

SHORT STORY

Saleha Chowdhury

(Translated by Sabreena Ahmed)

Father is reading in the study. Rumki brushes aside the curtain and peeps in. He is absorbed in a book. The coffee cup on the table is empty. A burning cigarette butt is lying there in the ashtray. Father smokes four to five cigarettes a day. He smokes a cigarette after breakfast in the morning, after lunch, after tea in the afternoon, and the last one after having dinner at 8p.m. Father is a man of strict principles. His aristocratic bearing is stricter than that. Rumki cannot make up her mind if she should enter the study or not. Perhaps Father has noticed that she is standing here. He does not take his eyes off the book as he asks: "Rumki, do you want to say something?"

Rumki enters into the room a smart and sophisticated woman. She is wearing trousers and a t-shirt with the motif of a cat drawn on it. The hair is drawn and tied up high above her neck, a touch of *kajal* in the eyes and perhaps a smidgen of facial cream -- that's it. She looks beautiful - unsurpassable! Actually Rumki is twenty-two years old. A wonderful 'twenty two'-- unlike the 'twenty two' of Rumki's mother's life when she had been tired, exhausted and weak because of the disease in her uterus.

Rumki pulls up a chair beside her father. Father places the bookmark in the book and looks up at Rumki.

"What's the matter, Rumki?" Rumki does not speak.

Father asks, "How is your thesis progressing?"

"Three more months," answers Rumki. Father becomes happy on hearing that. After finishing her honours in biology Rumki is writing her thesis on a difficult subject. Only Rumki and her father live in this house. Her mother had not died at the beginning, though; she died when Rumki was sixteen.

Looking at Rumki's face, her father realises that she has come to him with a special purpose.

"You will like him this time."

"Who's he?"

"He is from Uttar Pradesh, Abinish."

"What does he do?" Father is not bothered about where someone is from. He is interested in the man's speech, manners and behaviour. He sees if he is intelligent or not, and surely the husband of his daughter has to be courteous and gentle. Father had rejected some of the men before. He had been displeased with their talk. Some had

no ambition in life and some others were just blockheads! But Rumki will not marry without her father's consent. Yes, Rumki will marry, and Father has given her permission to search for a bridegroom. He wants Rumki to get married as soon as she has finished her thesis. But the bridegroom has to fulfil all the criteria given by Father; he has to meet Father's approval. This is an unwritten agreement between Father and Rumki.

Rumki grew up and studied in Britain. Now she is doing her thesis. Maybe she will get a well-paid job. Father told her to complete the marriage bit before that. He had said: "You search for the man you like. Then bring him to me once."

A few were rejected. Father did not like the philosophy of life the first one believed in.

He asked, "Give the definition of life."

The boy answered: "Speed." He thought that he had given an appropriate intellectual answer.

But Father took a little time and said: "Do you know that sometimes life has to learn to take a break?"

The boy searched for another intellectual answer. Father inquired about his family. The family history was not very pleasing to hear. His father was a wholesale rice trader in Dhaka. Rumki was ready to give the boy two extra points for his honesty, but not her father.

The next one was so dull-headed that Father bade him goodbye after talking for only five minutes.

He asked: "What is love?" The boy started on such a long lecture that Father became annoyed and said, "Can't you just say it in short? Something like, 'Man's love is only a part of his life. But it's a woman's whole existence!'"

The boy wanted to write a draft of his long lecture.

Father said, "You may go. but do have a cup of tea before leaving."

The third one had made him angry by confessing that he did not like reading books. He was a computer wizard.

"How will you become a human being if you don't read books?" Father asked him directly.

"What do you think I am?"

"Human."

"Then?"

"I have to think of Rumki's future. That responsibility is mine. I want a human being for her, a thoughtful human being who has imagination in him. Someone who won't buy things according to a shopping list. He would be capable of thinking beyond the list. And his thoughts should revolve around reading--not reading for academic studies, but reading for himself."



