

SHORT STORY

The Year of Return Part II

KAZI ANIS AHMED

Six months went by since Badshah had solved my problem. I had seen little of him for weeks. I had taken a trip to Los Angeles to see my daughter, who was growing up with aching rapidity. I quarreled with my ex-wife about reducing my obligations. I thought of bringing Badshah over to solve this problem, and chuckled at my own joke as I drove away from Crenshaw—it was inevitable that my ex-wife would live there. When I mentioned the riots or crime, she lectured me about the vibrant culture of that place, all the music and the clubs, and reminded me of the risks of living in Dhaka. When I came back, Badshah called me out to the Emerald Lodge. The room was familiar, but the décor more stark. No drinks on the table, no mood lighting, no smiling girl in sight. The curtain, looking cheaper in the glare of neon overheads, moved imperceptibly from the blowing air-conditioner. Badshah himself looked preoccupied. "Is everything alright, Badshah?" I asked, sensing that it was not. "No, I have some troubles," he said grimly. "But you are the great trouble-shooter," I said in a feeble attempt to make things light. "I need your help, Andalib," said Badshah, looking at me with no shred of humor in his eyes. I was stunned. "My help? What could I possibly do for you?" "I need money," said Badshah briskly, as if he had no time to waste. "How much?" "One crore," he said, unblinkingly. "Give it to me as a loan," he said, after a pause, leaning back into his sofa, a ghastly green affair with large

wild flower prints. Why had I never noticed before how ugly this room was? I felt a sudden churn in my stomach, and then my throat went completely dry. I looked around for a drink of water. Badshah must have seen the color drain from my face. He walked over to the writing table to pour a glass of water for me from the decanter. Handing it to me he said, "You must have at least a crore left from the sale of the house. Surely, you're not going to ignore me in my time of need?"

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"I told you, don't get too close to him," said Shamim. "You are the one who introduced me to him again," I said churlishly. "Yes, but I didn't tell you to go whoring with him!" I did what people do in these situations. I began to avoid Badshah. I asked for time. I tried to explain with only a shred a of truth that my wife had drained me of most of the proceedings from the sale in child support and alimony. I scheduled work trips which I could have assigned to subordinates. I took my mother to Bangkok for a check up, and stayed longer than we had to. Then Badshah got hold of me one day and said, in a tone I had never heard before, "I am beginning to feel insulted. Please don't insult me. Meet me at the Lodge tonight and don't come empty-handed." I thought of telling Shamim where and when I'd be meeting Badshah, in case I didn't come back. Then I laughed at my own sense of drama. This time Badshah was in a much better mood than when we had last met. I felt greatly relieved not only to see drinks on the table, but especially to see one of the



artwork by saabyasachi hazra

nubile hostesses flit in and out with chips and an ice bucket with only tongs, no picks. I reassured myself with sightings of other people in the lobby; a cleaner in the corridor. "Have you been avoiding me, Andalib?" Badshah asked with a smile that hovered in some enigmatic space between affability and threat. My sense of ease evaporated just as quickly; I repeated the ineffectual excuses with which I had tried to fend him off all these months. "I know you have the money," Badshah said with discomforting certainty. "I can't understand why you won't give it to me. Perhaps you don't believe me when I say it'll be a loan. I'll even return it with interest." "It's a lot of money," I said dully. "Of course it's a lot of money. I wouldn't have to ask you if I didn't need so much. You think I like asking a friend?" "Are we really friends?" I asked with sudden courage. "I thought we were real friends when you guys took off for America, England, Canada, and never wrote me a letter. Never sent me even a five-pence postcard. Until then I used to think we were friends. I couldn't get a five-minute appointment with Shamim when I was starting out. But, he found me alright when he needed me. So did you. You ask me are we real friends?" There was no heat in Badshah's voice, nor even malice. With a wave he sent away the girl who came in to fill up our glasses. I was sitting up on the edge of my sofa. I could see him clearly for the first time. He was no killer. He was a small-timer. He was once a goon, now a con. He had some business, a family and debts. I could see now who might have sent me that letter. I had brought five lacs with me, thinking it'd be enough to buy

some more time. Now I thought fifty thousand would get rid of him for good. But, I didn't want to give him even five. I wanted to give him a piece of my mind. When I finished, Badshah just smiled. "You think I am trying to use you? You think I am a criminal? Look around you. Look at this city, this society. Even the good people, your family, everyone wants to use you. They'll never ask what you want, nor listen if you tell them. We chew each other up, suck out the marrow, then throw the bone out for someone else to lick. Why blame me alone?"

