

SHORT STORY

A Night to Remember

JACKIE KABIR

There was no bus at the stoppage; it was five-thirty in the afternoon and there should be one, I thought to myself. Maybe it had been delayed because of the heavy downpour. So I waited.... one bus came and brushed past leaving me standing as a helpless bystander. It was full to its steps like the puddles on the road-side....overflowing.

Nothing else could be seen in the heavy rainfall, just some "private cars" rushing to their respective destinations. It had been pouring heavily since morning and I was quite sure there would be no usual vehicle for me to ride home. Panic-stricken, I started to walk to see if there was any other type of transport. In the meantime I got wet and was continuing to get wetter even though I had the umbrella. The raindrops fell diagonally and I could barely save my head from getting drenched.

"Come on! Come on!" someone shouted. It was a Rider; a four-wheeler to carry 10 to 15 passengers most of whom were scanty-wage people like myself and it was the helper who was trying to attract the attention of the passengers. I thanked my lucky stars and hopped in. It was so jam-packed that I almost felt sick when I got inside. The heat of the engine mixed with the body heat of so many people in a small cubicle made the inside of the vehicle almost unbearably hot. I felt nauseous as I sat down squashed between two elderly people as it continued to rain. The people inside the rider were talking amongst themselves:

"Allah's wrath is pouring on us. We were boiling for the last two weeks and look at it today, it's raining as though the sky is going to fall on us."

"What can you expect with the things that's going on in the country!"

Someone else was saying something else which I couldn't be bothered to pay attention to as I was too caught up with my own thoughts. Had I shut the window this morning before I left? Couldn't recall doing so. Oh my God! Some of my books were scattered on the bed--with this kind of heavy pour it was bound to get drenched. When the vehicle stopped with a jerk I came back to my immediate plight: this was as far as the automobile went. I could understand the reason as soon as I got out; the lane on which my house was located was flooded completely. The whole area looked like a river, with buildings sprouting from its bed. There was a strange, unfamiliar smell that struck my nostrils as I tried to approach my house on foot. The water was above my ankle at the mouth of the road. As I approached further the water level increased gradually. It was above my knee. My trousers made my legs feel heavy and it became more difficult to walk and I suspected that I might fall into a hole. There was an empty rickshaw coming from the opposite direction giving out ripples all around me. I asked him if he could take me to the end of the lane; he said I'd have to pay him 15 taka. 15 taka! While 5 taka was more than enough on a usual day. Near to tears I agreed as I didn't want to waste any more time to see what awaited me at home. By now I was completely drenched--*kakbheja* as they would say in Bangla. And parts of my body exposed to the road water started itching.

I lived in a house with a family of four and it was a three-storied building on the road. Ours was the ground floor. It was my third year with them and I had become a family member. My real family lived in Khulna and before I stayed with these people I had stayed in the university hall devoid of all support a regular family life provided, so I was quite happy to get all that I missed in exchange of a portion of my salary. The best person in the house was five-year-old Rumki, who was simply adorable. Even her mother couldn't take her away from my bed and on most nights she liked to sleep with me. Apart from Rumki's parents there was Rumki's grandma who was an elderly person and stayed in the adjacent room to mine. It was also the family's living room.

As my rickshaw approached my house I could feel that the day-long rain had left us waterlogged. I went inside quickly and unlocked my room.

It was already dark and I put the light on. The whole bed was soaked on the window side. The red-and-black striped curtain was reduced to a black piece of cloth stuck to the window pane. The water that had trickled down the wall was spreading on the ground.

"Auntie, see how hard it's raining today?" Rumki ran to my room with her usual shout. She had a pretty face with a flat nose and a bob. She was so thin that she looked even younger than her age.

Hurriedly I removed my books and rubbed them with an even wetter scarf of mine.

"Oh Auntie, you are all wet!! Can I get wet too?"

"No, you can't, you will catch a cold my dear!" I tried to explain.

Quickly I took a shower and got changed. In the meantime the rain continued. And as it got darker the water level also started rising. Slowly but surely. Our grandma ran around with one of Rumki's rulers with which she was measuring how high the water was rising. We were scared that the house might get flooded if the rain doesn't stop sometime soon

It didn't stop.

We cursed each car that passed through the road as it left huge waves which came over the verandah and almost came inside our main door. We took turns checking how far it was before we were flooded. And finally at around nine at night, when we were getting ready for our dinner, the water started to seep through our main door with the smooth fluidity of a snake. The waste water pipes gave out water in the opposite direction both in the kitchen and the bathrooms. In a matter of minutes the small house was overflowing with pitch dark, filthy water.

artwork by amina

place in Khulna where it never floods due to the Sundarbans which protects us. Even my grandfather couldn't ever recall seeing that area flooded.

