

SHORT STORY

DHRUBO ESH
(translated by Farhad Ahmed)

Hello, who goes there?
It's Rifat Zayedi.
He is going in a rickshaw.
From Chankhul Pul, to the Shahbagh area.
Sutopa will be there at the Art Institute. In
Mollah's canteen. Ah, Sutopa! Perhaps Purabi
will be there too. Or maybe not. But no, Purabi
will be there. She has this mysterious relation-
ship with Sutopa. They are always together. Rifat
has met with Sutopa twenty-one times in the
last month. Out of which Purabi has been absent
only three times.

On the traffic island in the middle of the road
Rifat sees the doyle birds made of cement. One
day they should just take flight and go away - fly
away from this city. An upbeat Rifat silently
gives the two birds permission to fly away. Go,
winged ones, wherever you want to fly!

The birds do not fly.

Rifat looks at the Krishnachura trees and notes
the sky's mood. Not actually of the sky, but of
the clouds. The sky is overcast. So many clouds,
like a painting. Clouds floating, gathering,
drifting. Gray-coloured clouds, rain-laden.
When will it rain? Any time now! And so many
Krishnachura flowers, all these amazingly red
Krishnachura flowers - it seems a surreal scene
to Rifat. Such a gathering of gray-coloured
clouds, is it - or isn't it?

Today Rifat's poems have been published in the
daily morning newspaper. In the literature page,
titled 'A Few of Rifat Zayedi's Poems.' Great care
had been taken in publishing them, accompa-
nied with drawings done by Hasan Habib. And
so Rifat today is in a rare mood! Any and all
scenes seem surreal to him today! Or even half-
ghostly, unearthly.

Has Sutopa seen the morning paper? Which
paper does she keep? That particular newspaper
- no, not likely. If she did, then she would have
seen his poems. Would have read them. And
would have mentioned it. She hasn't said
anything. Sutopa has a mobile phone. Rifat had
called her from a mobile phone shop, and had
talked to her for a total of seven minutes. Out of
which Sutopa had spent four minutes lecturing
him on what he should do, in the context of
the present socio-cultural conditions, what did
he think he was doing? In short, why wasn't he
getting a mobile phone? And what, Rifat had
asked, would happen if he did? The price of a
mobile phone had recently come down greatly,
she said, one could manage it within twenty-two
or twenty-three hundred takas - the whole set.
Why wasn't Rifat aware of the fact that he

owned a mobile phone then he could talk all
night with her? All night? Yes, all night! But aside
from this, why else should he get one? Weren't
poets not supposed to have cell phones? And so
it had gone on and on...

The rest of the three minutes they had spent
talking on other topics. The essence of it was
that Sutopa would be waiting at Molla's canteen.
Inshita, Sutopa's sister, or related to her in some
such way, studied at the Art Institute. She may
also be there with Sutopa. So that would make it
three of them: Sutopa, Purabi, and Inshita.

Inshita had a lover, a well-known singer. Would
he be also there, wondered Rifat. He was always
hanging around at Molla's canteen, when did
the beggar find the time to sing?

Rifat already there?

If he could only show Sutopa this surreal scene...
Red Krishnachura, the gang of gray clouds...
Hardly has he finished the thought that the rain
came down. Jhum, jhum, jhum, the rain
suddenly slants down hard.

Of course it stands to reason that it would be
sudden.

Big drops of rain.
Rifat gets wet.

"Uncle, don't you have your plastic sheet?"
The rickshawallah replies, "No."

"Then stop! I don't want to get wet."

There is a bus stop shelter right by the roadside.
Rifat leaps down from the rickshaw. Scurries
under the roof of the bus stop shed. Others have
also taken refuge there. Rifat's rickshawallah too
scrambles for cover.

Rifat looks around.
On the other side of the road is the old
racecourse, now a park, with its mausoleums of
three national leaders. Getting wet - the trees in
the park, the mausoleums. Getting wet too are
the two cement birds. One can barely make
them out from here.

It is a pelting, driving rain.
It streams down from a desolate sky.

The wind and the rain -- they are masters of the
universe now.
There is a crack of thunder, then a flash of
lightning.

The rain comes down even harder now.
It's raining cats and dogs -- that's what the
English would say.

A nasty phrase!
And in Bengali?

Mushuldaray, the rain, coming down in
torrents...

This phrase, too, is no less ugly...The word
'mushul' meant 'mugur', or a cudgel.

The rain, cudgeling the earth.

