

SHORT STORY

Eternal Exiles

PURABI BASU

(Translated by Niaz Zaman)

Many, many years ago, there was a land called Tutki. The king of Tutki was as cruel as he was evil and false. As a result, the sufferings of the people knew no bounds. There were two groups of people who lived in Tutki: the Tutki and the Toytoy. The relationship between the two groups was very cordial. Their features, their food habits, their clothes, their language, their manners were very similar. The only way one could tell them apart was through their names. The name of every Toytoy ended with "y" and that of every Tutki with "ki." However, in order to divert attention from his own failings and the ripple of dissatisfaction in the kingdom, the cruel king would point the finger at the Toytoy.

He would raise a thousand questions about the loyalties of the Toytoy. And their patriotism. In order to safeguard his own throne, he sowed seeds of suspicion in the minds of the people and succeeded in incensing the majority against the Toytoy. It was on one such occasion that an elderly Toytoy couple lost their lives. Before dying, they advised their three sons, Aloy, Niloy, and Somoy, to leave Tutki and go far away. They specially insisted that the three should go in three different directions: east, west, and north. In this way perhaps at least one of them would survive to continue the legacy of their parents.

Grieving for their departed parents, Aloy, Niloy, and Somoy swore that, no matter what, they had to survive. War, protest, justice, none of it was possible if they did not survive. According to advice their parents had given them, the three brothers set forth from their homes in the darkness of the night. They walked for hours in the deep forest until they came to an abandoned house. According to their parents this house was on the borders of the kingdom of Tutki. It was at this point that the three brothers had to part to go their separate ways. Slashing their way through the dense forest, they would go their separate ways. They would make sure, however, to mark the path they had taken, so that exactly a year later, at the time of the

full moon in the month of Magh, in late winter, they would be able to find their way to the same spot to recount their adventures. Then they would decide whether they should return home to Tutki or leave permanently to settle elsewhere. Before dawn broke, the three brothers embraced each other and said farewell. Niloy went north, Somoy went west, and Aloy east.

The full moon shone in the vast expanse of the sky. It was not only their companion as they set forth on their solitary quest, but also their guardian.

A year later on the night of the Maghi Purnima, the full moon shone bright again in the midnight sky. One by one the three brothers arrived at the lonely house in the deep forest. Before dawn broke, they would each have to narrate his tale so that they could decide what to do, where to go. So, instead of wasting any time, each began to narrate the story of his adventure.

Niloy's Story

After walking for three days and three nights, Niloy finally reached a kingdom which, form all appearances was no different from Tutki. So much so that the features of the people, their houses and dwelling places, their plants and trees were all similar to those of Tutki. When, hungry and tired, Niloy asked a passerby the name of the place, he learned that the name of the place was Toytoy. He felt relieved that no eyebrows were raised when he told people that his name was Niloy. Normally, the people of Tutki too did not show surprise. But the terrible dance of death that had taken away Niloy's parents had made it impossible for any in Tutki to have remained indifferent to his name. That is why Niloy was relieved.

Aloy and Somoy: What did you like about the place?

Niloy: Though it wasn't home, everything appeared similar to what it was back home. Even though the people spoke somewhat differently, I could understand what they said. And they could understand what I said. The people of Toytoy eat the same food that we do - though their way of cooking is slightly different. They also wear the same clothes that we do though here too their ways of wearing them are slightly



artwork by annina

different. What was best of all was that when I said that my name was Niloy no one showed any surprise. Because our features are similar, people didn't realize that I was a stranger immediately.

Aloy and Somoy: What did you dislike?

Niloy: The lack of knowledge and the lack of interest of the king of Toytoy and his people to those who were not Toytoy. In many ways the miserable living conditions of the people of Toytoy was similar to that of the people of Tutki. What pained me most was that I was so near and yet so far from my motherland. Because things were so similar and yet so different, it was inevitable that I would be constantly reminded of Tutki.

Aloy and Somoy: Will you leave Toytoy and return to Tutki?

Niloy: No. All things considered, I am doing all right here. Why should I return to uncertainty?

