

SHORT STORY

DHRUBO ESH
(translated by Reza Ali)

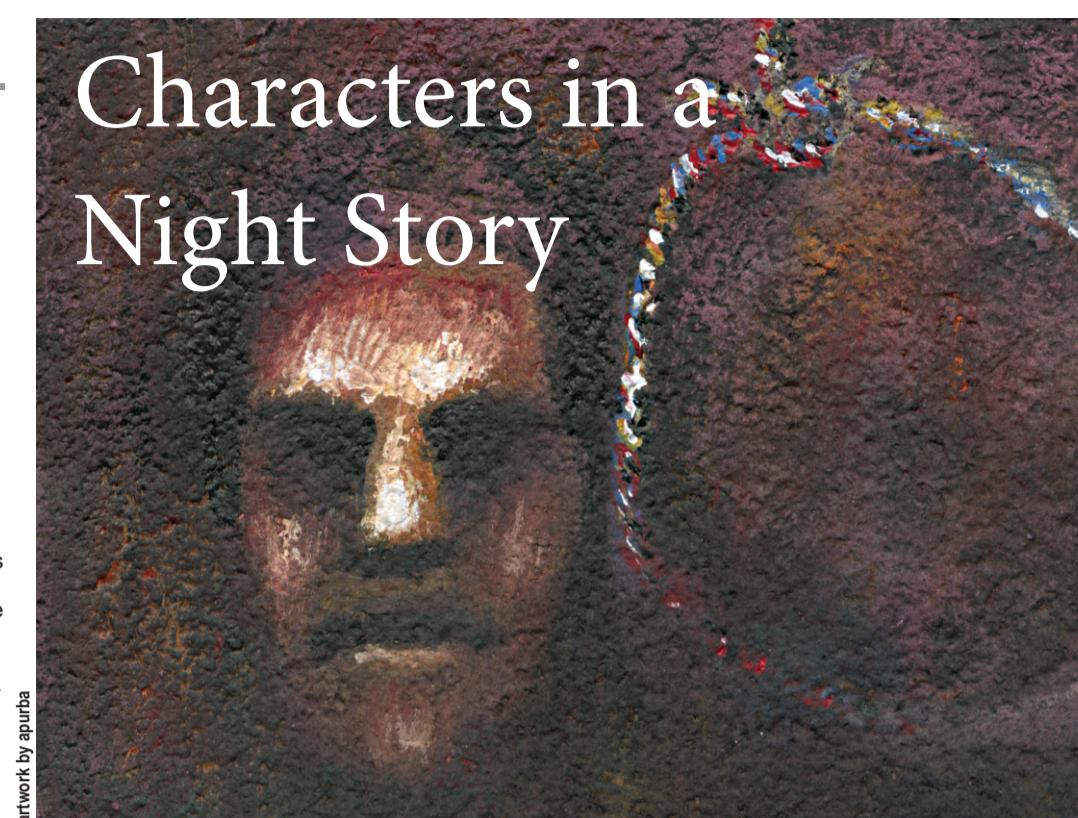
He felt sleepy. Time to go to sleep. If perchance he 'never woke up from this sleep,' it was okay by him. Yes, why not have a rest for eternity, he thought as he began to fall asleep. Bhai, enough time had been spent in waking hours, enough days spent waking. Two months away from being thirty-eight years old. So, thirty-eight into three hundred and sixty-five minus sixty--how many days was that? Big bloody shit--that's how many. Big... Bloody... Shit... Big...bloody...shit... And with big bloody shit in his head, he fell asleep. And while sleeping he had a dream--

