicitously. There are stretches of enchanting descriptions of Azul: "The garden was thick with bushes of glowing pink and red bougainvillea and trees dripping hard yellow mangoes to the ground below. The woods that stretched across Azul were scented with drops of coconut milk and shrouded with the pine aroma of secrets." There are deft sketches of life here and there. Consider this one when the girl's house was put up for sale: "How many honeymooners or

families, or young lovers who would want to run up these slippery blue stairs. All dripping cold, yelling for the last remaining dry towels, just that little bit drunk from too many beers on the beach, warm and happy..."

The delicious feel for life is thwarted with a touch of sentimental gothic as the same passage ends "how many of those people would want to sleep in a bedroom that had communed with the dead?" A passage with Faleiro's signature: "I carried with me the stickiness of sap and the bubbling heat of fresh toddy. I ran down the beach, my head buzzing with multiple flavours of a giant bowl overflowing with fruit: hard, black grapes, fresh peaches, small sweet raspberries, a watermelon so big I could dunk my head in the wetness of its scooped-out heart...And I should have known that the hot-cream odour of self-satisfaction that trailed him everywhere would not wash away with salt water or soap or the fervour of a woman in love. His long artist's fingers, the soft red skin behind ears pierced with silver, the bump of thighs muscled by a lifetime of swift escapes...all exuded that almost imperceptible scent of careless fascination for change."

I was almost incredulous that one who could write with such intensity could be capable of writing strange things like: "exaggerated coconut trees," "minute specks of nobodiness," "embroidered envelopes," "blue clouds of moonson."

The story in conclusion is about grief for losses, real and imagined. It is a summer romance about things that will not last. *The Girl* will elicit comparisons with Arundhati Roy's first novel *The God of Small Things*. Faleiro takes us to a similar topography, to "verdant hill where peaks spread like twin palms across the village...amidst a flat green field studded with custard apple trees and completed with jasmines, [where] sleeps a deserted temple inlaid with gold" but she leaves us there floundering with a weirdly disjointed story.

Nuzhat Amin Mannan teaches English at Dhaka University.

Revolution in the Naga psyche

FARHAD AHMED

These Hills Called Home: Stories from a war zone by Temsula Ao; Delhi: Penguin Books India in association with Zubaan Books; 2006; 147 pp.; Rs. 175

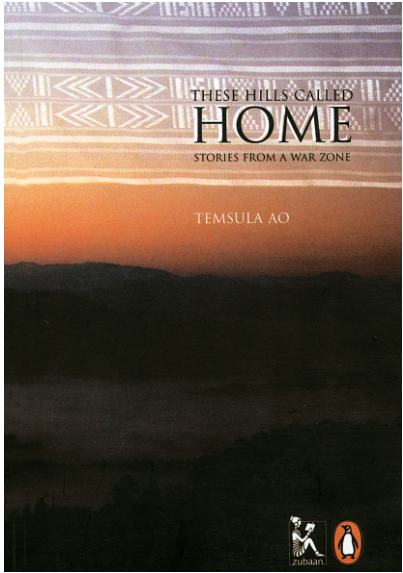
To paraphrase a line from one notable review of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, here is news from a relatively neglected region--at least as far as narratives in English is concerned.

It is a book of ten short stories by Temsula Ao, who teaches in the department of English at North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, and has published four collections of poetry and a book titled *Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*. She has also written on the oral tradition, folk songs, myths and cultural traditions of the Ao Nagas in various journals.

In her introduction titled 'Lest We Forget' the author says that two objectives impelled her to write and publish these stories. One is specific and historical: a depiction of how the brutal repression that was visited upon the Nagas by the Indian army during the abortive Naga war of independence that started "in the early fifties of the last century...re-structured or even 'revolutionized' the Naga psyche." The second objective is far more general and amorphous, and one which many a culture faces in this globalized age: An attempt to preserve on paper a now vanishing, "traditional Naga way of life, which, even for our own youngsters today, is increasingly becoming irrelevant in the face of 'progress' and 'development.'"

Therefore it comes as no surprise that the stories, unlike the current output from Bangladesh, depict rural life and are set in villages. With perhaps one major difference, these villages have a far more pronounced jungle setting. Unlike in vastly deforested Bangladesh, in these stories villages are always at the edge of forests, and the jungle shown in many ways to have a profound influence on the lives of the Naga folk. No doubt this age-old influence will die out over time, as the author laments, something which is increasingly evident in the changing ways of our own 'tribal' people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, with whom there are many parallels in these stories.

All of the stories in this volume are successful in conveying the above dual



aspects, and have been written with an enviable economy of expression. Also, despite the unremitting character of the violence portrayed in the stories, all of them have warmth and some of them, like the one reprinted above, even a goodly slice of humour. The village life, the Nagas, the violence visited upon them, the forest, the Indian army, all have been evoked vividly in a language whose simple tonalities--chosen deliberately and wisely--reflect the contents and themes of such an existence. To Bangladeshis, a society whose traditional village way of life is also disappearing under the onslaught of 'modernity,' who live across the border from the Nagas, who have fought their own war of independence and have had had to undergo brutalities of their own, and who then have also become silent witnesses to excesses in their own 'tribal' areas, these stories should have complex echoes.

There are proofing mistakes, but none too obtrusive to deter from a good read. The reviewer was surprised to note that none of the stories here are translations, but in fact were written originally in English. This fact alone goes a long way in dispelling the myth of 'tribal' backwardness and 'underdeveloped consciousness' that one finds in the subcontinent's metropolises. One wishes the author well, and certainly hopes that she continues to write.

Farhad Ahmed is a free-lance editor/translator.

Cold War

UTPAL MAAN
(translated by Siddiqui Rahman)

Your body no longer smells like a woman's
Train-bus warfare, work, tired, sweaty

A cloudy day amid June rain
Yet the office claims you, traffic jam

Gunpowder spreads a false perfume in the air
Disheveled hair. Evenings you put away the toys

Newspapers, magazines, household chores
Only I do not have your attention

An angry man, I bury my resentments deep
Suspicions fueled by you coming home late

I become a tiger, claws retracted in paws
No talking, turn over on my side, cold body on nails...

Siddiqui Rahman is a schoolteacher.