That was it. This one was dismissed also. Thank heavens that all of them were Rumki's friends, classmates in fact. Or else Rumki would have died of the pain inside her heart. After all of them had left, Rumki stood in front of her father with a smile on her face. "I'm bringing some more. You will definitely like this one."

Father has retired from the executive post of a multi-national company. He reads and sometimes plays golf. Rumki says, "Father, you have been alone all your life."

"Your mother was not with me. I live better without her. I am selecting bride-grooms for you so that you don't feel as she used to. But the best gift of my marriage is you." Saying this, Father goes back to his book.

No, Rumki will not get involved in an affair. Rumki will choose a man approved by her father and marry him. Her father has sacrificed everything in his life for Rumki's sake. She will make him happy in return--this is her decision, a contract. Father also expects that from her.

When Rumki was a rippling eighteen, a boy popped up in front of her out of the blue and then sank like a stone. The boy did not like Rumki's father.

He said: "A woman can have only one man in her life at a time, not two. Both the men will have equal influence on your life. I don't like the way your father controls you."

Rumki watched him go away. She did not say anything.

Rumki is as bright as the stars!

"What will you hold on to if I go away?"

"What other work?"

"I want to do a research on the big lizards of the Galapagos Islands, a research on the successors of the dinosaurs. I was thinking about it for a few days."

"Will you go there alone?"

"What's the harm if I have to?"

"Well, don't forget to take books with you. You'll have your own time after biology. You can read books. But I have a feeling from what you have said that I might like Abinish."

He likes the touch of the boy's hand as he shakes hand with him. It is neither very soft nor rough. He has sparkling, intelligent eyes. He has good hair. Thirty years of age. An attractive way of talking. Father is pleased to note that he has goals. Even his fashionable get-up is nice. Father and Abinish exchange views on different topics. Their opinions match perfectly on various issues. Rumki thinks, "What a surprise! Has this man done a research on Father before coming here?"

The two men empty one wine glass each and then another. Both of them light a cigarette after the meal. Father smiles meekly. It is clear that Rumki will get married within the next three months, just on the day after submitting her thesis. Rumki does not speak much. She merely looks at the two men sitting with her. She listens to their conversation. The way the man takes a spoon to his mouth is also very interesting to watch. Most Asian men do not know how to use different spoons set on the table. They eat dessert with the teaspoon. While listening to their conversation and watching her father's bright smile, Rumki picks up the fork that has fallen and puts it back the table. The fruit cocktail ends. They will go to the living room to take coffee.

Abinish does not notice that some part of his trousers got stuck to the tablecloth quite tightly. The expected incident takes place. Everything on the table drops on the floor with the tablecloth. How did this happen at the last moment? It takes time to put everything back in order.

Then?

Father and Abinish sip on their tea gravely. The conversation on Camus, Sartre, etc., does not go very far. Not even the topic of Paul Valery or Heinrich Heine--father's Chandi Das and his poetry. Abinish stands up. How can this be? The colour of his top coat is same as the colour of father's top coat. And the design on his tie--Father has one exactly like that!

"Good night."

"Good night," Father replies looking at his top coat. He looks at his shoes.

"What size do you wear?"

"Seven-and-a-half."

"That 'half' is where we don't match. I'm size eight," says Father.

"It depends on the shoe company."

"I see." Father seems to be thinking of something.

It is Father's room. Rumki goes to sit there.

"What a day, Father! He dropped everything on the table while going to the living room! Tut tut! How clumsy of him!" says Rumki.

"But he is so much like me. How could it have happened?"

"Clumsy. He made a mess."

Father looks at Rumki's face and says, "What happened with the tablecloth was an accident. It could have happened with me also. Do you have to take it so seriously, Rumki?"

"What are you saying?" replies Rumki. Father is thinking. "Rumki, I am ready to excuse this accident of his."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll have my blessings to marry him."

Rumki looks at her father coldly. She says firmly, "How can I marry such a clumsy person, Father? It's worse than slurping tea or soup. We get married, and we go to a party and the same thing happens? What then? You are not thinking about me."

