

SHORT STORY

We Two

RASHIDA SULTANA
(translated by Rehnuma Siddique Sinti)

My husband rang me from his office and said he wanted the house free this afternoon. He suggested I should go out with the children. And take the maid along.

"Our daughter has an exam ahead of her," I said. "And right now you have to have sex?"

"Umm...it's a new girlfriend -- she's dying to see me."

Returning from work, I go out with my two daughters and the maid. My elder daughter Anita is in the eighth grade, at Sunbeams, while the younger one, Tanisha, is in KG-1. Same school.

I did ask my husband, Imran: "Who's the woman? How old is she? What does she do?"

"Let me keep that a secret for now. You don't tell me anything about your lovers, do you?" I said. "Well, remember Anita's exams are coming up. We're going to be back by eight."

My two daughters play with the maid in Gulshan Park. Even though Anita's in class eight, she is still quite childish. She snatches the Barbie from Tanisha. Tanisha starts to wail. I scold Anita and she gives the doll back to Tanisha.

I message my lover, Jewel, on my mobile: *All I want is for you to come
Close to me and kiss me to the core
Then you might know me
Like no other man
Has ever done before.*

I haven't finished writing it when Anita comes up to me: "How can I play all by myself? Let's go to Helvetia." I say, "How can you be this grown up and still bother me so much? Go and play with Tanisha, I'll take you there later."

After I send the message to Jewel, the reply comes soon: *Oh god, I am in a meeting! Calm down. I'll call you back soon.*

But if he's in a meeting how could he have messaged me? I ring him on the mobile and

say: "I'm by myself now. If you were in a meeting how come you could send a message?"

He answers: "I stepped out for a smoke, and messaged you. I'll call you later. The meeting will be over in half an hour or an hour. Don't message me while I'm in the meeting."

We while away some more time in Gulshan Park and then go over to Helvetia. Jewel calls me when we are there. Seeing his number on my cell I get up from the table and step out of the fast food shop. I talk to him with my back to the shop so that Anita can't see my face and make out that something's going on. I come back to the children at the table. My husband's probably still busy unveiling his girlfriend's beauty. Let him lead his own life, I say, and let me lead mine. He is an engineer, with the government, and I am with a transnational company. I have no idea how our immune systems got so crossed! As far as I know, it all started with some occasional, harmless flirting. Nowadays, however, we are realistic, and seldom poke our noses in each other's affairs. Though in the beginning there was a lot of unhappiness, a lot of quarrelling and fighting. I used to be suspicious of Imran, and he of me. We would fight, exchange blows. Now that we have a common grammar, we avoid all that whenever possible. I hardly feel a thing, when I now hear about Imran's girlfriends.

Some nights when my husband is in a very good mood, he talks about his various girlfriends. They are of different ages. He has one girlfriend who is still a college student, while another one, the wife of a boss, is five years older than him. She is crazy about him. "You're dating a college girl," I tell Imran. "Don't you feel uneasy? Your own daughter will soon be in college." He answers, "I didn't force her to come to me. She came of her own free will. And she is so sexy, you can't even imagine."

"And your boss's wife?" I want to know. "The one who's five or six years older than you?"

"You don't know Lubna, she's a sex-



crazed monster. You can't imagine how nuts she is. She's always buying me things, t-shirts, wallets, other stuff."

"Yes, I can guess that from seeing all your new t-shirts. But that woman should be in menopause, how can she be still sex crazy?"

"I don't know," Imran says. "Maybe she's getting hormone treatments or something. She's abnormally hot..."

And then he would ask me, "What about your boyfriend? Is he also crazy for you? You are quite the sexy chick yourself."

"I don't know. He loves me, and that's what I want."

"This love thing is what I really hate. If you like someone, have sex with him, why mix it all up with love? Sex is like going to the gym for a workout, what's love got to do with it?"

"Perhaps I'm not as smart as you are. One lover is enough for me."

"Okay. Tell me your lover's name."

"I don't like giving out his name. He works in a foreign bank, you know that."

that I had fallen for someone. He became depressed. At that time we used to fight a lot. I had fallen for somebody else, I didn't pay him any attention - maybe that's the reason he started chasing other women.

