

## SHORT STORY

# Nightmares

JULIE REZA

I finish my *magreb* prayer, doing the extra *nofol rakats* that I had promised my brother I would do for my niece, Shahina. Shahina is getting married 'back home' next month, and my brother is feeling increasingly anxious as he and his wife finalise the arrangements. It's funny to think of Shahina having grown up. I think of my own son Murshed, who is only three years younger than her and - despite having just graduated - still very immature. Shahina is tough, I'm positive she'll be fine with whatever life throws at her. But Murshed? I'm not so sure. He has always been a little too gentle, a little too soft-hearted. Oh, what a *norom-chorom* boy I had raised!

My thoughts wander back to the present. Murshed. 'He should be home from work soon,' I think to myself. Outside it's starting to get dark.

Murshed works in a mobile phone shop at the top of Oxford Street. It should take him less than an hour to get home, but I know he likes to wander around the shops before he starts his journey back.

My boy is so childish still - even though he's now nearly twenty-two! Sometimes on his return, giggling, he'll put a hand into his backpack and produce a snake from within it. As I start to scream and cover my face, he'll draw me close and give me a huge hug. 'Oh, Ma, you're such a coward! Look, look, it's just a fake snake made of sweet, coloured jelly!' From behind my *urna* I look at the snake, laugh, and give him a loving, gentle slap on his cheek. I smile to myself as I recall this. Murshed has done this time-and-time again, and yet, somehow, I always fall for it. Why? I wonder.

But, when I think it through, I suppose I know why.

Back when I was four or five, I'd been playing by myself in our kitchen outhouse while everyone else slept after a heavy lunch. Squatting on the floor, I'd been pretending to cook rice and curry with the miniature *hari patli* my Dadu had given me -when I saw IT. A snake. It glided directly towards me. Although my heart was pounding, I wasn't afraid. I slowly edged to the side of the room, and stood with my back to the wall as its black-and-yellow body slithered unhurriedly over my bare feet. To my surprise, it wasn't as slippery as I thought it would be. In fact, it only tickled. I kept my eyes on the snake. It weaved its way in-between the pots and the pans on the floor,

towards the pile of wood for the stove sitting at the far side of the room. Fully engrossed in watching it, I hadn't noticed *bhaiya* appear silently at the doorway. Suddenly he cried out: 'Snake, snake!' There was immediate pandemonium. Bua, who had been sleeping peacefully on a *khaat* at one side of the kitchen jumped up and started screaming for her *jharno*. Halim bhai, who was dozing on a mat just outside the kitchen, shouted out for his forked stick. Hearing the commotion, Kanta, our young maid-servant girl, had rushed out from the main house towards the kitchen, gasped, and dashed back into the house screaming 'Everyone, get up. Get *uuuup*!' I started to panic as people rushed to and fro past me, cursing and yelling as they attempted to catch the snake while it, in turn, tried to dodge them. Pots tumbled, bottles smashed, oil was spilt.

Eventually, Halim *bhai* had

managed to catch the snake with his forked stick, and throw its beaten body out into the fields behind our little house. But that feeling of sheer terror that I'd felt when everyone had surrounded me, screaming and shouting, had never left me. To this day, I would dream about that time and waking afterwards, would be filled with a sense of dread. Every little thing noise I suddenly heard, or any unexpected movement that caught my eye during the day, would make me jump.

Last night I'd dreamt of the snake again. Afterwards, I had got up, drank a glass of cold water, and recited some *suras* to calm me down before I was able to go back to a fitful sleep.

I lift my eyes from the Quran to look at the time. Nearly seven o'clock. Murshed will call soon from the station, so that his father can go and pick him up. I kiss the Quran and put it back on the shelf. I comb my hair and put some cream on my face and hands. I look again at my hands. They seem to be shaking. How strange, I think.

Switching lights on as I go down the stairs, I go into the drawing room. Murshed's father has already settled back to read his newspaper after saying his prayers. His thick hair is a little salt-and-pepper now, and he wears gold-rimmed glasses on the edge of his nose to read the paper; a few wrinkles grace his forehead these days, but otherwise he looks just the same as when we first got married, just over twenty-three years ago. I

place my hand gently on his shoulder. He looks up and smiles, placing his right hand on mine. The phone rings. I jump. Murshed. But no, it isn't Murshed. It's Sonara Apa from Brighton. She's thinking of coming up to visit us when she comes to London next week. I put the phone down. Murshed's father and I recollect that we had last seen her at her son's 15th birthday party last year. How time passes. Time. Passes. 7.20 pm. I turn into the kitchen in order to cook some onion *bhajis*. Murshed likes to tickle into those when he comes home from work. I start to peel and slice the onions. I take out the oil and pour some into a *karai* to heat up slowly. The microwave says 7.32. Where is Murshed?