Somoy's Story

After walking for seven days and seven nights and occasionally taking a boat, Somoy finally reached the kingdom of Tuton. There was no similarity between the kingdom of Tuton and the kingdom of Tutki. Even the people were completely different. The clothes they wore, the food they ate, their likes and dislikes were completely different. And their language? At the beginning, Somoy could not understand a single word of what they said.

However, he gradually started to understand their language. The houses were different, the plants and trees were different. Even the climate was completely different from that of Tutki's.

Aloy and Niloy: What did you like about that kingdom?

Somoy: There is no end to the things one can like in the kingdom of Tuton. There is plenty of food there, beautiful clothes, plenty of money, and well designed houses for everyone. The people eat healthy food, their smiles are cheerful, and their faces calm and content. There are no hungry, ragged beggars on the streets. There is little disease. And even if people do fall ill, good medical care is readily available. People do not look suspiciously at someone named "Somoy." The king of that place is not cruel as is the king of Tutki. He is always concerned about the welfare of his subjects.

Aloy and Niloy: Isn't there anything you dislike about that kingdom?

Somoy: There is. Even after getting everything, there are some things one cannot get there. Even though there is plenty of food there, the foods I had back home in Tutki are not available for love or money. I cannot speak in my mother tongue to express my innermost thoughts. I cannot wear the clothes I was used to wearing at home. Most of all, one cannot be happy all alone. One cannot be happy unless one can share one's happiness with someone close.

But I do not have a single intimate friend, a single relation in that kingdom. The people there are so different, that even if one wants to, it is impossible to forget that one is a foreigner, in a foreign land.

Aloy and Niloy: Will you return, leaving that place?

Somoy: No. No I am quite comfortable there. Why should I return to a life of uncertainty?

Aloy's Story

The place that Aloy reached after walking eastwards for a whole day and night was not at all similar to Tutki. There was nothing of Tutki's flat plain here. The place was mountainous. Aloy was famished after walking for such a long time. Thinking that perhaps the road on the left led to some habitation, he started walking in that direction. After walking for some time, he had the strange feeling that he had visited the place earlier. He tried to shake off that thought, telling himself that in all his life he had never left the kingdom of Tutki. But he could not get rid of that uncanny feeling. It was almost dawn. People had not awoken yet. After a little while he came to a crossroad. On the right was a huge banyan tree. Aloy suddenly had the thought that if he took the road on the right he would soon come to a double-storeyed building, and that after that there would be a large pond. Across the pond there would be a building of white marble. Full of curiosity, Aloy took the road on the right and started to walk along it. What a surprise! There stood the red brick building -- except that it was three-storeyed not two. Beyond it was a large pond on the banks of which stood the huge building made of white marble. Was he dreaming? Aloy pinched himself. No, he was truly awake. But his heart was pounding in his excitement.

Holding his breath, Aloy ran towards the ghat. Four, five, six, seven steps. He quickly ran down the steps till he was standing on the lowest step, washed by the water of the pond. He looked at each step to see whether he could discern any distinguishing marks. Failing to see any, he started to scrub away the moss-covered step washed by the water. He seemed to be looking for some invaluable treasure. When he did discover what he was looking for, his hands and feet grew

cold and numb. Below the moss were written the letters "A" and "N." There was no room for further doubt. The mists of memory cleared away. Aloy realized that he had really visited the place before. Once as children he and Niloy had gone to visit a maternal uncle. The maternal uncle had taken them to a *mela*. On their way to the *mela*, they had stopped in this village. The pond *ghat* was being repaired at the time. The concrete plaster had just been smoothed out. Unknown to their uncle, the two brothers had scratched their initials on the soft plaster. Dumbfounded, Aloy realized that, though he had walked for such a long time, he was still in Tutki. And it was there that Aloy had spent the entire year.

Niloy and Somoy: What do you like there?

Aloy: I like everything. I am in my own land, with my own people. I still do what I did before. I talk the way I always have, I see what I have seen before, I wear what I've always worn. Everywhere there are friends and acquaintances. What more do I need?

Niloy and Somoy: Were our parents wrong then? Was it not necessary to leave Tutki at all? Unlike us haven't you lost anything?

Aloy: I have.