People were screaming over loudspeakers in their darkened alley. It was dark because of load-shedding. What were they shouting about? was a boy lost? Or was it because a girl had been found? It was neither. Only one item was being broadcast over the mikes: two hags were going to play kabaddi today! Two hags were going to play kabaddi today! Two hags were... Just that one message. He looked down at the alley from the roof. Completely dark. No rickshaw-vans could be seen. But the voices continued over the loudspeakers: Two hags are going to play kabaddi today...just this. The dream perhaps would have been a long one. But it wasn't--the phone rang. His cell phone. He had forgotten to turn it off before he went to sleep. He had

to pay his dues. Said "Hello." "How can you sleep?" "No, I am just watching the cartoon channel." "Yes, darling, watch. Watch it good and well." "Okay." "My little heart-throb." "Hmmm." "You are a good kisser." And with that she shut off the phone. Who was this? He looked at the number. Unknown number. He called back the number. A saddened voice informed him that the number you are calling is currently unavailable, and implored him to please call a little while later. He called the number twice, and twice heard the grief-laden voice. Dreams and sleep had now fled. He looked at the time on his mobile phone. Eighteen past three o'clock. Who could he call? Who had insomnia? Harold, Shithi, and Monidipa. He called Monidipa. Phone not in use. He called Shithi. Busy signal. He called Harold. Harold's wife answered the phone. Ah, Mili! She said, "Harold's committed suicide." "What? When?" "Just now he hung himself." "Why did you let him?" "What could I do?" "Well, he could have jumped out the twelve-story building." "No, bad idea," Mili said. "He would have been smashed to pieces. It is better this way. He's swinging from a rope. The tongue's stuck out." "Is it a rope or nylon cord?" "Electric wire. Look, I have to go." "No, wait..." Mili said, "What?"

artwork by apurba

Characters in a Night Story



"Did Harold leave a note?" "I shall return one day." "What?" "It was in his pocket. In his handwriting. 'I shall return one day.'" "Are you going to show that note to the police?" "No." "Don't." "Are you feeling bad for Harold?" "No. He's going to return." "As an eagle or *shalik* bird?" Mili laughed (paraphrasing Jibanananda Das). He said, "Why do you laugh?" Mili replied, "Just think, Harold has turned into a huge big *shalik* bird and is dangling from a rope around his neck." He thought about it. A *shalik* bird dangling from a rope around its neck. There were birds with a predilection for suicide. Ones that committed suicide by the

gangload. Lemmings, weren't they? Harold was going to return as which bird? As a lemming? And then would Harold-Lemming go ahead and commit suicide all over again? Mili said, "I have to go now." He said, "Such an uncivilized girl." Mili switched off the phone. Harold had committed suicide? Why? Wasn't Harold happy living with Mili? They had been together for seven-eight years. No children. What was Mili going to do now? Was she going to marry her lover Deedar? And what would happen if Deedar also decided to commit suicide? People were becoming lemmings. Every day the number of suicides was going up. What was the politics of suicide? Must be that people were no

longer able to dream! Sereen was politically aware. Sereen's mother was a teacher. Her father was connected to politics. Sereen believed that 'socialism was the future.' That it would happen one of these days. That socialist states would come into being throughout the whole world. "It's just a pipe dream, Sereen." "No. Why shouldn't it be? It has to happen." "And so what if it happens? Will people stop committing suicide?" "Why should stop people from committing suicide?" "So what's the big deal then?" He had met Sereen at the central Shaheed Minar. They had gone to view Shamsur Rahman. View Shamsur Rahman's dead body. Afterwards, walking back, Sereen said, "Did you hear,

Krishna committed suicide?" "No. When?" "Day before...no, wait...yes, day before yesterday." "Rope or pills?" "Jumped in front of a train. At the Malibagh rail crossing." "Nobody told me." Krishna Das was an artist. Not a painter, but a graphic designer. He was the creative hand behind many newspaper ad campaigns, billboards, and lots of other such things. As was usual with them, he had met with Krishna the day before his death. Krishna had been his normal raging self: "The nation's gone to the dogs." Krishna had taken a Benson & Hedges cigarette packet out of his shirt pocket: "Take a look at this." Look at what? The cigarette pack? What was wrong? Krishna spat out: "See what's written here: Smoking causes death." He had seen it. But so what? This was regulation now on all cigarette packs. Before it used to be a warning: Smoking is bad for health. Now was written smoking leads to death. So what? Krishna said, "It's a farce! A joke! Who writes like this? They have blanked out two-thirds of the space here. Ruined the packet design." On the packet 'Smoking causes death' had been written leaving a large blank space. The packet's design had indeed been damaged by it. Of course Krishna would feel hurt. Not only hurt, but rage and bitterness. This was normal with him. Why had that same Krishna committed suicide? Why Harold? What should he do? Sleeping pills, or the rope? Or jump in front of a car? He began to think and analyze the host of possibilities. Would his death be reported in the newspapers? What about Harold's? Had that been in yesterday's papers?