Everyone but Rumki looked as though they had lost the most valuable thing they owned. The drain water mixed with rainwater along with all the dirt of the road seemed to have invaded our private sanctuary; it had violated our innermost dignity. Life seemed meaningless now. All our furniture was immersed in a foot of water and I could almost see germs crawling along the body of all of them.

"Don't throw it!" I heard Rumki's mother shouting.

Splash! Splash!

I came out to see what was happening. Rumki was throwing things into the water. And as the water splashed she clapped her little hands. It was like a game to her.

Rumki's mother was desperately trying to prevent her from throwing things but she screamed and kicked her legs in the air as her mother tried to take her in her arms. I intervened and took her to my room and as I put her down on my bed she sat there quietly for a split of a second. As soon as I turned my eyes from her she threw my comb in the filthy water. I gave her a stern look.

As Rumki's father returned home he was flabbergasted seeing the condition of the house. He asked if Rumki should be sent away to her maternal grandma's house for the night. He worked in a private company so usually he always came home at different times but it was inevitably after dusk.

"No, I don't want to go" screamed Rumki "But this place is like a river. Where will you sleep, Rumki? Your grandma will have chocolates for you. You can play with your Auntie, no one will say anything to you."

But the little person was very determined that she'd stay back.

I felt sad as I looked through the two-bedroom house; it looked a mess. All the wooden sofas were on top of one another. The kitchen utensils were all stacked on the dining table. We all forgot about dinner. I tried to look back and think whether I had ever felt this kind of distress or discomfort in my entire life. My memory failed me. But like the saying goes, the show must go on. I thought of our forgotten dinner and declared: "Let's get ourselves to eat something. Surely we can't starve!"

So it was decided that we would eat in turns. Rumki was fed by her mother and Grandma and Rumki's father took the plates

on their hands and ate the rice and fish with dal. They both had to go to different rooms so that they could sit on their beds.

As they finished eating Rumki's mother and I took our turn. Although I felt inexplicably famished I couldn't get myself to eat. I felt pukie-sh and smelt the foul water in everything.

The colour of the water was absolutely black. God knows how many types of germs are there, I thought, as I walked around the house barefoot.

Grandma decided she needed to use the toilet.

But there was no toilet. Everything was under one foot of water. As I peeped inside the toilet I felt disgusted. The water had mixed with the latrine water as well.

"I am desperate!" she whispered to me.

I called Rumki's mother and asked for some advice. At that moment I felt so helpless that tears started rolling down my face. I just felt that everything was meaningless. The world became a very hostile place to live in. As I looked at Rumki's mother I could sense the feeling of helplessness within her too.

It was as though we were the unwanted inhabitants of mother earth. I looked around myself. All I could see was the water--water which had given me the feeling of disgust, irritation and loss of pride. I lifted my mattress where I saved the few plastic bags from buying little accessories from here and there. I withdrew one and asked Grandma if she could use it as her toilet. I suggested that she should sit at the edge of the bed and use the plastic bag. We shut the door behind us.

The rain became thinner eventually early in the morning and we did get to clean the house the next day. After the water subsided we got bleaching powder and Savlon to clean the premises. Life, for us, went back to its normal chores, but the night's onrush left a deep imprint--evoking fear for the rest of our lives.

Jackie Kabir lives and works in the UK.

The North-East: A divided music

Supreeta Singh

I.

Ruben could not play his music. We were staying at the border town of Moreh in Manipur, inhabited by Kukis. And Ruben was a Naga, which meant that he could not sit with his fiddle outside on the steps of Yatri Nivas and sing songs of his clan. This would miff the Kukis and he dare not take the risk. As the clouds gradually gathered over the mountaintops and evening was announced by the falling light, silence reigned supreme over the land, broken only by the buzz of the insects, the drizzling rain and the whirring of fans. Then from atop the hill just on the other side of the lodge wafted the rhythmic beat of drums. The evening prayer of the Kuki church was in session. The outside was bathed in darkness and nothing could be seen. Only the primal beats that were pure music and evoked a mythical response could be heard; the slow, soft and regular beats benumbed the mind as if a distant lullaby from nowhere really. Inside the lodge in the downstairs drawing room, Joshy, Razzak, Molly, Pirun and myself now came together to listen to Ruben. Doors were closed and a strict vigil was kept. Then we heard Ruben. The folk songs did not have any lettered meaning to any of us, but we understood. The fiddle came alive and the music was very fitting to the surroundings -- it's what is expected in the land of tribes, age-old customs and far away peoples. The drums and the fiddle played together, melodies flowed out to reach us, they fused and were one but alas the drums were not meant for Nagas, and the Kukis had nothing to do with the fiddle. The sound of music was divided -- one for each. Music belonged to Nagas and Kukis separately. Sounds and music escaped and spilled over the borders, but the boundaries were too sharp.