My lover Jewel too loves his wife a lot. When he lauds his wife in front of me I feel like sticking Scotch tape over his mouth. Perhaps I too love Imran. When his colleagues praise him I feel good. I never buy pricey gifts for Jewel, but I buy them for my husband. If sometimes Imran spent the night out, I try to speculate where he could be. If Abba, Amma, or my mother-in-law ask about him, I say he's doing a late night at the office. Similarly, if I am late some night, he covers for me. He tells everybody that I'm in a meeting. But later he'd ask me a lot of questions: "You had a date, right? Tell me about it. I won't tell anyone. Come on, don't tell me everything?"

I've saved Jewel's number in my cell phone under 'Irina' because Anita often takes calls. One day when I was exchanging messages with Jewel, I ducked into the kitchen to check on the meat when Anita came up to me and said, "Ammu, someone wrote on your mobile 'Bye Jaan.' I said 'Let's see,' and took the phone from her. 'This 'Jaan' means 'go'. See, this is your Aunt Irla's number. I was just having some fun with her. She's my friend.' Afterwards I told her, 'Anita, from now on please don't read my messages."

I often have to go to Delhi, Kuala Lumpur, and many other places for business.

Sometimes my boyfriend accompanies me. Imran may have guessed it. But he never says anything. In the beginning, I too agonized over Imran's extra-marital affairs, but now I'm okay. I think "Imran, you graze as much as you like." And when he confesses to everything I know that at least he is not pretending. Yet, even then, fights do break out. I swear at him: "Bloody bastard, dating schoolgirls! Pervert!" Anita will run to me: "Ammu, the maid servant is listening; everybody will know." My husband too will sometimes lose his temper: "You bitch, you call me a bastard after a spending a whole

month with somebody in Delhi?"

Then, after a couple of days, Imran will come over to me and say he's sorry. He'll make me understand that we should be together for the sake of our children. But I'll refuse to talk to him.

My daughters will try to make peace: "Ammu, please talk to Abbu, he said he's sorry."

That night Imran takes us out to Khazana or Emmanuel's for dinner. He buys us gifts.

After the quarreling ends Anita asks: "Ammu, why do you two use such ugly words when fighting? It sounds awful." I reply: "Listen, people say all sorts of things when they're angry. They don't mean anything. I say them to make your dad angry, and he says them for the same reason. Put them out of your head, dear."

On holidays, we go to Cox's Bazaar. Before leaving I spend an evening with Jewel. In Cox's Bazaar, we have a wonderful time. I love swimming in a tube amid the waves. If I go a bit too far out Tanisha and Anita start screaming: "Ammu, the waves will carry you away, please don't go that far." If I go even more farther out Imran too will shout: "For God's sake come back, don't go out that far. There's no need to show that kind of daring." I pay no heed. I keep floating on the waves; sometimes they go over my head. It is one of the most exciting things in the world for me. At one point, Imran will come running through the waves shouting: "Please don't take that kind of a risk. If you die, I'll have nothing left." When I return he holds my hands in his and says: "I won't let you go back in there. Never."

I'm enchanted by all this. "I love you," I say. "Me too" he cries out.

Imran and our daughters play in the knee-deep water. The setting sun light up their faces -- with what delight these three children of the gods sway in a sea-dance. After a while, I go a little distance from them, take out the cell phone from my bag and send a message to Jewel: *Missing you a lot.*

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artwork by sabyasachi haza

On Humayun Azad and Pak Saar Zameen Shad Bad

FAROOK CHOWDHURY

Till the establishment of the caretaker government in January of this year, with violence and political chaos on the rise, *Ekushey February* was coming under attack from the seemingly growing Islamic religious resurgence in the country. Last year, like all the others, thousands of barefoot people wearing black badges singing "Amar bhaiye rakte rangoano Ekushey February, ami ki bhulite pari," walked at dawn to the Shaheed Minar to lay wreaths of marigold and Krishnachura bouquets. The speakers at the Shaheed Minar played recitations from the Qur'an instead of the customary songs, poetry reading and speeches. When asked about this change, the Dhaka university authorities in charge of coordinating the program brushed the question aside. They said the Quranic recitation was played only for a minute and that too to test the speakers, which previously would have been done unnoticed with a "hello". The recitation was actually played intermittently for a full night, morning, and noon. Around the country, in several towns and smaller communities, concerts and theaters could not be held, either because they were stopped, or for fear of attack.