Hadn't Krishna's death been reported in the papers? Surely it must have been. Maybe it had even been on television. He did not read newspapers, and never watched television. The phone rang. He checked. It was Harold's number. Mili? He switched on the phone and heard Harold's voice. "Who is it? Harold," said Harold. He said, "No, damn it, this is Harold's dad! Where are you?" "In front of your gate." "What?" "Come down. Tell the guard to open the gate." "I thought Mili said that you'd hung yourself." "I had. The rope broke. Now, quick, come down." And then the talk ended. Harold cut off the line. He went downstairs and woke up the guard. When the gate was opened he saw Harold and Mili sitting in a rickshaw outside in the darkness. Harold said, "Get in." He asked, "What happened?" "Shit, man, first get in." He climbed into the rickshaw. In the middle was Harold. A sweet fragrance rose from Mili's body! He said, "What happened?" Harold laughed. Mili said, "Nothing happened." "Into this city's huge night..." Harold intoned. Mili said, "Like the jungles of Libya." "We are going to roam in the jungles of Libya," Harold said, "I say, my man," he addressed the rickshawallah, "you go ahead and start." They headed out into the darkness, into the city's huge night or the Libyan jungles.

This is the story. The story's plot. Was this the story he was going to write? No.

If it had amounted to a story he would have written. But it didn't amount to a story. Or maybe it was too unreal. He wasn't going to write those kinds of stories. Going out at three o'clock in the morning into the darkness! Huge night, Libyan jungles. Something was wrong with his head. If the story had continued the night would have to be spent in jail! The newspapers would carry the story the next day: 'Two youths accompanied by a young woman arrested.' And various other kinds of hassles would happen. So? All by himself, in the deep dark night, why had he crafted such a story? Was it because he had a secret fantasy about Mili? Maybe he did. What else to do? He switched off his cell phone and became eager to go back to sleep. He was to meet Harold tomorrow. Perhaps Mili would also be with Harold. Maybe he would hook up with Krishna too. Sereen too. And then what? Should he tell them that he had written a story about them? That they were characters in a fiction constructed by him at three in the morning? What would happen? Nothing would happen. No, he would not tell them. Today people had grown complex. And so there was a chance he would be caught out. In the story there was Mili and the sweet fragrance of Mili's body. He was not a writer of such stories. But he did think up such stories. Often. About Mili, about Sereen, about a lot of others.

Dhrubo Esh is an artist/writer. Reza Ali is an occasional translator.

R. K. Narayan's Centenary Conference (Part I of II)

FAKRL ALAM

Tuesday, 10th October 2006

The R. K. Narayan centenary conference begins fifteen minutes late (subcontinental standard conference opening time!). On stage for the inaugural session in the very impressive auditorium of the Mysore wing of the Central Institute for Indian Languages (CIL) are representatives of the three organizers of the conference: Mr. S. Jithendra Nath of the Bangalore branch of the Sahitya Akademi; Professor Harish Trivedi, Chairperson of the Indian Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS); and Mr. B. Mallikarjun, the Assistant Director of CIL. Mr. Nath is brief and punctilious in making his points as is Mr. Mallikarjun, both of whom are here by default, standing in for others who could not show up. Also absent is someone we were all looking forward to hearing: Keki N. Daruwala, member of the Sahitya Akademi, representing no doubt its English language interests, and identified pithily in the conference brochure as 'Eminent Poet'. It is left to Harish Trivedi to explain that he has not been well and thus could not be present. But the absentees don't matter: Harish makes up for their inability to come and the succinctness of the other speakers by giving us the perspective necessary to begin proceedings: this is R. K. Narayan's hundredth birthday (he died on 13 May, 2001); Mysore, the place he has immortalized as Malgudi in his fiction is the right setting for the occasion; and his achievement is so great that it was fitting that the Akademi, ACLALS, and CIL should have got together to bring together a relatively small group of Narayan devotees/scholars for a three-day conference. Harish is witty and gracious; in the course of his speech his charm seemed to have wafted to the almost ineffable allure of Narayan's work to set participants in the right mood for all subsequent sessions.