II.

I am in a ghost town where everything used to be, Where everything existed including you and me. But now the story's over, the time has gone Ashes to ashes, dust to dust And the roads stink of blood.

Any other day I would not have cried I would not have burst open at the seams I would not have understood. But the bare and empty corridors, failing light and soiled floors Made a point.

There were no facts to fight with, no statistics to be grappled with. Just a lone figure on a single bed, hair all loose, packed up in blankets A voice rising nonetheless from the debris of chopped humanity Trailing blood from printed lines from a threadbare collection of stripped dignity.

Let them play games of death over life. I would not join, but stand apart, and look upon it. Doors would be thrust open without a knock Human bodies dragged and pulled by the hair on the streets At night may be, beaten, punished Raped till death and rightly so for that is their special whim With special powers.

Swarms of people scampering out to protest Revolt, self-immolation, naked spectacle All over broken pieces of everything that can be broken Torn apart, uprooted. Voices and bullets raised together, When shells explode in this history Replaying itself each single day with unflinching accuracy Shards of betrayal sticks in the memory Like piercing arrows of an old world. Let me be. Please. III.

What is it to be a woman? Is it to be a body, a gender, a discrimination? Is it to be a victim, a non-entity, a crisis? Is it to be an object, a commodity, a price? Is it to be a sniffle, a cry, a voice? Is it to be a self-hood, an identity, a fight?

If I am a body, then I am raped. If I am a gender, then I am studied. If I am a discrimination, then I am inferior.

If I am a victim, then I am just there. If I am a non-entity, then I am nowhere If I am a crisis, then I am everywhere.

If I am an object, then I am a possession. If I am a commodity, then I am marketable. If I am a price, then I am biddable.

If I am a sniffle, then I am a mouse. If I am a cry, then I am a failure. If I am a voice, I am inaudible.

If I am self-hood, then I am a daughter. If I am an identity, then I am a wife. If I am a fight, then I am homeless.

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Rabindranath

AL MAHMUD
(translated by Fakrul Alam)

What kind of darkness has settled over Bangladesh? Stillness has spellbound trees till even birds won't perch. Rivers too look sad, the exhausted earth only produces Inedible mushrooms; no green things sprout anymore.

I don't get it--how could Rabindranath have this crazy desire To be born again in Bangladesh as one of its trees? No trees, no rivers, a time when flowers have stopped blooming. No possibility of rebirth; everyone is against birth.

Listen, Rabindranath, even if I plant all your poems as seeds, Taking care to water them night and day tirelessly I am certain that the result will be zero--! So barren is your Bangladesh, O Tagore!

An incessant wind; no words resonate anymore; Only a bird or two perch on Ashwatha branches; Timorously conversing with musical tunes; On this rainless soundless twenty-fifth Boishakh!

Fakrul Alam is professor of English at Dhaka University.

Book Review

“Is anyone in America reading *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*?”

CHARLES LARSON

The Reluctant Fundamentalist by Mohsin Hamid; Harcourt, Inc.; 2007; 184 pages; \$22.00

In an interview he gave with 'The Stanford Daily' last month, Mohsin Hamid--author of the riveting new novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*--stated boldly, "I am in love with America and deeply angry with it, sort of like Changez" (the main character of his novel). Hamid explained of Changez: "He is always aware of certain benefits that America hands over to him, benefits that are part of the American corporate culture. At the same time the culture doesn't work for him. He becomes at once ashamed and proud of his background."

It's difficult to see how any writer could have captured the conflicting--almost contradictory--feelings so many of us feel about America in these post-9/11 days. Capitalism stinks, yet I don't know of any better system. And democracy? Well, sadly in a democratic society, you get the person you elect. And in these troubled times, too many of us are looking for better leaders than the ones we have.