Father keeps silent. He is a rational man. Rumki stands up and goes to her room.

Rumki did not marry a man wearing shoes, top coat and tie like her father. She had pinned up the man's coat to the tablecloth when she was picking up the fork from underneath the table. Why?

An eighteen-year-old beautiful murmuring brook has been doing some kind of research in the Galapagos Islands for the last three years. In a house with a thatched roof. There is no dining table there, no different types of spoons or plus serviettes and napkins folded Ikebana style. And if need be, one has to eat leaves of trees or the eggs of ants to survive on this island. There lives no man there to either stand by Rumki or be a wall between them. From eighteen years to the age of twenty two.

Weren't six years long enough for Rumki to realise this truth?

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Letter from

MONTREAL

REBECCA SULTANA

My 'Women and Nationalism' class was an eye opener. Over the course of the semester we read fiction, poetry and theory analyzing how entwined women's lives are with the nation and thus made all the more vulnerable as they are forced into difficult positions. The success of my class depended on my students. This was an all female graduate class. The lone male student dropped out at the beginning of the semester claiming overwork and other commitments. These were smart young women, who dissected Spivak, Said, Foucault and Derrida with an acumen that left me breathless. Feminist theories were also discussed, mostly of the Third World variety, again evoking Spivak, Chandra Mohanty, Kumari Jayawardena, Lata Mani and the likes.

But this was not just an erudite and serious class. I brought *laddoos*, *samosas*, and *jilapees* to give them the South Asian gastronomic flavor. When I brought paan to them some were brave enough to take a few nibbles. When I mentioned that nothing beats paan as a deterrent to morning sickness, that really made them interested. They, on the other hand, would bring home-baked brownies and muffins that I would attempt to taste.

Films were an integral part of the class, and I often feared that I might be overwhelming them. *Water* revealed patriarchal complicity in exploiting religious ignorance for more mundane economic reasons. Tagore's *Ghare Baire* highlighted the emancipated "new woman" but also her vulnerability in a society not yet at par with the rising 19th century literary and cultural awakenings. During the showing of *Earth*, Leanne ran out of the class room just before Ayah was dragged out of the house. When she came back and I quizzed if everything was ok, she said that she just couldn't bring herself to watch the scene. Jean Arasanayagam's poetry made it imperative that we learn about the decades-old hostility between Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. The bio-documentary *No More Tears, Sister*, brought tears to our own eyes.

The very last day of the term appeared and I wondered what we should do to wrap up the class. Everybody agreed that after the heavy dose of somber movies, we needed something to perk us up, especially considering the end of semester stress of meeting deadlines. I settled on

Of Paan, Parineeta and Parvati

Parineeta, having found the movie likeable in its simplicity, beautiful music and the happy ending. I was also well aware of its enormous popularity.

After providing them some literary background of the movie, I selected the subtitles and sat back to enjoy it one more time. They were duly forewarned that in a typical Bollywood movie people would suddenly burst out in songs for no apparent reasons and would remain in full makeup during the entire length of the day, but as soon as the first giggle started I realized I was in for a bumpy ride.

I continued to provide tidbits about Bengali culture and to clarify the Shekhar and Lalitha relationship until we came to the scene when the two meet on the staircase on his wedding day. As Shekhar swooped his palm down on Lalitha's face as a slap, Leanne's "Whoa" almost drowned the collective gasps that emanated from the rest of the class. I, too, became troubled. I sat through the rest of the movie not enjoying myself any more. As the movie ended, Leanne asked, "She ended up marrying him? I would never marry anyone who hit me like that." Come to think of it, would I have, given the chances? Heck no! But wait, didn't I just say I had liked this movie? Why did I never think anything about a man's hitting a woman? Was I that inculcated into the dominant ideology of a woman's place in a man's world? Of course, the fact that it was all done through a misunderstanding and that later Shekhar repents, altogether exonerates him in the eyes of his female fans. While most reviewers underscored the refreshing quality of a movie sans violence, what does one call hitting a woman so hard she falls?