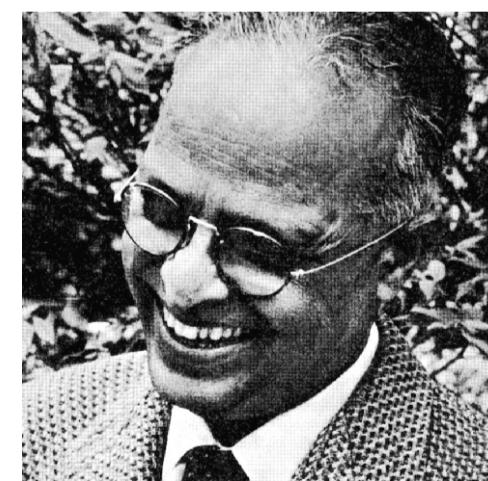
The first half of the first working session features two women novelists: Shashi Deshpande and Neelam Saran Gour. Deshpande is famous for novels about Indian women emerging from long silences and belongs to the generation of Indian English writers who succeeded Narayan. She confesses her 'great trepidation' in addressing the audience since she is not a 'great admirer' of the novelist but stresses that she has a high regard for his rootedness in Mysore (she is also rooted in Karnataka). She tells us that she knows the debt her generation owes to Narayan and his contemporaries, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao, for they showed that one could write about ordinary Indians in English without awkwardness. I am impressed by Deshpande's speech but am puzzled by her conclusion that Narayan is a very good but not great writer if compared to her touchstones of fictional greatness, Jane Austen and George Eliot, not because I think that they aren't among the greatest but because she seems to let her feminism sympathies deny greatness to any male novelist, including Narayan.

Neelam Gour's approach is strikingly different from Deshpande's in that she doesn't let gender become a barrier to her valuation of Narayan. Gour begins by saying that she finds a kindred spirit in him since they both base their fictions in small towns where people have time to loaf, chat but lead captivating lives. Like him, she tells us, she draws on life in her town and feels that such locales allow for concentration of focus and wealth of detail as far as setting, plot, and characterization is concerned.

In the second part of the day's first working session we are treated to sparkling reminiscences of Narayan by people who knew him intimately. T. S. Satyan, Narayan's friend

(though fully 17 years his junior!) for over six decades points out what every close reader of Narayan knows intuitively: there is a thin line dividing fact and fiction in Narayan's narratives; the novels appear to be so realistic because they are intimate *fictional* portraits of people and places he knew. Satyan reveals that Narayan was an indefatigable walker of Mysore streets and exhilarating company while strolling; no stand-offish Brahmin, he interacted with everyone and found delight in everything and had a quirky humor (but then one could guess as much by reading the fiction!). His splendid testimony to Narayan's astonishing capacity to replicate reality is worth repeating: 'I have personally known his characters--Raju, Margayya, Mr. Sampath, et al.'

Satyan gives us glimpses of the writer's early life that we can also glean from the useful biography of the writer by the Rams: the first fifteen years of Narayan's writing career were all uphill for he was gaining a reputation but no money from the early novels. Apparently, walking for Narayan then was a question of survival, for he was stalking Mysore for stories for newspapers determined to gather 10" of news before lunch time for his column. To survive, too, he had to do stints as a writer for radio and for a film studio. He observed that Narayan could relax financially only after the success of *The Guide*. Perhaps the most acute



comments made by Narayan's friend in his tribute however is his simple observation that he saw in the novelist the writer as a citizen and that he found the novels so valuable because they are free from malice and the result of his infatuation with humanity.

Mr. Satyan's account of Narayan the man is comprehensive and compelling; the speakers who follow--acquaintances, admirers, neighbors, and writers who had come close to him--only manage to supplement his concise and full portrait. From them we get only more glimpses of the writer's life and times in Mysore: his love of coffee and fastidiousness about it; his passion for Karnataka classical music; his wit and humor; his fondness for jasmine flowers and the way they always reminded him of his dead wife; his partiality for *gulmohar* trees in particular and trees in general; his dislike of critics and criticism that tried to take his work apart for this or that motive; his hatred of the film Dev Anand made out of *The Guide*; his liking for Vikram Seth's fiction and dislike of Salman Rushdie's work and stance; and his last few years in Mysore when he had become a celebrity but appeared incapable of acting like anywhere.