I hadn't expected such a personal outburst from him. Badshah's forehead was beaded with sweat. By the moment he was growing smaller, and more human. He was emerging from the shadow of menace and sordidness that had surrounded him all these months. Or, that I had cast on him. I felt I could walk away and there was not a thing that Badshah could do to me. It was all bluff. Perhaps he'd hire an urchin to throw a brick at my car one day, nothing more.

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Then two more men came into the room. They lacked Badshah's humanity. You could see in their eyes that some part of their brain was missing. They could not comprehend pain in others any more than they could comprehend any risk to themselves. This was why they made good killers. I knew they wouldn't kill me. They dragged me out of the sofa and threw me onto the floor. I wish I could say that the anticipation was the worst part of it. But, the anticipation lasted the whole time, every kick, every blow, the pause between them was filled with suspense. Where

would it land next? Instinctively I tried to protect my face. Mercifully they didn't pry my arms open; they kicked me around lazily on whatever parts were exposed. I don't remember when Badshah walked out of the room. Nor when or who pulled the money out of my waistband. I don't know why I never went to the police. I never even told Shamim what happened. I told my mother I had had a small car crash; she would not notice the car. Luckily nothing was broken; the recovery was quick. I don't know if Badshah had planned to beat me up all along. I don't know why Badshah didn't try to get more money out of me. Perhaps it's because Dhaka is such a big city now; all relationships are so transient. We make our transactions and move on.

My mother and I have moved to an apartment block—New Horizon Towers—while the builders develop our plot. I go to my bank; I have become senior vice-president. I talk to my daughter; her French is well past mine by now. My mother keeps up with her Mah-jongg. I keep track of the crime news in my area. I check the rearview before stepping out every time. Shamim was right; it takes at least a full year to get fully reoriented.

Now, I feel at home again.

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## In Janus's Footsteps

Adib Khan

The philosopher, Diogenes, was known to have an undisguised contempt for any distinction between Greeks and foreigners. When asked what his country was, he replied: 'I am a citizen of the world', and in so doing he coined the Greek word cosmopolitan to express his thoughts on the matter. I imagine that more than two thousand years later, there are many among us who share that view.

The question of identity has been a complicated issue for me, long before I accidentally stumbled into writing fiction. I have always been wary of any rigid, stereotyped characteristics that may be attributed to the word identity in a way that may compromise my notions of individualism. Undoubtedly my attitude has much to do with cultural fragmentation, and, in that sense, I am a post-modernist.

There are times when I recall an interesting experience during the early 1980s, after I became an Australian citizen. It was the singular incident that set me thinking about the multiple dimensions of identity, especially when you freely transcend boundaries and leap across cultures. On a tram in Melbourne, an elderly lady, whose grandfather had a stint in India as a British administrator, asked me politely if I was an Indian.

"No," I replied, 'although India is my ancestral home. My grandparents and my mother were born there, and I have relatives in Kolkata where I spent most of my school holidays.'

Was I a Pakistani? "No," I responded. 'I was born in Pakistan, but my Australian passport doesn't say so.' 'Ah, an Australian!' The enlightened exclamation sounded very definitive in its conclusion. 'So, you were born in Pakistan but you are an Australian citizen. A Pakistani-born Australian!' Her triumph was short-lived.

I must confess that I was not to add to the confusion I was creating. 'Not quite,' I said, watching her frown. 'I was born in Pakistan, but officially I can no longer claim that privilege.'

There was perplexed silence. By this time I was rather pleased with the web of mystery I had spun around my national identity. The riddle had rapidly reached a complexity worthy of the Sphinx. It was time for revelation.

'I was born in East Pakistan,' I explained. 'It is now Bangladesh.'

She smiled and nodded, but I sensed that the bewilderment was still there. I had, however, stated the truth. It really summed me up. I was born in Pakistan, with familial connections in India, had a rebirth in Bangladesh without ever believing in reincarnation, and now I was an Australian in possession of a certificate of citizenship and an associated document of sixty-four pages, valid for ten years, to prove who I was.

