

SHORT STORY

Morning or Evening?

QUAZI MOSTAIN BILLAH

"What time of the day is it? Afternoon or evening? How long have I been sleeping? Have I slept at all?"

The thick, long blue curtains drawn tightly across the window almost touch the floor. It is impossible to look out because of them. The room has only one window and the thick curtains guard it zealously.

However, on one side of the window there is a small gap in the curtains through which the sky has been peeping stealthily.

"But why does the sky have such a dark face? Is it already evening?"

Just before lunch there had been a light storm accompanied by a heavy rain. It was a great relief to the thirsty city, which had been roasting under a pitiless summer sun. It had not rained a drop for over three months. There oozed from the ground a sweet and soothing aroma that seeped through the window. The balmy mingling of thirsty earth with cool fresh water could be felt even from the corner of the second-story room.

"Did that aroma induce sleep?"

Normally, the window curtains are drawn aside after lunch to let in air and light. But today they had to be drawn tightly because of signs of an approaching storm. Maybe the wind striking the folds of the curtains had parted them on one side to make a gap to reveal a slice of the dark sky. But the sky was puzzling.

"Is it afternoon or evening?"

It is not possible to get up and check as I am unable to leave my bed where I am confined because of a back injury. Old age brings such problems; it takes away the power to do things freely and independently.

" Didn't I have almost a similar problem in deciding what time of the day it was, i.e., whether it was morning or evening when I was a child?"

I had returned home and was very tired after the mile-long journey back from school. Every day I had to cover over two miles for my trips between my home and school. Most of the road lay between houses on one side and paddy fields on the other. The houses were screened off by a kind of natural fence of palm, banana and coconut leaves hanging from bamboo poles that were tied to the lines of mango or guava or whatever trees happened to be there. Each house had a *kachari ghar* in front of it. The men-folk, who gathered there usually for a

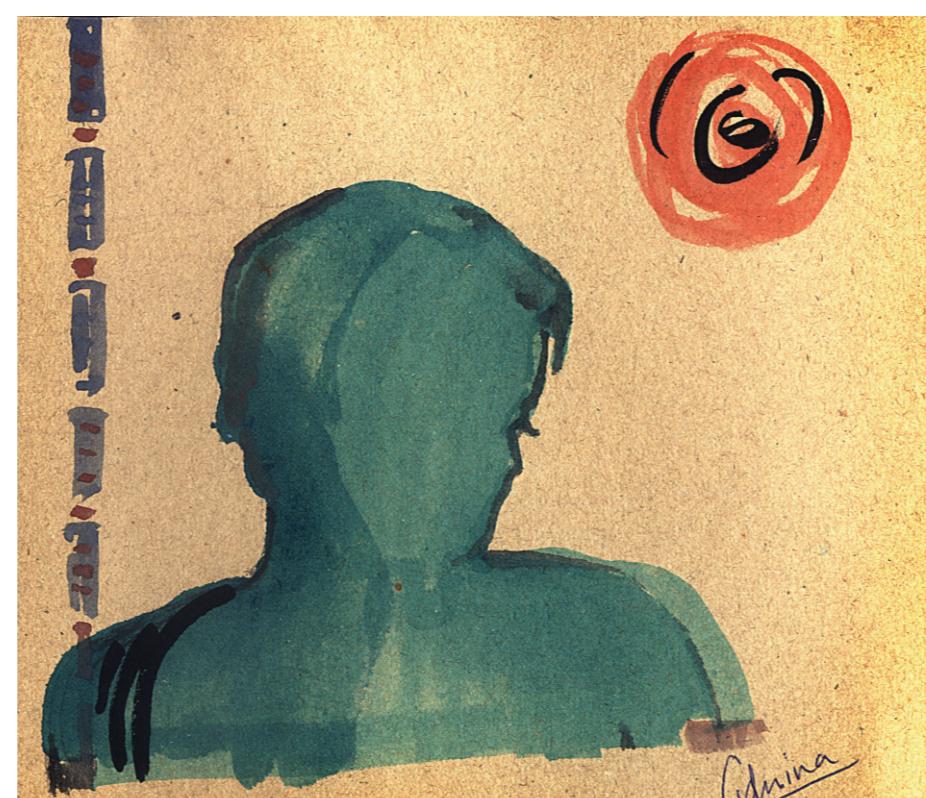
chat or work, were normally out at that time of the day. Peering hard through the fence one could see empty courtyards or the morning wash hanging on clotheslines. The women worked in the back yards. Once in a while one could hear servants quarrelling or the cackling of hens or geese. It would be eerily still and quiet.