Misunderstandings or not, let's call what it is - brute violence.

Those who have read the actual Saratchandra novel know that Lalitha is thirteen years old when the novel starts. She is, however, seventeen when the story ends with the prospect of her marriage. By fourteen she had resigned herself to a life without love, and to the

fact that she must lose the man she feels married to for no fault of her own. She knows that she will never stop loving him though he is revealed to be a self-righteous coward. Lalitha in the novel is a child without a childhood, the carefree kind that would suit someone of her age today, as she dealt with responsibilities that would appear to us far beyond her years. We must remember though, that it wasn't until the 1891 Age of Consent Act that the marriageable age for Bengali girls in Kolkata was increased to twelve and later to fourteen. But, of course, to show a thirteen-year-old in love, even by Bollywoodian standards, would have made a Lolita out of Lalitha.

In the movie itself, it is hard to see what Lalitha sees in this man not withstanding his occasional buying her trinkets and providing easy access to his pocket money. Girish is, by far, a better choice of a male. Still, all is fine at the end, misunderstandings are sorted out and Shekhar and Lalitha get married, but one wonders if he actually deserves her. Interestingly Shekhar's indecisiveness are remarkable in them-

selves, in that they disclose the defining role that male ego can play in a relationship, and on the quandary of a generation that, on the whole, had not learnt to stand up to dominating fathers.

Speaking of domineering fathers, no one takes the cake more than Devdas's father. The first and only time I read the novel was just after my school finals when I had all the time in the world to kill. Having already had hearty doses of Mills and Boons and Harlequin romances, I still was not as stary eyed as not to see through Devdas' flimsy façade. Finishing the novel, I found him to be the perfect candidate for Alcoholic Anonymous, a ne'er-do-well weakling, a sorry example of a grown-up male and as males of this version go, ready to pick on those smaller in size--in other words, Parvati. He hits Parvati hard enough to give her a bleeding wound. The worse thing than the blow is Parvati's glorifying the scar.

In the glitzy version of the movie there are similar glorifications galore. This is a movie as misogynistic as violent towards women. The patriarchal rhetoric of the dialogues justifies verbal and physical violence against women. All the women characters are identified simply by their relationships with men. And again, what is even more difficult to absorb is how women themselves are shown accepting of such behavior. But let me not get started on this one too.

Coming back to my class, there are things that have made me proud. While reading *Sultana's Dream*, my class marveled at such early depiction of Bengali Muslim women's writing, contradicting the more negative portrayal of women from that area. Around the same time, Dr. Yunus' Nobel prize was especially welcome considering Grameen's reputation of working with disenfranchised women. Caitlin, especially, became an instant fan, updating me with Dr. Yunus sightings on the media. She was especially moved to see him being interviewed on the Jon Stewart show.

This is the show, Caitlin had informed me earlier, that young people of her generation in North America get their political views from, rather than from the more mainstream news channels. Once, in an after class casual talk that veered towards American politics and foreign policy, I vented my frustration at the complete nonchalance of the American public to the current administration. Caitlin protested. It came out that she is American. Oops. I said, "No, no," she protested, "I'm equally frustrated." Young people do protest, Caitlin insisted. What frustrated her was the absolute absence of an impact of such protests. "Look what happened during Vietnam," she pointed out. "No one cares anymore today." Lara, another transplanted American to Canada, agreed. She ventured that it's probably fear, or not wanting to be portrayed as unpatriotic that could be the deterrent to a mass uprising like the Vietnam era ones. It was heartening, nonetheless, to see these young people with conscience. Yet, I still wonder how much clout they carry and whether the rest of the world have patience enough to wait until this generation comes to power. For now, Caitlin is more amazed to see Stewart, who usually cracks irreverent jokes with his guests, spare Dr. Yunus a similar treatment, clearly being over awed himself.