If one considers Hamlet's situation as a parallel, then his dilemma was relatively simple. He was merely crawling between earth and heaven an uncharted distance, I shall grant him

that. But one may well ask, what should such fellows as I do with the claims of four different countries tugging at me for some declaration of who I am?

At any point in our lives, we can think of ourselves as relating to a number of identities - in terms of gender, age, family status, religion and ethnicity, to name only a few. The conceptual and emotional difficulties that a migrant experiences in coming to a singular understanding of the term identity is akin to standing in the middle of a chamber of mirrors that are in constant and slow rotation. One catches glimpses of transient reflections without ever settling on a fixed image. Those of us who have reluctantly experienced displacement, or willingly shifted our cultural base, find our own private ways of locating and perceiving ourselves beyond the obvious coordinates of a street, a suburb, a town or a passport. I am no exception in this quiet but persistent search, and my vehicle of travel is writing fiction.

But undeniably, as a social being, I am part of a larger scene, and I have to say that looking at the bigger picture makes me uneasy about contemporary attitudes regarding identity. The cultural fragmentation with which I must cope merely complicates the issue, but it also alerts me to the pitfalls of excessive and sometimes blind prejudicial loyalty that is evident in the polarisation between the West and the Islamic world.

The alarming acceleration in the evolution of technology and its impact on social and cultural changes have significantly influenced the ways in which communities are insisting on defining themselves. It would appear that there is a desperate need to find historical and contemporary markers to construct a framework within which people can feel secure about their perceived values and lifestyles. Across nations there appears to be a shift in the way people characterise identity. The identity of an individual is now sometimes subservient to a community's ideology of what a person should be if he or she is to have a meaningful place in mainstream society.

Discourse on gender, ethnic and class identity appears to have subsided for the moment and we are caught in a mesh of aggressive religiosity and nationalism that encourage a somewhat naïve and illusory view of identity. Guilt and alienation are frequently evoked to lash individual into acceptance of an advanced tribal mentality, and these are often achieved by clearly defined characteristics of unacceptable non-conformity. In all likelihood this is a communal reaction to fear, and fear is the most potent weapon of politicians.

I do not believe that it is possible for me to wear the tag of a cultural stereotype. An unqualified identification with a single, mainstream tradition would be a denial of the composite that I am. It would be futile and, indeed, undesirable to purge the cultural diversity that has shaped me. My splintered life is not entirely the result of migration. It is also a natural consequence of an upbringing that was strongly

influenced by history. In the 1950s and '60s, the postcolonial subcontinent was still strongly affected by the cultural and institutional legacy we had inherited from the British. For my parents it was imperative for me to attend a school where English was the language of instruction. I was sent to Holy Cross and then to St Joseph's.

The fragmentation took place early in my life. There were glimpses of the Gospel at school. We had to study an absurdly titled subject called Moral Science. The Old Testament was taboo. Some friends and I deduced that since anything forbidden had to do with girls and sex, the Old Testament had to be compulsory reading. So I read Genesis and Exodus and learned about creation and Moses, played cricket in the afternoon and returned home to face a Spartan mullah waiting to hear my reading of the Koran and teach me about the only faith he wanted me to know. In retrospect, the exposure to the historical richness of the three desert religions saved me from some of the prejudices of ignorance and set me on the path to cultural dualism. It was no longer possible to think of myself exclusively in terms of a single tradition.

At university I studied Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare and Milton. They did not negate the influences of The Ramayana, Mahabharata, the Moghul poets, Tagore, Iqbal, Nazrul Islam and Faiz Ahmed Faiz. The two traditions met, not in cultural combat, but in a synthesis of ideas out of which I emerged considerably enriched in ideas and feelings but without any clearly defined sense of belonging to a mono-cultural society. I would not have it any other way. Even at the risk of sounding excessively egotistical, the awareness of my multiplicity makes me curious about myself. What I was, what I am and what I will be can only be determined by experiences and their storage in memory. I am not a great admirer of Tennyson's poetry, but I sometimes recall that wonderful line from 'Ulysses': 'I'm a part of all that I have met.'

My writing life has merely intensified a curiosity about identity. Writing fiction was purely accidental during a period of soul searching to know why I was so restless when I turned forty. There was a growing dissatisfaction with my teaching life and boredom with the predictability of my middle-class existence in a Victorian country town. I had reached a point of lethargic blandness where any desire for intellectual fulfilment was being blunted by an increasing indifference to the wider world. Underneath all of this was a kind of insurgency, a revolt from within that insisted I pay attention to myself. I made an effort to meet the real me by recording my reflections in fragmented bits of writing.