Niloy and Somoy: What is it?
Aloy: My name. No one knows me as Aloy there. To them I am Alki.

Niloy and Somoy: Do you want to go back there? Or do you want to come somewhere else?

Aloy: No. I will return there. Why should I leave my hearth and home for some uncertain place?

It was not long before dawn would break. The three brothers embraced each other and set off in their separate directions.

Somoy went west.

Niloy went north.

Aloy went east.

The full moon of Magh was once more their solitary companion and only witness.

Purabi Basu is a noted Bengali writer. Niaz Zaman is an academic, writer and translator. The above story is included in the forthcoming book of translated stories, *Radha Will Not Cook Today*, publishers Writers.inK, Dhaka

Skater Girl

ANDREW MORRIS

In the beginning was the image. A spell-binding, captivating sight -- one so extraordinary on Dhaka's streets that I am already wondering if it wasn't a trick of the light, an optical illusion, a fanciful epiphany.

I was sitting in my car on the way to work down one of the city's wide avenues. Half-concentrating on my book, half-trying to block out the brass band of fifty types of car horn. By chance I glanced up and across the street, attracted perhaps by a sudden movement, as of a tropical bird darting into flight. The other side of the road at first seemed unusually quiet. Then I saw her, right in the middle. Her arms were outstretched and she seemed to be *gliding*. It took a moment to realise that this was a powerful young woman actually roller-blading down the road: a pure symbol of grace, freedom and movement. Her face was striking in the morning light, against the blurred background of trees. I recall her scarlet tracksuit, her hair daubed with a gleam of creamy sun and the fact that she was smiling with utter exhilaration. But before I could drink in any more details, the traffic on my side closed in and swept us along like a swarm of hornets, and the image was lost for ever.

Or was it? I thought no more of it, until later that week I heard a muffled knocking in my skull. It slowly became clear that in a moment when my concentration lapsed, this magical girl had actually slipped in to my head and was now captive there. But she was soon plaintively dissatisfied with this narrow imprisonment, pleading for release, like a princess in a mediaeval tower. And at that moment I understood I had to free her in the only way I knew: through putting her on a page.

Why bother? Why not put in some earplugs, leave her locked up and let her languish in there, fading slowly into oblivion?

I can think of some very good reasons why. First, a realisation that in a rapidly-changing world, these moments of extraordinary significance need to be held on to. They cannot be allowed to slip away. For too many years I did that, and now thousands of such images lie buried in the rubble of my past.

But then the challenge arises of how to convey these images in words. The problem is, there are so many damn words around -- which ones to choose? The art, I suppose, lies in emulating the sculptor who sees the statue *inside* the stone, and simply works to liberate it. And so, from the vast body of words in the lexicon, the trick is to eliminate all the useless ones, the false leads, the vain, pompous and purple, and to allow just the right ones to remain. Not an easy feat. Each time the initial written description is re-read minute changes are made. The final product emerges only slowly, and tentatively, until the words seem, to your eyes at least, to have assumed their rightful and final resting place.

There is also of course the thorny question of recall -- how reliable is the image now floating in front of my eyes? I can hardly depend on my tricky memory: I have returned to too many cities looking for exactly that graceful mosque and golden fountain which adjoined each other so clearly together in my mind, only to find they occupied different streets altogether. Perhaps if that skating moment had been caught on video camera, I would be wrong in almost every detail. But this doesn't matter: what matters is that she was there. She was a spark, a catalyst, though she herself is of course blissfully unaware of the subsequent chain of events in my head.

Besides, the image that remains with me now has as much right to life as the original reality. Creative writing means working with these raw materials and crafting them so that their essence and their beauty can emerge, not documenting them microscopically like some scribbling clerk.

And as you do so, you cause others to be inspired or moved, to laugh, weep or close their eyes in silent remembrance. Here is our second reason: writing allows us to share. Each of us has access to unique experiences which can be relayed to others or remain locked in our own minds, but what good can they do there? I want you to treasure this image too. And in return I beg for those remarkable tableaux which you have squirreled away. Let's have 'em: they're too good to hide in a drawer, or leave in the dusty corridors of our own heads.