Idris walks in, one eye on his computer game, the other seeking the fridge. He opens the fridge door, a little too suddenly, and some orange juice that had been in a carton in the door shelf spouts onto him.

'Oh Ma' he moans, as he looks at me. I sigh to myself as I wet a towel to clean his T-shirt that proclaims 'cool dude' across his body. The stain is successfully removed as Idris pours juice from the carton directly into his gaping mouth. 'You shouldn't do that,' I admonish.

Idris smiles broadly, puts the carton back in the fridge, takes my face in his chubby hands and gave me what he calls a 'raspberry' - a 'brrring' of his lips again my skin. I chuckle to myself. What had I done? -- with one boy who still seems a perpetual baby, it seems that ten years later I'd given birth to another! But really, could I complain? My boys are lovely lads, popular and fun. Having finished college with good results, Murshed is doing some holiday work while looking for a proper job in banking. I turn back to the worktop and continue to beat the onions and batter together.

7.47. Where is that boy? Oof. Why hasn't he called? And as I think this, I spy his new phone still sitting on his blue-and-white deckchair-shaped charger. 'He didn't take his phone with him,' I call out to his father. His father comes to the kitchen doorway and looks at his watch. He checks it against the apple-shaped kitchen clock. It's nearly eight. He's never usually this late,' his father declares.

I agree. The oil hisses on the stove in the background. I gently place more dollops of the mixture in the oil. They sink to the bottom, and then with a vicious hiss rise

to the top and float, getting fatter and turning golden. I prepare a plate with paper kitchen towels so that they can drain. One. Two. Three. Four. 8.07.

Murshed's father appears again at the doorway. 'Did Murshed tell you he was going to be late today?' 'No, he didn't say anything other than his usual goodbyes'. Thoughtful pause. 'It's well past eight now, he should have been home an hour ago.'

'Idris, did your brother say anything about coming home late today?' he calls out.

'No, Baba - why?' Murshed's father and I look at each other. His eyes have lost their natural soulful calmness. And I know, as he looks at me, mine mirror his. 'I think I'll go to the station. Maybe he doesn't have any coins to call from the phone box.' He picks up his keys from the hallway table and goes out of the front door.

I call Idris to have some *bhajis*. It's approaching time for our evening meal. Murshed won't be able to eat all of them. 'Yuk,' Idris says. It doesn't surprise me. Only Murshed and I like onion *bhajis*. I cover the *bhajis* with an upturned plate, and place them on the shelf under the grill. I don't switch it on -- the warmth from the electric ring will keep them warm for a little while.

8.34. 8.35. 8.36. 'Switch the TV on, jaan,' I tell Idris. 'But there's nothing on,' he replies. 'Well, put a cartoon video on then.'

Idris slides off my silky lap to switch on the TV. Colours whiz by on the screen, but they are all starting to merge into one.

8.55. Murshed's father opens the door. My heart leaps. Mother's joy. But he is alone.

'Murshed wasn't there -- the station is empty. I drove down all the routes that he may have taken. I didn't see him'. I feel weak. 'What shall we do?' I ask.

'Call Shabbir and Mike' (Shabbir is Murshed's best friend and Mike a college buddy who lives near Chelsea). 'See if they know where he is.'

Murshed's father goes out into the front garden to look down the road. I call Shabbir. No, he hasn't seen Murshed. Nor has Mike. The drawing room clock strikes 9.00.

Murshed's father comes back in. 'What could have happened?' he asks.

I look at him, and then look down. Surely something moved? Is that a snake I saw then, just trying to hide behind the plant-pot?

'You go and drive around. He must be somewhere. But take me to the station,' I request. 'But what will you do there?' asks Murshed's father.

'Nothing. I'll wait. I'll wait until I see my boy.'

I call Idris to accompany me. He decides to leave his Gameboy behind. I pick up my prayer beads, and draw my *urna* over my head. And pick up an apple from the fruit bowl. Murshed will be hungry.

In the car we are silent. Idris and I get down at the station. Murshed's father drives off,

shouting out that he will be back in half an hour or so.

I know the station well -- I used it when I worked. I walk up to the barriers. No-one is around. 'Hello?' I call out.

'Oh.....I see,' she says hesitatingly. 'Where.....err.....does your son get on the train?' I pause. Then 'Marble Arch,' I reply. She says nothing.

A snake's tongue seems to flick the air behind her ear.

I muster the courage to ask... 'This person, under the train...when...?' 'Six-ish,' she says. 'I'd just come out of work when I heard about it -- She pauses awkwardly. 'What time did your son catch the train?' 'Six -- he catches it around six, usually earlier, but sometimes...with his friends...sometimes he wanders. His mobile. On the charger,' I mutter, knowing I am not making sense. My heart is pounding. I hear something hiss menacingly. Where? I start to feel dizzy. The girl takes my arm. 'Don't worry,' she says, 'I'm sure your son is alright'. She looks across at Idris, who is looking increasingly uncomfortable.