A novel emerged as a residue of this attempt at self-analysis, and with it came the realisation that I was destined to occupy a kind of no-man's-land, wedged between polarised cultures. My identity is simultaneously plural and mutable. There is no definitive measurement of who I am. My occupancy of a territory between the East and the West does not offer much stability. Here the earth shakes quite violently to discourage me

from developing any sense of permanence or belonging.

However uncomfortable this position may be, it is by no means an arid ground for the mind to discover a multiplicity of voices and what they have to say. The voice of diaspora tells me how it is to feel like a stranger and yet be at home, to live both inside and outside of one's immediate situation, to be permanently on the move, to think of return journeys but to realise at the same time the impossibility of doing so, since the past is not only a different country but also another dimension of time. It tells me about long-distance travels and relocations, of losses, changes, conflicts, powerlessness and visions of what might have been had I never left Bangladesh. And with it comes infinite sadness that severely tests my emotional resolve.

But there is another voice that refuses to be silenced. It is different in tone and articulates perspectives of another landscape. It speaks about new frontiers, of ideas that extend my intellectual and emotional horizons and recharges the desire to explore unknown territories. It encourages me to celebrate the richness of cultural diversity. In a sense, writing has become a residence, a place I can call home.

So the question arises, in this house of writing which room do I occupy and can I be vaguely characterised by the way I live?

That was perhaps a possibility until very recently. I guess I shall move from room to room in my metaphorical residence. My last novel, *Homecoming*, was set in Australia and it was not about migrants but about a Caucasian Vietnam veteran, troubled by guilt and concerned about his lack of moral responsibility during the war, seeking atonement through art and a commitment to a relationship with a partly paralysed woman. Now, I am back in Bangladesh for my new novel due to be published early next year. *Spiral Road* explores the themes of dispersal, family secrets and terrorism in my native land in a family saga that is set in Dhaka and rural Bangladesh. And how did I respond to this cultural shift in the writing landscape? Well, I am still in the same house, merely changing rooms. That sense of familiarity has not deserted me. If there were imaginative barriers, then I did not have a problem with pulling them down and roaming freely between Australia and Bangladesh.

That is one of the supreme advantages of not being weighed down by a single identity.

Adib Khan is a Bangladeshi-born Australian writer.

## 1390\*

MOHAMMED RAFIQ  
(translated by Khademul Islam)

Kushtia, Rasulpur; red earth, an ochre ornament; sleep wakes to crawl and sit at the verandah's edge. Dawn breaks; today is Pahela Boishakh; at the courtyard's

edge a pile of unwashed pots and pans; a pregnant woman's blood-smeared torn sari; by its side a pack of mangy dogs saliva-drool running past jawlines into the dust.

Today is Pahela Boishakh. Dawn breaks. Amena's mother diarrhea-vomiting since last night. Fever. Incantations, holy water; from the joist hangs a fearful breath;

two blood-red eyes flung from Hell. On Rasulpur's east, at the bend of the village path, that centuries-old-witness, the *bot* tree, trembles slightly,

on bone-dry branches swoop down thirteen vultures. Yesterday when Khaleq tilled the south patch of land, the plow blade hit and awakened human skulls

not one not two, but thousands, noiseless. Today is Pahela Boishakh. A warm wind pauses at the village's edge, at the old cremation ground.

The rice spills when the cat's body brushes the pot; licks its lips; a titmouse makes a nest within the ribcage. Over the field a ridged path slowly wends its way

from village to distant village. Over all of Rasulpur, sunlight erupts by degrees. Brain matter melts to run from skulls. The red earth will be fertile this year. Pahela Boishakh;

on hearing the dawn azan Fatima's father opens his eyes. Breaking the fence in a single bound leap three foxes, braided women's hair swing freely, on this mad morning.

Day lengthens. Round that witness *bot* tree fly a thousand vultures. Plowing skulls. Mustard. The sun-wind laughs out, spreading its flashing tongue to enter the village.

\*1390 is the Bengali year: 1983.  
Mohammed Rafique is a well-known Bangladeshi poet. His Collected Poems have been released by Papyrus, Dhaka. Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.