The post-lunch session of the day consists of academic papers; we are now into what Narayan was wary of: academic dissections of

his works! The first essay of the first session, by Viney Kirpal, begins by referring to V. S. Naipaul's almost dismissive praise of Narayan as an 'intensely Hindu' writer. She disagrees and tries to show that Narayan's protagonists are not, as Naipaul sees them, 'quietest' but assertive in their own ways. The most interesting part of Kirpal's presentation is her attempt to connect the fiction of Narayan--'the greatest Indian English novelist'--to the works of his brother, R. K. Laxman--'India's greatest cartoonist'. Using slides, she indicates how the cartoonist's eye for the oddities of life is a characteristic of the work of both brothers.

The second speaker of the session is Ranga Rao, an academic who knew Narayan well and is also a distinguished Indian English writer himself. He makes the simple but crucial point that Narayan has shown mastery over the English language even in his first novel, *Swami and Friends*. He also finds most Narayan protagonists questing for freedom and self-realization. He, too, takes on Naipaul and finds his way off the mark in characterizing a novel like Mr. Sampath as representing 'Hindu withdrawal' and declares that on the contrary the book reveals the novelist's immersion in life and 'the joys of this-worldly experience'.

The second session of the afternoon begins with a paper written by Martina Ghosh-Schellhorn, Professor of New English Literatures and Cultures at a German university. Her paper concentrates on Narayan's intensely autobiographical fourth novel, *The English Teacher*, written out of the memories of his forays into the supernatural as he tried to communicate with his wife's spirit through séances and his slow and painful return to everyday life afterwards. I follow the reading of her paper with an essay on Narayan's depiction of sexuality in his fiction. I am interested in the way he depicts people often overwhelmed with desire and on occasions entangled in it and the manner in which he maps desire in the Malgudi landscape. Part of my intention in presenting this paper is also to portray Narayan as a complex writer who presents the intricacies of men-women relationships in Malgudi at the heart of which, of course, are issues relating to sexuality and desire.

The day's proceedings end with a paper by Nancy Batt, a Canadian academic. She compares and contrasts two Indian English novels about a wife's decision to leave her husband: Narayan's *The Dark Room* (1940) where the wife's gesture leads nowhere and in which she feels compelled to return home and Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) where at the end the wife seems poised to reject the role of the passive victim. Batt's exploration of the wife's plight in Narayan's novel reminds one that he was one of the first Indian male novelists to treat with sympathy and understanding a woman's plight in conventional, middle-class, Indian Brahminic society, but one is also reminded that thirty-six years later Narayan would show a singularly independent, nonconformist woman in *Daisy of The Painter of Signs*.

When we leave the splendid CIL auditorium it is nearly five-thirty in the evening. It has been an absorbing day but we are all tired. I return to my hotel room and turn on the telly and am elated when I hear on BBC the news of Kiran Desai's Booker. Somehow it seems very appropriate. As Harish would put it later: 'From Narayan to Kiran'!--yes, there is an echo--the gravelly road that Narayan entered in 1935 along with Anand has now become a major highway of English fiction.

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Letter from LONDON

Shamsad Mortuza

Tears are signs. They signify emotion and they postulate a signified state of emotion. The penetrating gusto of tears is such that it is no surprise that the word 'tear' is used not only as a noun but also as a verb.

Tears are powerful weapons for women, if not the greatest. It is probably a stereotype to put women and tears under the same bracket. It seems for every occasion women manage to bring forth tears from their arsenal. They cry in joy. They cry in sorrow. And, historically, one of the criteria of becoming a man is to face the terror of female tears. Put simply, a man becomes a man if he can withstand woe of woman. He can increase his woe by wooing women though. The legacy dates back all the way to the first woman who 'teared' the first man into having the fruit of knowledge. A cynic would argue, there could not have been any tear prior to the consumption of the fruit of knowledge. I wonder how Eve persuaded them!