Of course, if I'm honest, there may also be a third reason for this urge to write. Is it just about capturing and sharing moments of note, or is the writer also driven by the tempting idea of leaving something to posterity -- a modest memorial inscribed with the epitaph: "I was here. I existed"? Perhaps there is a little of that: we have precious little else to comfort us when set against the certain knowledge that we will die, be remembered for a while, then disappear for ever from living memory. Who now recalls your grandfather's grandfather?

Maybe we should also acknowledge our sense of pleasure that what we write will be read by others, that we have an audience. There may be a few driven souls out there whose writing exists for themselves alone, but for many the relationship to a readership is vital. Our writing needs to be read. If you were the last person on earth, would you still want to write?

But for now, there are still plenty of people around, still legions of readers to reach. So waste no time. Look around, (writing can make you a better observer too), drink in the vivid details of what you see, use your every sense, and start to create. These moments which are too important to let slip, too precious to hoard to yourself. Find a quiet place, let your pen hover over the page, breathe deeply, and begin.

Andrew Morris is an expatriate British writer living in Dhaka.

Second Daily Star Anthology : Date Extension

The Daily Star literature page, in order to promote English-language writing among Bangladeshis, had announced the publication of an anthology of non-fiction writing. The last date for submission of articles has now been extended to July 31, 2007. Authors who have already sent in their pieces can send in revised material if they so wish.

--The Literary Editor

Book Review Poet of Ease

Farhad Ahmed

Five Faces of Eve by Rumana Siddique; Dhaka: Writers.inK; 2007; pp. 80; Tk. 400

Five Faces of Eve is a collection of poems by Rumana Siddique, who teaches in the English department of Dhaka University. The book's blurb informs us that the poems "have been written over a span of twenty-five years." They have been arranged in the volume in five sections, beginning with 'The Girl', then going through 'The Lover', 'The Wife', 'The Mother' and lastly, 'The Woman', thus to an extent, but not wholly, sequentially depicting the multiple roles that women's lives evolve through.

The blurb, though, is confusing in a couple of ways. It pronounces that "Women's art, whether literature or painting, is a means of sharing their experiences with the world" which begs the question: what does art by men (or even those who claim to be in between the two 'privileged' genders in our age) represent, and is art's function determined by gender. Equally, it goes on to inform us that "the volume aspires for a collective voice by drawing lines from women poets of different countries and ages...which is complemented by paintings of women artists from Bangladesh". And indeed while the paintings reproduced at the beginning of each section are top drawer, and make for an unusual effect in a book of poems, one notes that among the "lines drawn" from such convent school staples as Emily Dickinson and Edna St. Vincent Millay, there are also a couple of males, and showy ones at that, with their bogs and fens and sprung rhythm: Milton and Marvell.

Going through most of the poems is a genuinely pleasant experience, since Rumana Siddique has staked a definite claim to a certain expanse of a Bengali woman's (but one whose childhood was spent abroad, in East and West Africa and England) experience. Though she crafts her poems from the familiar raw material of a woman's life, with the poems abounding with references to rings, relatives, 'salty fears', 'letter of passion', miscarriages, 'contagious giggles', bangles, motherhood, cold waters and hot skillet, etc., and speaks in everyday tones, Rumana is far less a poet of the moment than how that particular moment imprints itself on her mind. The poems provide less a view than the angle of the view, the portrayal--an unveiling if you like--of a consciousness comfortable with its habitat:

The conversation meanders
As conversations do
From the general to the me and you
In between shared parathas
Sugar-free coffee and laughter
She ponders, "Is there really
No happily ever after?"



Or:
I love cupping my coffee mug
Close to my face
Looking at its colour
Feeling warmth, savouring smell
Intoxicating fumes, wafting up...
I'm addicted to coffee
Overwhelmingly so
But you?
I guess I just didn't know.