My walk to the school was usually a lonely one, which I didn't really look forward to. Neither school nor studies repulsed me; I knew of their value even as a child. It was the journey to the school that worried me. Every day as I walked to school I longed for someone to walk the same path I did. Not that I was a gregarious child. On the contrary, I was a bit of a loner even at an early age. A fear of being attacked by monkeys thrust the longing for company to the back of my mind. I was told that there was a time when the village was full of monkeys, but only a few were left. Either most of them had died or migrated to distant villages. God, how I feared them! I didn't understand why the few that still lingered had not followed their fellows.

It so happened that they used to gather in a garden through which the road to my school lay. Unfortunately, it was the only garden without any house. Its owners had left the village a long time ago. It had earned the name 'banorer bagan', or monkey garden. The days when I didn't see anybody near the *banorer bagan* I used to run at top speed to cross it. Not that the monkeys had ever attacked me; but the stories of monkeys attacking lonely children haunted me. I still do not know why my mother would not give me an escort to see me safely out of the monkey garden. I used to think that parents were often unfeeling and failed to perceive what lay at the bottom of a child's heart.

On that particular day there was nobody on the road and getting closer to the monkey garden I suddenly saw one of them sitting on the ground and a few others hanging from a tree eating something. I could have gone back and waited for someone to come along. I got so panicked that instead of running back I ran forward as if to crash into their arms. Fear had robbed me of the power to think. Oh, how I ran and ran!

By the time I reached home I was exhausted. Fear and the run had almost killed me. As usual, I could not share this monkey matter with anybody. After lunch, I



reminded me of the importance of exercising every day.

"But I haven't finished my home-work," I protested.

"Well, you can do them in the evening," she said.

"Isn't it morning?"

Amused at my reply she said laughingly, 'Silly boy, can't you distinguish between morning and evening?'

I went out and saw my aunt fixing the lamps to be lighted for the night. From the adjacent play-field I could hear the children bidding joyous farewells after an afternoon of games and fun. Alas, the day was over! It was almost evening and too late to join them. Well, a day of games and fun missed!

I could have started another row with my sister for playing a dirty trick with me, but that would make me look a bigger fool. I should have the commonsense to distinguish between morning and evening. I saw a victorious smile spreading across her face and glared at her. Once more she had defeated me. Well, there would be a second time to beat her. But that was along time ago and I beat her in many things and was defeated by her too. But there is no second time now, because she died three years ago.

"Has that old uncertainty about time returned to me? What a pity that at my age I am unable to decide whether it is afternoon or evening!"

As I lie on my bed, I keep a count of the time by listening to varied sounds that filter through the window. Otherwise, it's a blank sky that witnesses my empty, motionless hours. From morning to lunch, I have no problem with keeping track of time, though I had no clock or watch in my room. I had insisted on removing them after my return from the hospital. The daily chores like eating breakfast, cleaning the room, dusting the bed or taking medicine or a regular wash followed each other with the precision of a clock. I could figure out the time following the activities taking place inside the room. But the time following lunch became uncertain. I listened to sounds to keep track of the time.

The first one to pass through the world of sounds is the peanut-seller hawking his wares in a nasal voice.

As his voice slowly fades away, a girl next door begins her music lessons. A gate opens with ear-splitting screech.