What would that be like, the rain falling like
cudgels, like hammers? There was a song by Bob
Marley - 'Got to have kaya now! For the rain is
falling...' which Pablo Rahi had translated it into
Bengali: 'Hang loose and smoke ganja/Because
it's raining...'

Oh Pablo, where are you now?

Rifat has cigarettes in his pants pocket. A packet
of Gold Leaf cigarettes. And a Ronson lighter.
The lighter was in memory of an almost
forgotten girl. She now lived in Wisconsin -- had
married and left, was now the mother of a child.

Children - two, in fact - born in the USA. Will
they learn how to speak Bengali? Will she teach
them?

Rifat draws out the cigarette packet and the
lighter.

The rain has not damaged the cigarette packet
since it had been in his jeans pocket. Rifat
extracts a cigarette and lights it. He draws in a
lungful of smoke and thinks, that woman now in
Wisconsin once liked to get wet in this kind of
rain. That was a long time ago. She and Rifat.
And Sutopa?

Does she like to get wet in the rain? And Purabi?

That girl too is interesting. Arunima Chanel
Purabi. After being introduced to her Rifat had
immediately thought of a wild duck - had
thought of a village once upon a time and
Arunima Chanel Purabi. Was this the same
Arunima Chanel?

Purabi was in Statistics. Sutopa in the Bangla
department.
Again there's thunder, and a flash of lightning.
And the rain, is it now coming down harder?

Wasn't the rain's musical instrument the kettle-
drum, the one used in wars in ancient times?

Today, this city, Dhaka, is going to drown.
Before the rain there had been a wan light. Not
anymore. On every side there's now a late
evening darkness. Even though it's not yet time
for the Asar call to prayers. Or had it sounded,
and Rifat hadn't heard it?

Somebody else lights a cigarette.
It is only now that Rifat sees the others -- those
who have taken shelter in the bus stop shed. He
glances at them cursorily: Ordinary people, off
the street. Poor people, one could plainly see
that. Besides Rifat, there are seven others. Two
women. Sitting on the cement bench. Quietly.
The others are talking. About the rain.

"It's been quite some time since it rained like
this."

"If I could only get my hands on this bitch of a
rainy day..."

"Why, what has the rain done to you?"

"Done to me? Done to me, you say? The harm's
been done to those who till the land -- could

anyone of them scatter any seeds today? This is
not rain, this is Allah's curse!"

"Curse it is, and here it comes again."

Thunder, and then a streak of lightning!
Rifat thinks about the two girls. Who are they?
They were not 'good' girls. But then who are
good girls? Are these two women really women?

Or just bodies, for sale for fifty or a hundred
takas? When it was after evening they stand with
all the world's desolation inside them. Go
around in rickshaws in designated areas.

Whoever wants them, gets them. Rifat feels a
vague kind of uneasiness. The two girls have
started to talk to each other. But in low voices,
and nothing of what they say can be overheard.

And of course over and above it there is the
sound of the rain. Rifat wonders, what is it they
are talking about, is it about him? But no, there
is no logic to his thinking such a thought is
there? No, there isn't. So, then?

Rifat again turns back to the rain.
Today, Dhaka is definitely going to drown.
This rain is not going to easily go away.
And over there Sutopa --

So Rifat, what do you do now?

Should he walk in this rain? Walk all the way
over to Mollah's canteen? Will Sutopa be
impressed by it? In the last three months how
impressed has she been by him? A lot? Some?

The last time they had met was day before
yesterday. Dhanmondi Road Number 2, at the
Alliance Francaise, for half an hour at the
Alliance's cafe. They each had a mug of coffee.

And talked and chatted, after which Sutopa had
said, "So what are you like?"

"Not nice," Rifat had replied.

"So then it's impossible."

"What's impossible?"

"If you'd been nice," Sutopa had replied,
"maybe I'd have married you."

"Should I try?"

"Try what?"

"Try and see if I can be nice."

"No use. I won't marry you."

"Will Purabi?"

"Purabi? No. Purabi is not going to marry some
boy."

"Oh, so is she going to marry a girl?"

Purabi had not been there then. It was one of the
three times she hadn't been there. Rifat takes a
drag of his cigarette.

There's no smoke.

Oh, the cigarette has gone out a long time back.
A raindrop had put it out. Re-lighting this one
again would not be the intelligent thing to do.

Even if he did light it, smoking it would be
useless. A waste. What else can he do?

artwork by sabyasachi hozra



Rifat takes out another cigarette and lights it.