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Book Review

The skies promise nothing

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

No God In Sight by Altaf Tyrewala; Delhi: Penguin Books; 2006; pp. 171.

These are the tales of the ordinary, those who constitute life as it is. The grandeur upon which literature shapes itself, or attempts to come wrapped in, is not what comes alive in this Altaf Tyrewala endeavour. What is alive here is a morose way of observing individuals and the thousand and one banalities they are straitjacketed in. In a manner of speaking, when you meet all the Sohail Tambawalas, collide into the various identities of all these men bearing an identical name, you could be running into a myriad dark possibilities. For one of these innumerable Tambawalas is a terrorist, has been accused of being one. Another has a wife waiting in apprehension for him. Mistaken identities, or varied ones, are the stuff of the tales here.

And the tales branch out in very many directions before coming together once again to sketch a somewhat composite picture of life in Bombay (you could, in the manner of political correctness, even call it Mumbai). But it is life that is not lived on the broad avenues of the urban jungle. It subsists in the alleys and by-lanes where the struggle to eke out a living swiftly, and regularly, puts all possibilities of dreams to flight. Consider the case of Suleiman, the aggrieved Muslim who must now elicit an answer to the overwhelming question he places before his great-grandfather, the man who is father to his decaying Shazia-dadi. "What came over you? What mischief made you a bloody Muslim?"

It is a city of fear, the strands of which course quietly but insistently through men like Suleiman. Conversion has only deepened their anxieties and loosened their hold on the future. Of course Suleiman gets no answer. Some questions are too much of a rigmarole to be resolved with a credible response. The inability of Nawaz-'saab' to explain to Mr. Joshi and his culture-seeking son Abhay the precise meaning of the poetic thought -- *Bukhara-e junoon shabo khayalon rooh maheer* -- falls within the ambit of the queries that defy explanation. Nawaz's bubbling perspiration then leads him into an irreversible process of decline. His dead father's ill-fitting *sherwani* will not help him any. A dream of economic security, through peddling poetry, is thus brought to nought.

In these chronicles that define the mundane realities of the common herd, waiting is of the

essence. Nilofer, the young woman in need of work, typifies the quiet desperation which eats away at the core of sensibilities. She waits at the door of a flat, expecting to be appointed as a maid. The wait fizzles into nothing. The sense of things not happening is what Altaf Tyrewala projects through his characters, each of whom takes centre stage, in turns as it were. Rina waits, even as she lets her hands run across the back of her lover, in anticipation of the sex she has turned into a matter of routine with him. But GK, the lover, is weighed down by ambition or ill luck or both. Balbir Pasha waits for him, for the team from Breaking News, dying to be spotted on television as a gallant police officer who has made a remarkable kill. All of them wait; and every desire gets to be nipped in the transition between a bud and a flower.

Take a few steps back and chance upon the sentimental Hamida. Marriage has been her ambition for years, and yet prospects of conjugal happiness have progressively receded for her. But she waits, for the one man she has wanted. Rafiq has explored her, has held her mouth in liplock for long minutes despite all the marriages he has gone through. Hamida understands his compulsions, and so keeps a firm lid on the probability of revulsion rising in her. She will be his fourth wife, or she thinks. She hides her time. Meanwhile, age begins to take its toll.

There is a plethora of expectations in the narrative. The chicken seller Jamal Seth plods wearily through his business of the day. What day? That for him and his friends begins in the evening as they go looking for erotic pleasures. Shakila, the woman in the black sari and white sleeveless blouse, will not disappoint them, not even when a power outage interrupts the gaiety of the evening. She gyrates, swings her left arm about and keeps the right one suggestively on her crotch. It is eerie, a disturbing image of no light and absent music and pointless simulated sensuality.

In the end, hollowness is all. There are gaping wounds all around, bodies in anticipation of embraces, youth in search of purpose. The Mahant visits Barauli for the second time in a month; and communal passions are stirred.

It is a scarred landscape. The skies promise nothing.

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