"Why don't they grease the wheel gates? Occasionally, there are crows that keep cawing from the roof of the next building or sparrows chirping querulously from the eaves."

But the sound that keeps me waiting is the noise made by the children playing by the building I live in. Everyday I wait for them and follow almost every moment and movement of their games; their joys, fights, and cries of both victory and defeat reach my eager ears through the window. Though I do not see them I try to draw them in my imagination. Maybe one of them is fat and has a chubby face. May be another one is lean and has a hungry look. May be a third one is fretting about a secret hole in his shorts that may embarrass him exposing his genitals unawares. But their game comes to an end as the evening approaches and as they leave, they toll for me the departure of another day.

After they leave, silence falls across the whole place.

There are sounds here and there, but they are not quite orderly. There are vehicles that return late and thunder along the lonely road on which the house stands. Once in a while, a nocturnal bird or two fly by the window. Cities do not have much space or darkness for them. Sometimes the night watchmen can be heard crying 'beware' to their fellows. On some nights, a rickshaw rings its bells sadly.

Suddenly, it begins to rain again. Oh, the possibility of the return of the old familiar sounds is destroyed. At least, the children, the final mark on departing time, cannot come and play outside today even if it is afternoon. Silence will reign uninterrupted tonight.

"Is it already evening then?"

The silence is never silent. It opens holes in the hours ahead. I lose count of the progress of time and try to work out its journey by listening to the haphazard sounds outside. More holes open up as the uncertain hour crawls on. Memories, both sad and sweet ones creep through the holes as I struggle to make sense of time.

"Why don't the holes fill up with something from future? Does it mean that I don't have any future waiting for me? Or, is my life bounded only by memories?"

Quazi Mostain Billah teaches English at Chittagong University.

Indigenous women liberation war fighters ignored by 'Ekattur' scholars

VEN CHIPAMONG CHOWDHURY

The publication, in 1998, 2000, 2005, of works on ethnic feminist nationalism by Selina Hossain etc, (in *Samgrami Nari Juge Juge*), Rokeya Kabir and Mojib Mehedi (in *Muktijuddha and Nari*), and more recently Dipankar Mohanta (in *Muktijuddha Bangladesher Cha-Sramik*) has helped to create public awareness on the issue of women and Bangladeshi nationalism and on those women who played a vital role in our independence struggle. But regrettably, very little has been written about their ethnic/indigenous counterparts and their participation in our nationalist struggles. Inspired by above-mentioned works, Zobaida Nasrin has written on the topic in her *Ethnic Women in the Liberation War* (Dhaka: Shaddhasheli; 2007). It is a welcome addition to a topic otherwise ignored by 'Ekattur' scholars and writers in our country.

Prior to her book people generally, including myself, were led to believe that the struggle's public leadership centered

struggles. I believe without their participation both in strategic and tactical sense during the period of democratic struggles, our national liberation goals would have been more difficult to achieve.

There are two specific contradictions in the book. The first concerns the title of the book, which leads us to believe that it is a book about women. However, many indigenous men who joined the struggle for national liberation are recorded in the book. So she should not have used the term 'Nari' (Women). The other one is also related to the title of the book, specifically the term 'Parbatya' (Hill-Areas). That is, along with hill women (Parbatya Nari) there are many ethnic women from different plain districts of the country who are discussed. Only four indigenous women from *Parbatya* Chittagong or Chittagong Hill Tracts, the areas that are officially recognized as Hill-country, are mentioned. So the use of the word 'Parbatya' is problematic and, in my modest opinion, unnecessary.

Zobaida has failed to give us her

research methodology. The materials she gathered for her study, specially the information on tea gardens, are from Dipankar Mohanta's *Muktijuddha Bangladesher Cha-Sramik*. The mention of source materials for Ahlyha Chasha, Lakkhi Rani Lama, Dhani Karmakar Revati Mahali, etc., has been questionably omitted.