On a Friday night in late February 2004 when Humayun Azad left the *Ekushey boi mela* and was walking towards the Atomic Energy Center, several men attacked him with butcher knives. They stabbed him at the back of his head, twice in the left side of his face and once in the shoulder, leaving him bleeding profusely. The assailants were never caught. Over the past years he had received death threats, not exactly *fatwas*. Since his book *Pak Sar Zameen Shad Bad* came out those threats to his life became more real. Largely allegorical, with indefatigable exploring of the verbal and carnal, the language of *Pak Sar Zameen Shad Bad* is a phantasmagorical indictment of the national consciousness of Bangladeshis. Its portrait of power-cum-violence is unforgiving and merciless, and the language is charged with anger and abuse. It uses the rise of Muslim religiosity in Bangladeshi society as a point of departure, but moves beyond it, interconnecting authority with power, power with wealth, wealth with humiliation. In the horrible world of *Pak Sar Zameen Shad Bad* there is no place for compassion. Like Pasolini's *Salo*, it creates victims with their faces emerging powerless in front of fascism, and the powerful - a group of cheats and conmen at the service of faith and belief -- gloriously feasting on success and optimism. Girls are raped and savored, as sacrifices for total-kill, as revenge, and to satisfy the carnal desires of Jihadists pledged to free Bangladesh from the hands of blasphemous Hindus and Jews.

Humayun Azad was born in a village named Rari Khal in Munshiganj on April 28, a few months before India wrested independence from the British and was split into the two countries of Pakistan and India. Humayun Azad, a linguist by profession, wrote poems, novels and essays, none of which have been translated from Bangla. A social liberal, steeped in the teachings of Rabindranath Tagore, Michael Madhusudhan, Bankim Chandra Chatterji, to name a few, his contributions to Bangla linguistics, literature and language are considerable. His devotion to Bangla was immeasurable. "I could have lived abroad, but did not," he said, "not because of the country, but because of the language; I live inside Bangla language." After Bangladesh came into being, there were great expectations that at last Bangla would flourish, that, *Ekushey February*, our 'unofficial' independence day, would inspire a new phase in the development of Bangla. It would become one of Azad's principal concerns to speak out against the increasing vulgarization of Bangla, a process he grieved was coming about due to the use of poor, ungrammatical and vulgar Bangla by the ruling classes, particularly politicians, as well as because of widespread use of English. The language of *Pak Sar Zameen Shad Bad* is deliberately vulgar, and when the Jihadist narrator and

his lover Kanaklata metamorphose in the final act of the novel to hold the torch of love, the vulgarity ends and we are thrown inside the language of Tagore. On a more apprehensive note, Humayun Azad traces the failure of state building in his book-length essay *Is this the Bangladesh we wished for?* -- a treatise more Lacanian than postmodern structural. Disappointed, sad and angered, he apprehends that mediocre and



petty-minded politicians, industrialists, civil servants, intellectuals, all who have gained prominence and risen to positions of authority, are contributing to push the country into dark ages. Dedicating the book to a poem Humayun Azad warns us to take his emotions, hyperbole, bluntness, and most of all, anger, seriously: *I beg of you do not ever hurt me by speaking of Bangladesh*

Do not wish to know about the spoilt, rotten 55,000

square miles; its politics,

Economics, religion, sins, deceits, innumerable

humans, living, murder, rape,

Do not hurt me by asking me about the blind journey

towards medieval times;

I cannot stand it, not for a moment - there are reasons for it.

There are reasons- and primarily Humayun Azad is interested in reflecting on how fantastic, gargantuan opportunities to establish a modern, freedom-loving, rationally- spirited, democratic society went astray. In the decades after the independence of Bangladesh, the country spiraled into a cycle of political treachery, suspicion and murder. Over the last five years stories of murders, rapes, bomb and grenade attacks were routinely published in the daily newspapers. Indeed, in a sort of *fait accompli* acknowledgment people continued to complacently live their daily lives, while denial had become common among heavier quarters. Top political leaders, now being rounded up, denied the violence and called it media-propaganda, a non-localized, global phenomenon (Madrid, Bombay, Bali, USA). Even a former prime minister, in one of her parliamentary speeches, praised the Islamic groups for their significant contribution to the stability of the country, when those same groups had taken the country hostage to their bloodshed. Humayun Azad waged a war in words against the spirit he understood thwarted growth, choked spontaneity and killed the will of the liberation war that brought independence. He was outspoken and spared no one, and in a repressed hierarchical society such as Bangladesh, his daring attracted attention of the wrong kind. In Bangladesh, sexual expression is a social prohibition, as it is a moral violation; it does not stunt sexuality, but finds nasty, secret and dirty ways of fulfillment. *Pak Sar Zameen Shad Bad* does not, however, explore sexuality. It depicts repressed sexuality expressing itself in a violent way-as rape--by forcing the weak to submit to an authoritarian rule. This metaphor of rape is taken to new, stunning heights, and