The girl starts to walk away apologetically. 'Please don't worry...' she says, calling over her shoulder. 'You'll see, everything will be alright.' But it isn't. Murshed isn't home. Idris comes over and hugs me, looking into my eyes. I hold his hands in mine and we sit down, me with my arms tightly around Idris, trying to hold his childhood in. Another train comes. We don't look up. It seems there's only one person this time -- he walks up to the bike shelter and cycles away. Murshed's dad returns. He is looking pale and drawn. He walks over to us, bracing himself for news. 'Person under a train at Marble Arch,' I say. He looks at me with a question in his eyes. My eyes reply. He understands the unspoken words. He says nothing more. We huddle

seems to recognise. An unspoken bond. She must be too, though she is dressed in jeans and a top like her Western counterparts.

'I hear there are delays,' I say. 'What's happened?' 'Oh,' she says, pointing towards the train line. 'There was an incident at Marble Arch. There have been really severe delays on the Central line'. She senses my anxiety. 'But the trains are running OK now.' Momentarily I relax. But just then, a snake seems to slither across the floor behind her. 'Marble Arch? What happened at Marble Arch?' 'Err,' she says. 'I'm not really sure....they said there was a person under a train.'

Another snake slithers past. 'A person under a train?' I repeat. 'A person under a train?' I repeat. I gather my strength to say: 'You see, my son....' 'Oh.....I see,' she says hesitatingly. 'Where.....err.....does your son get on the train?' I pause. Then 'Marble Arch,' I reply. She says nothing.

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'Ma, Baba, Idris, is that you?' it gasps. 'What are you all doing here? I left my phone at home, and there were huge problems on the train,' the voice says excitedly. 'There was this person under the train at Marble Arch. They closed the station'.

By now he is standing alongside us. 'There were no buses. There was major chaos. He had to walk all the way to Lancaster Gate. And then this old man was lost. I couldn't leave him, he looked so disorientated. I had to take him all the way home. I wanted to call you, but he didn't have a phone at his house -- he lives in a little bedsit. He asked me to stay for a cup of tea. I didn't, but...' But Murshed's voice drifts off as he is hugged so tight he's unable to breathe. For the rest of the evening a bemused Murshed is squeezed, kissed, pinched, fed and cajoled.

The following day is bright and sunny. I go into his bedroom to put back some ironed clothes. 'Ma,' he says, grinning, 'I have something for you...and he reaches over to his bag to pull something out. I stop him. 'No child, please don't,' I request. 'Let me tell you something'. And I sit down and tell him about the snake. And the dreams. And the visions. He listens quietly, until I finish my story.

'But Ma, don't you see -- you've got it all wrong. The snake is not a bad omen. The snake is your strength. It wasn't the snake that frightened you all those years ago -- it was the others. By keeping focussed on the snake -- your strength -- you were ok.' He pauses. 'After all, Ma, it was all alright in the end, wasn't it?'

And as I look into my young son's eyes I come to understand, for the first time ever, that my boy has more maturity than I realise.

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## Book Reviews

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### Everybody having a go in the wake of 9/11

AZFAR AZIZ

**Religion, Power and Violence: Expression of Politics in Contemporary Times** in *Contemporary Times* by Ram Puniyani; New Delhi: Sage Publications; 2005; 332 pages; Rs 380

After the fall of Berlin Wall, symbolising the defeat of communism both as a state system and as world order, a new global political polarisation began between so-called secular democracies and the forces of religious communalism. But, unlike its one-time progressive role against the Papal-Khalifat-feudal powers, the present-day secular democracies, with the USA as its self-appointed champion, are fighting tooth and nail to conserve the interests of the classes that are benefitting the most from the status quo, while worldwide more and more people--marginalized, deprived, and discriminated against--are rallying around religious and communal identities in order to mobilise and express their socio-political interests and aspirations.

Globally, two opposing sides have emerged in this religion-based politics. One is the camp spearheaded by the USA, which has launched a new offensive in the oil-rich zone, where Islam is the dominant religion, expressly to export democracy. The offensive is being justified, by a willing 'democratic' intelligentsia and corporate mass media, in terms of a demonized Islam. A theory of 'clash of civilisations' was concocted by pundits like Samuel Huntington to cover up the oil-related interests of the US and its cohorts. This theory counter-poses the 'advanced' Western civilisation against the 'backward' Islamic one, where Western civilisation is not Christian but the Middle and

language, laced with modernity, so to say.