I am fully aware that by making tears only a woman-thing, I do run the risk of being labelled as a chauvinist-pig. I would settle for a far worse animal, hitherto known as the man. But before you jump to conclusion, let me assure you I am man who cries, too. I do it not to rob women of their giddiness but to convince myself that I am alive. A good film makes me cry. A happy reunion makes me cry. A hearty sneeze makes me cry. A gentle breeze rippling through the cherry blossom makes me cry. A feisty protest makes me cry. If my optical gland betrays me in public, I blame the speck of dust or the flying insect that has drawn my attention. If I feel the moist in the corner of my eyes when I am all by myself, I don't blame anyone or anything; I just let the good things roll. Is it proper for a man to cry? Is crying feminine? Or am I too sensitive or too sentimental? Have I forgotten that civilization, in its western model, has highlighted sensitivity at the expense of sentimentality? Is sentiment a bad thing to sexuality?

I once took my daughter to her friend's house. Sung Ho's mother often invites her son's classmates after school. My daughter, Arshi, new to school and London then, refused to go on her own and I had to make myself invited. Huey Ting put on an animation film, *Ice Age*, for the kids. She said the film made her cry. To my surprise, I said, 'I cried too.' Suddenly, Huey Ting changed her version of crying, and said, 'It is not that I was 'Crying, Crying': I was in tears.' And I was quick to amend myself as well and objectified the emotion. I said that the lack of passion in the film could really make one sad. When one sees a dying mother give away her son to animals without any human emotion, one just feels like filling the void with the missing emotion. The woman from Hong Kong agreed.

I hardly knew Huey Ting apart from the formal hellos while dropping off or picking up Arshi from her school. Our little acquaintance probably made us wary of the nature of the topic. Besides, it was ridiculous for two grown-ups to

talk about crying over a children animation film. Crying, if not talking about crying, as Roland Barthes so ambiguously put in *A Lover's Discourse*, is a reversal of values. In fact, I was reminded of the shying away from the tear-ridden *Ice Age* incident in our Critical Theory class on Barthes at Birkbeck College, University of London. Barthes maintained that at a certain point of history 'sensitivity' transformed into 'sentimentality' and wrote: 'In the lover's very tears, our society represses its own timelessness, thereby turning the weeping lover into a lost object whose repression is necessary to its 'health'.'

I began to wonder why it was important for the West to repress tears. Crying in public is almost a taboo in the West. Few years back, an American artist was killed while jogging in the Victoria Park. Her father and elder sister came from America to look at the sympathy notes and flowers laid in honour of the deceased. They attended some press conferences in black dresses and grave faces wearing dark glasses to hide tears. The local media highlighted how dignified they looked in their grief. I can hardly think of a Bangladeshi father and sister being so grave following the loss of a dear one.

The month following September 11, there was a plane crash in New York. Most of the 200 plus victims of the American Airlines were from Dominican Republicans. I was trying to compare and contrast the amount of tears that went into signifying the grief in the two occasions. The Americans after the 9-11 exhibited a well-disciplined, well-schooled grief that soon gathered a translucent shell of pride and strength. You could see the icy cold tears glistening beneath the sheet of crystalline ice. In contrast, the Dominican Republicans, the relatives of the victims showed little care to look dignified in public. It was like muddy floodwater rushing to devour everything. They cried, they wailed, they bemoaned. Just like us, the sentimental Bengalis, I thought. They showed unschooled emotion, so pure and so genuine in their colourless tears.

The macho image of the West well justifies the lack of public emotion. But with strong patriarchy in Bangladesh, how are we to justify the outpouring of tears and their public exhibition by the male. Is tear not only colourless but also genderless?

In our Barthes class, like in any other academic discussion in the West, we somehow find a gender twist. Barthe's sexual orientation as gay makes the matter pertinent too. Barthe's use of tears as a manipulative weapon for his male narrator adds another icing to the gender cake. In response to my observation on the contrasting emotions, one of my classmates mentioned that in certain situations in England it was now acceptable for men to cry in public. But for women it is an absolute no-no. This is news to me.

Tears in women are now considered marks of insincerity. A couple of years back, the British Prime Minister's wife had to read out a public statement regarding her business liaison with a

Tear, Idle Tears

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ABEER HOQUE