In her preface Zobaida eulogizes the role of Chakma chief Tridiv Roy during the revolutionary struggles. But, to my surprise, she does not mention Marma Mong chief, whose prime contribution to the liberation is unforgettable.

Apart from these errors, surprisingly there is no table of content. Also, there is no index. These are some weakness in her academic approach and research.

I, belonging to one of the indigenous communities of Bangladesh, the Marma community, however welcome her survey of ethnic women and their contribution to the Liberation. I believe every one will enjoy reading this book.

Ven. Chipamong Chowdhury is a young Marma research student.

Literature EXTRACT

(Translated by Farhad Ahmed)

Kakon Bibi

Kakon Bibi was present the whole time during the whole ferocious battle that took place in Sunamganj. The Pakistani army base was to the north of Joya, deep in the jungle. Learning of the presence of the base Kakon Bibi hurried over to the Mukti Bahini. She gathered together the freedom fighters from various Mukti camps, and then sped towards the army base. On their path lay a river. By constructing makeshift rafts from banana trees the freedom fighters crossed the river by twos and threes. Then, nearing the army base, they divided into two groups in order to attack them from two directions. One group rushed to the nearby bridge, the one that linked Sylhet to Sunamganj. The Mukti Bahini blew the bridge to bits with bombs. Then they attacked the army base from two directions. In an instant the news spread like wildfire. On getting the news Pakistani army reinforcements from Sylhet rushed to the battle, but they were forced to go back when they came up to the demolished bridge. The battle between the Pakistani army and the Mukti Bahini raged for one whole day and two nights. At one stage the Pakistani army ran out of ammunition and were forced to surrender to the freedom fighters. The latter raised slogans of 'Joy Bangla'. Kakon Bibi, when relating the events of that day, said 'At one stage we had surrounded the enemy and were shouting 'Joy Bangla', when one soldier on seeing me and recognizing me, shouted out 'Aray, this is the same woman, I always suspected that she was one of the Mukti Bahinis.'

(*Kakon Bibi had earlier been arrested and kept at a Pakistani army camp, only to be released on condition that she spy and report on Mukti Bahini activities. She, of course, promptly chose the opposite course of action.)



Imtiaz Dharker's new book of poems

SUZY KHURRAM

The Terrorist at my Table is Imtiaz Dharker's latest volume of poetry (2007). It is a troubling work, interrogatory and probing about how we, both in the west and the east, live, how we work, travel, eat, listen to the news, prepare for diverse assaults. How do we differentiate between enemy and friend: what can any of us know about the person who shares this street, this house, this table, this body? When life is in the hands of a fellow-traveller, a neighbour, a lover, son or daughter, how does the world shift and reform itself around our doubt, our belief?

Imtiaz Dharker's cultural experience spans three countries: Pakistan, the country of her birth, and Britain and India, her countries of adoption. It is from this life of transitions that the themes of her poetry are drawn: childhood, exile, journeying, home and religious strife, the body as a territory. It is a collection of poems alive both to terror and unicorns; responsive to ancient script and cable TV, the plight of migrant workers, and the flavour of fresh mangoes.

Imtiaz Dharker is an accomplished illustrator who conceives her books as 'sequences of poems and drawings'. The poems and pictures in this book hurtle through a world that changes even as we pass. The book is divided into three sections: *The Terrorist at my Table*, *The Habit of Departure* and *Worldwide Rickshaw Ride*, with the first section further, and somewhat self-reflexively, subdivided into 'the terrorist at my table', 'these are times we live in', 'Lascar Johnnie, 1930' and 'remember andalus'. The book therefore grows, layer by layer, through three sequences—each exploring, in short sentences typical of our times, and the media that defines them, the different layers of what we think of as normal. Where Imtiaz can evoke a Muslim Birmingham, but is rooted in a culture of Arabic calligraphy and desert pomegranates; where she not only looks back at the lascars that were some of the first South Asians to settle in Britain, but forward to a present where identities have blurred to an extent that one cannot know what is going on in the brain of one's breakfast partner. Imtiaz reminds us, in Hanna Arendt's famous phrase, of the 'banality of horror', whether in Chechnya or in Israeli-occupied West Bank:

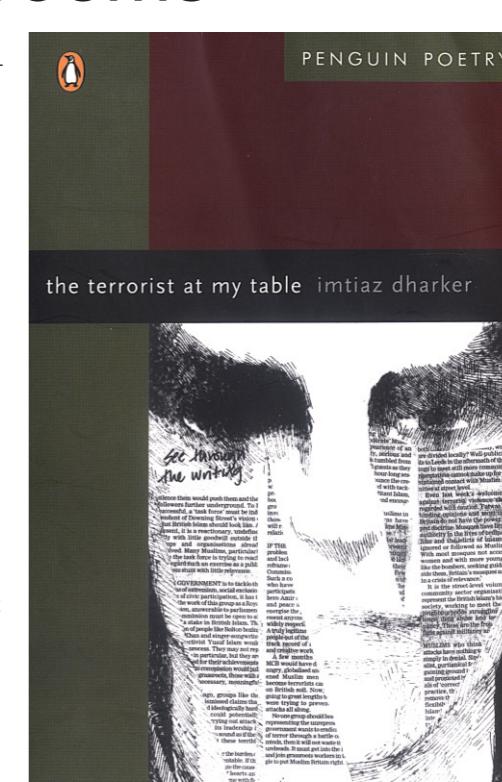
At my back, the news is the same as usual. A train blown up, hostages taken. Outside, in Pollokshields, the rain.

It can be anybody, the doctor next door, one's son:

It will not come slouching out of the ground. It walks along a street that has a familiar name.

This is how it will look. It will have my face.

But all the bombs, fears and clatter are overlaid with a skin of love, trust and sudden recognition. With a shrug, life will go on:



On the windward a string of plastic jasmine jumps up and down with excitement. Far below, I see the world shrug. One more mad rickshaw. So tell me what's new?

Suzy Khurram is a Pakistani expatriate in Boston.

Opaque

Why are these clothes such solid, unrelenting things?

Who dictated they should be opaque?

Where did they get the right to fight my outlines?

Why should they have weight? Don't I have any say?

Weave me a dress of light, a net made out of blue

switched on like runways at dawn

to say to you as you circle the sky

Touch down. This is the way.

The right way

(johnnie lascar 1930)

You call this tea?

Black brew, no sugar, raw milk? Let me tell you how it should be. Put the water in the pan. Add sugar, more than that, more. Then boil it till it gets quite syrupy. Now add the tea-leaves, let them boil, to get your money's worth from them. This is when my wife would put in ginger, cinnamon, or seeds of cardamom. You have none of those? No matter, let me show you. Put milk now. Boil again, yes, boil. Let it rise, turn down the heat. Turn it up, let it rise again, sizzling. Blow on it to keep it bubbling just inside the rim. This takes skill, and shows respect to both tea and guest.

Then take the cup and strain it in. No, don't drink yet, I am showing you the way we drink tea in my village.

Pour it in to the saucer, blow. Now drink. Don't shake, don't spill. Good, no?

How to cut a pomegranate

'Never,' said my father, 'Never cut a pomegranate through the heart. It will weep blood. Treat it delicately, with respect.'

Just slit the upper skin across four quarters. This is a magic fruit, so when you split it open, be prepared for the jewels of the world to tumble out, more precious than garnets, more lustrous than rubies, lit as if from inside. Each jewel contains a living seed. Separate one crystal. Hold it up to catch the light. Inside is a whole universe. No common jewel can give you this.'

Afterwards, I tried to make necklaces of pomegranate seeds. The juice spurted out, bright crimson, and stained my fingers, then my mouth.

I didn't mind. The juice tasted of gardens I had never seen, voluptuous with myrtle, lemon, jasmine, and alive with parrot's wings. The pomegranate reminded me that somewhere I had another home.