Isn't this rain going to stop today? How long has
it been?

Not less than half an hour.

It has rained this long!

Come on, take a rest!

It should be like a television program: We're
going to take a small break and we'll be right
back. If only it would stop for even five minutes.

Mollah's canteen at the Art Institute is three
minutes by rickshaw from this bus stop shed.
But this rain - this cats-and-dogs-and-cudgel
rain. Not going to stop anytime soon.

A poem - can't one dream up one now?

Jhum jhum jhum -- a poem about rain.

Yes...No...Yes...No...Yes...No...This is the rhythm
of the falling rain, it seems to Rifat. Seems not
rain, but simply foul weather. Tomorrow there
will be photos of this storm in the newspapers.

It'll be all over the news on television channels.
The water-logged city of Dhaka, its inhabitants
the victims of rainwater. No government has
yet taken any steps to relieve the people of
waterlogging. A poem comes to Rifat's head:

Rain rain mayuri dances...

A line of poetry. Not the peacock, not the bird
mayuri! No, the 'mayuri' here is the actress
Mayuri. The Bengali movie actress Mayuri. Let's
envision the scene then: in this torrential rain
Mayuri is dancing. A blue rain, a white Mayuri.
She is wearing a short white dress because her
'character' demands it. And in this rain her dress
is soaked through. A very wet Mayuri is doing a
frenzied dance. No matter how fearful the
image, can't a poem be written about it?

Sure! There's no bar against it.

Rain rain Mayuri dances...

What should be the next line?

Rifat thinks about it. *Rain, rain, rain, rain...*

Behind him one of the women laughs.

Rifat hears the laugh, and quickly returns to
reality.

It seems as if all the chatter among the people

who have taken shelter in the bus stop have come
to a stop. Nobody is saying anything. The only
sound is that of the rain. But now, the woman's
laughter. Low but clear. The girl says, while still
laughing: "You're blind, you unfortunate bitch."
Did the other girl laugh too on hearing it?

Why?

Blind? Who is blind? What blind are they
laughing about?

Rifat turns around. As far as he can make out
in the gloom of the shed, there are two young
women wearing shalwar kameez. A tiredness
about them, a fatigue not erased by the bright
lipstick or the powdered cheeks. The girl in the
green shalwar-kameez, she has tied a red ribbon
in her hair. A red-ribbon flower. This girl is
looking at Rifat. Looking at him and laughing.
Looking? At Rifat?

Rifat's blood goes cold. In this gloom, no matter
how little can be seen in this darkness, yet she
cannot see it. She has turned towards him, in his
direction. Has turned towards him.

She cannot see, because she's blind.

Rifat can see the white irises of her blind eyes.

An empty white.

Can see it plainly even in this rain-heavy,
untimely darkness.

Rifat freezes. A keenly unpleasant sensation
floods throughout his entire body.

Blood races to every corpuse. Is it distaste, or is
it anger, or what is it?

A blind girl, one who can't see...

A blind girl, whom nobody sees...

Who buys this girl?

Who?

Are they blind, too?

Can one see their faces in the dark?

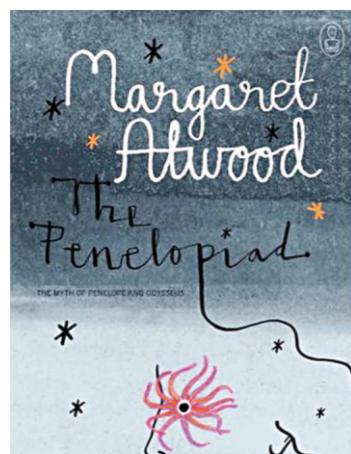
Or in the ugly yellow glare of streetlights?

Is it faces they see? What do they see?

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(Un)weaving a Tale: Reading *Penelopiad*

RADHA CHAKRABORTY



A man smitten by wanderlust, who is also a compulsive adventurer, a consummate liar, and a wily strategist with extraordinary survival skills. A woman who turns her long wait for her absent husband into a lesson in endurance, human resource management and ingenuous dissimulation. A host of suitors vying for the (unavailable) heroine's hand. The devastatingly seductive "other" woman, for whom thousands of men are ready to lay down their lives. Twelve living women caught in a web of palace intrigue. Clashing egos, flashing swords, mangled bodies and tangled relationships. Rumour, scandal, blood, sex, violence and betrayal. The perfect formula, we could say, for an all-time bestseller. Homer certainly knew the secret of telling a good story, for since its inception many centuries