Yet immigrants in the United States are often more accepting, more appreciative of the country than those of us who were born here. Mohsin Hamid brilliantly recreates that love and hate for America, perhaps only the way that someone not born and raised in the USA can. Initially, to be sure, Changez certainly appears to be content with his life in America--for quite a time, in fact, after he leaves his home in Pakistan and enters the United States on a student visa. Changez attends Princeton University (as the author himself did) and subsequently lands a top-notch job with a prestigious company that evaluates other companies, advising them how to enhance the value of their assets. Changez's even got a beautiful American girl who gives him her attention instead of her multiple suitors. Everything appears to be going well--and Changez is getting rich. Hamid is a master describing all these incidents in his main character's life. His writing is fluid, at times almost lyrical, even heavy with sensuality. (Hamid published an earlier novel, "Moth Smoke," in 2000.)

Then 9/11, and Changez is changed (no pun intended) in the way that millions and millions of people around the world were forced into a new reality. In a hotel in Manila (where he has been sent by his employer), Changez turns on his television and, momentarily at least, believes that what he is watching is another Hollywood blow-up-everything extravaganza. And then, "As I continued to watch, I realized that it was not fiction but news. I stared as one--and then the other--of the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center collapsed. And then I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my

initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased."

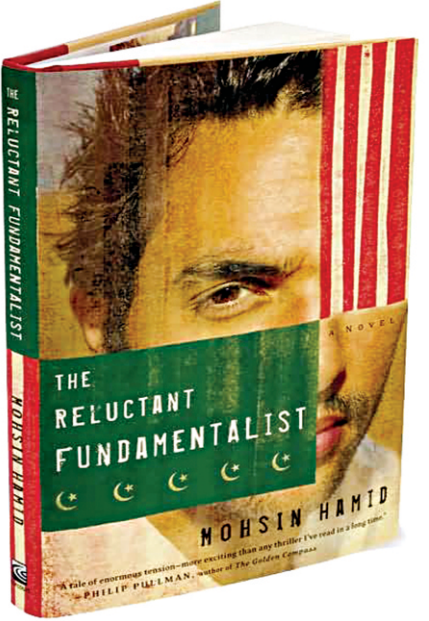
Immediately everything in his life is altered. Passing through customs as he re-enters the United States, he is scrutinized as he has never been before. People on the street, even his colleagues, look at him differently. He recognizes an incipient anger in people who regard at him with suspicion. Equally unsettling, Erica, his American girlfriend, goes through her own altered state, brought about by memories of the death of an earlier boyfriend who died of cancer--years before she and Changez met one another. Listless at work and concerned about tensions back in Pakistan (specifically the fear of a war with India), as well as the health of his aging parents, Changez returns home, to Lahore. Eventually, he

begins teaching at the university. Ironically, it is in that university context--and not at Princeton--where Changez becomes radicalized, attracting increasing numbers of students to his classes. The entire narrative is told in Changez's voice as he sits in a café and talks to an American tourist like the Mariner in Coleridge's

celebrated poem: Princeton, his tortured love for Erica, his prestigious job. And then 9/11. Throughout, the reader is charmed, beguiled, and fearful of things to come. As the author himself has explained to "The Stanford Daily," "The novel is like a conversation much like the world is in conversation. The expectation that a terrible thing is going to happen, speaks for the world today."

In an additionally revealing comment in that interview, Hamid explains: "...people are being overly frightened about the wrong things. Terrorism is a huge problem that needs to be addressed. But forty thousand people die in car accidents [in the USA] yearly." Far fewer on 9/11. American history is one of fear--"moving into new territory...The War on Terror is a misnomer. It is a War on Fear."

Perhaps, more succinctly, a war to create fear around the world. These are brave remarks from a bold writer who mimes no words. Moreover, in the most telling passage from *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Changez addresses America directly, almost pleading for understanding: "As a society, you were unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you. You retreated into myths of your own difference, assumptions of your own



superiority. And you acted out these beliefs on the stage of the world, so that the entire planet was rocked by the repercussions of your tantrums...."

And then Changez remarks about his own situation as a teacher at the university: "When the international television news networks came to our campus [in Lahore], I stated to them among other things that no country inflicts death so readily upon the inhabitants of other countries, frightens so many people so far away, as America."

Are American readers ready for Mohsin Hamid's conversation with the world? Is anyone in America reading *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*? Fortunately, there are signs of increasing awareness. The novel has appeared on the list of best-sellers in "The New York Times Book Review," and it's selling well on Amazon.com. Besides the United States, other editions of the novel have appeared in England and in India. Though no optimist, I take these as encouraging signs.

Perhaps fiction is the road through which Americans will begin to understand what happened to them.

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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