Here the easy, unpretentious rhythms of the short sentences (the lines coinciding firmly with the sentence) calmly chiming in with the movement of the thoughts reflect a woman registering Dhaka in an uncomplex way, with the steadiness of a

woman of a certain class, diction, upbringing and manners. Even when she writes:

Reds of rage and passion
Blacks of death and depression
Greens of innocence and envy
Whites of purity and fear...

no particular feeling of strain, no sense of unease is produced in the reader, though the "over-permeable belles" in referring to present-day English lasses (in the poem 'Twenty Years On') may make some readers wince. Rumana is really a poet of equanimity and ease, whose better poems confidently reflect a small dance of light and shadow, of the interplay of everyday matter and sensibility. Even in the three poems where she is critical about men (as faithless lovers, as chauvinists and macho bipeds) the poems' temperaments do not rise above a certain level and the poetic register remains unruddled. In the poems where she departs from her usual form, as in the concrete poems, the quality is uneven, and at times unconvincing.

Given our local constraints, the production standards of writers.inK publications are demonstrably high. A distinct pleasure in this volume was seeing "complemented" -- in the blurb quoted in the beginning paragraph of this review--correctly spelled, a true rarity in Dhaka, where in its myriad English language productions it's always 'its', 'complimented' slips in as 'complemented' and vice versa, and 'lose' eternally weighted down with the extra vowel as 'loose'.

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Dear Editor

I read the book review entitled 'Books from the Ekushay Boi Mela: On Anisul Hoque and Dr Mohit Kamal' by Mr Azfar Aziz, published in the literature page on March 17, 2007. The review delighted me as Azfar Aziz touched upon the time-relevant issue, the mushroom growth of cheap writings and writers. It is a traditional belief that a Bengali having an iota of education becomes a maniac of writing poetry or story. The saying 'A little learning is a dangerous thing' is pertinent here. It is a great regret that the people with the mania are not aware of danger regarding being poets and writers. Azfar Aziz wrote, "Even the lowest-grade writers of the 19th and 20th century would surely turn over in their graves from shame if they knew that these sort of books are nowadays considered popular Bangla literature", which, I think, is well justified.

I also read the write-up entitled 'Book Review: An Exchange' in the mail bag of the Star Literature of April 21, 2007 by two students of Islamic University of Khulna. Munmun Ali and Umme Salma are perhaps emotional readers of literature of the 21st century. Maybe their tender psyches has been swirled by the invectives on the bestseller of Ekushay Boi Mela 2007. Maybe they cried out as well as got thrilled with the characters of the stories they swallowed, which compelled them to 'lecture' Azfar Aziz. Consequently Munmun and Salma requested the critics (maybe especially Azfar Aziz) to ask the readers about the real mystery of *Chandmukh's* success. It is a true conundrum indeed! I would add a different analogy. The most accurate and best films in the film industries of the world earn critics' awards, while the common viewers rebuff such films. The average readers of the present time, who entertain themselves by reading books replete with raw, bemusing ingredients, also keep the finest and valued books away. They sometimes choose books with attractive labels for reading. Most general readers of Bangladesh are unable to select good books with excellent standards. The number of good readers in the country is disappointingly very few. We altogether should find a way out to bring forth the quality writers who can generate genuine readers of literature. I heartily congratulate Azfar Aziz.

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Twenty Years On

Twenty years on
I visited teenage haunts
Amazed, appalled
How same it was, the place
How different they seemed, the people
British public transport
Reliable and ruddy as ever
Kissing couples on tube escalators
And double-decker back seats
Never gave it a thought then
T-shirts and tattoos with "Love Forever"
Were okay, even cool
Now I kept thinking, transient adorations
And in public too, silly fools!
Trees still as beautiful, paths still as curved
Then nature walks sparked dreams and plans
Now they left me pensive, wanting more
Angry, resentful of parks and playgrounds
Even fresh air that I couldn't take back
To a choked city elsewhere
Senior citizens in coffee shops, still delicate
Quaint and amiable as then
When I had smiled, chatted and soon forgotten
Now I viewed frailty with terrified eyes
Cut and paste dream visions of
My parents' faces moulded their sad smiles
But mostly the generation that then I knew
I looked at now without a clue
What goaded pierced eyebrows
Belly-buttons and tongues?
Would this bevy of over-permeable belles
One day seduce my sons?
Twenty years on
A visit to teenage haunts
Made me clearly see
That what had changed was mostly me.