The above, in general, is the context and the subject of the book, or actually the readable part of it, under review--*Religion, Power and Violence: Expression of Politics in Contemporary Times*—a collection of 16 essays edited by Ram Puniyani, a former professor of biomedical engineering at the Indian Institute of Technology, now the secretary of the Centre for the Study of Society and Secularism and a member of EKTA, the Committee for Communal Amity, all based in Mumbai. Other than the editor, the contributors include sociologists Thomas Sebastian, JJ Roy Burman, Prakash Louis, Ranu Jain, Uday Mehta, Rowena Robinson, and D Parthasarathy, political scientists Shamsul Islam and Manjari Katju, freelance journalists V Krishna Ananth and Sarto Esteves, economist Bibhuti Patel, physician Jawaaid Quddus, management professional Anand Teltsunde, and lawyer and women's rights activist Flavia Agnes.

Among them, it is really hard to understand the merits and justifications of including two articles of Jawaaid Quddus dealing with elementary information about the advent of Islam in India and its teachings, as well as the first entry of the volume by the editor, headlined after the Marxist cliché 'Religion: Opium of the Masses or...', a largely superficial and common-place outline of religion, right after his introduction to the book, which incidentally is lucid enough. He should have stuck to that introduction and given more emphasis on his editorial tasks than penning simple-minded stuff on religion, which makes the book seem to be targeted to school-students. The reviewer is compelled to make this harsh

judgement, especially given the ups and downs in quality that runs through the whole volume.

An unusually large number of publications have been noticed after 9/11 on the topics of religion-based politics, communalism and violence, in most cases recycling the same old tired opinions and arguments. Since the going is good, with the publishers finding the topics in vogue and saleable, alongside the genuine scholars every sort of hack is having a go at it. This volume reflects such a mix of real scholarship with more amateurish efforts.

The few contributions which are worth reading and provide new ideas and angles to the subjects under discussion include the second entry, on the relationship between globalisation and communalism, by Krishna Ananth, and that between terrorism and imperialism by Thomas Sebastian. The pieces by Bibhuti Patel and Flavia Agnes respectively, titled 'Fundamentalism, Communalism and Gender Justice' and 'The Supreme Court, Media and Uniform Civil Code Debate', both dealing with gender issues, are really analytic and offer distinct perspectives. The article 'Violence Against the Cross', i.e., the Christian minority, is another good reading, and so is the last, titled 'After Gujarat... Making Sense of reports on the Post-Godhra Violence and Its Aftermath', co-written by Robinson and Parthasarathy. Only these articles, in my view, can justify recommending to readers that they purchase and read this book.

Azfar Aziz is an occasional contributor to The Daily Star literature page.

### A splendid achievement

KHADEMUL ISLAM

**Dictionary of Literary Biography Volume 323: South Asian Writers in English**, edited by Fakrul Alam, editorial directors Matthew J. Brucoli and Richard Layman; Thomson Gale, Michigan, USA; 2006; 490 pp.

Bangladeshi academics rarely write textbooks or reference books, especially of an international standard. It was therefore a pleasant surprise to see that Fakrul Alam (professor of English at Dhaka University) has edited this hefty tome, brought out by American publisher Gale Thomas, on South Asian English-language writers. Furthermore, among the group of largely South Asian academics who have contributed the articles, there are four other Bangladeshi academics, an agreeable development. This particular book is number 323 in a prestigious multi-volume series (as emphatically underlined by its 90-page cumulative index) brought out on different regional/national literatures and writers.

It is perhaps advisable at the outset to remind readers that it is not an anthology of South Asian English writing, such as Amit Chaudhuri's *Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*, nor does it consist, solely, of traditional literary criticism. It is a volume whose brief is essentially, as the DLB series advisory board points out, to give 'career biographies, tracing the development of the author's canon and the evolution of his (sic) reputation.'

Given this specific mandate, these 48 entries on a mix of poets, novelists, dramatists, two political figures and an art critic--those adjudged to be the principal figures in the South

Asian English writing 'canon' to date--exhibit a fairly strict format:

biographic details, list of publications, interspersed with discussion and analysis of their major works and authorial style. And it is in the latter mode that this volume, though primarily intended and packaged as an introduction to the subject, shines. Almost all the pieces, under the steady hand of its editor, are of a high standard: well-researched and thorough. Some of the pieces transcend their set parameters: Sridhar Rajeswaran on the Kannada English-language playwright Girish Karnad, Kaiser Haq on poet Nissim Ezekiel, Krishna Sen on Amit Chaudhuri, Chelva Dananayakam's article on Romesh Gunesekera, for example, is simply the best I have read on the Londoner Sri Lanke writer.

Which brings me to a very attractive feature of this volume: its attempt to be broadly inclusionary, to cover South Asian writers, poets and dramatists (and in the case of Ananda Coomaraswamy, a seminal art critic) who usually are overlooked in such compilations. Among the *eminentes grise* who are perennial favourites in such works, such as Salman Rushdie,