the use of explicit language could be difficult reading for most Bangladeshi. The middle-class, the so-called liberated mind, shrinks from it with embarrassment, while the religiously initiated are inflamed by its blasphemy and finds the language and the book impossible to tolerate. Humayun Azad evokes extreme language to talk about extremes in Bangladeshi society, where young males and females are unsafe and are a victim of, he laments, a society of licentious, power-hungry, ill-educated people bent on taking the country back to the Dark Ages. His intention was to shock the readers into facing harsh realities, and not to hide from them. He was not concerned if anybody was going to be hurt or embarrassed by novel:

"According to Mohammed Hafizuddin the best of the best are the young boys. He loves them - nine to ten years old ones; trains them little by little, and he buys different kinds of creams from Dhaka." *Pak Sar Zameen Shad Bad* is provocative; it taunts readers with its outspokness. The language of fornication is deliberately placed in opposition to tenderness, respect, humility and joy. Social prohibitions placed on women- their movements, expressiveness, undulations, above all, their drive to life--make of rich sexuality a barren, dried-out river. Age-old customs, rituals and rules have put women behind walls, and in his book I prefer to call *For Women* Humayun Azad traces the history of this subjugation, structured and maintained through the institutions of marriage, image, laws and patriarchal control over the other sex. Bangladeshi customs and rituals of social festivities are devoid of joy, sexuality, merriment and wantonness. The shackles on women and sterile religious observances prevent the river of life from overflowing the land with dance, music, intoxication and necessary forgetfulness. In an antiquated and backward-looking society the increasing religiosity of Bangladeshi is gagging and putting a lid on those elements that could provide opportunities for growth, at overcoming old customs by creating a new national culture of abundance. Humayun Azad was alarmed at how the spread of religion was taking Bangladeshi along an irresistible path of darkness and fettered life, particularly for women. Dhaka, the capital city, mirrors all that is Bangladesh. Established around fifteenth century, Dhaka showed momentary glory and potential to be a great city in an otherwise long history of neglect, abandonment, and inability of its inhabitants to crown it, to adorn it with richness of life and culture. That opportunity finally came in December 1971, as the independent city of the Bangladeshi. Opportunities lost and squandered, after 36 years, the city now is a variegated place of rich and poor, sudden islands of luxury in the shape of glass-domed atriums within a sea of dilapidated, uncared-for buildings and slum areas, its streets crammed with every possible means of transport from pedal chains to 500 hp SUVs creating chaos and unbearable congestions, violence perpetrated by thugs, political groups and businessmen grabbing land, occupying streets, undertaking mindless, hazardous constructions anywhere and everywhere for shopping complexes, condominiums, restaurants, industries, offices; Dhaka is dangerously reaching a point of no return. The city is rude to its inhabitants and intrudes on their privacy with loud calls of modernity and religion; it fails to provide basic facilities of good water, uninterrupted power, entertainment, or even simple walking space. To the outside, Dhaka is a myth. It is where jobs are, money is to be made, flabbergasting the uninformed, as they, the outsiders, flock into its heart in uncountable numbers, only to become a victim of its ferocious unwelcoming.

With typical uncompromising, harsh, pointed words Humayun Azad writes:

*Your future you think is dancing in the streets of Dhaka
Your dreams you think are floating in the skies of Dhaka
Your life you think is resounding in the minarets of Dhaka*

Hell too you is heaven

Fire to you is light

Illusion to you is mystery

Little do you know Dhaka is now fiercer than hell

Little do you know Dhaka is now worse than cancer

Dhaka now is a city of 401,800 rouges

Dhaka now is a city of 308,000 lechers

Dhaka now is a city of 504,300 deceits

Dhaka now is a city of 202,000 harlots

Dhaka now is a city of 1,045,300 frauds

Dhaka now cannot offer you anything at all

In *Pak Sar Zameen Shad Bad*, the destruction, pillage, killing, murder, plundering, money laundering, chaos, lies and deceit all end with a Rising -- with the darkness of night giving way to a new dawn. Throwing his weapons, whiskey bottles, 'Pak Sar Zameen Shad Bad' cassettes in the river, the protagonist asks his lover, Kanaklata, to discard her