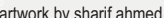


# An Aladdin Tale

They were issuing out in unbroken waves. As were the screams. And, then, they subsided, almost simultaneously. And we looked at each other. The terrified yells had emanated from me; the high-pitched screams from the woman I was married to at that time. The year was 1977, and we had been united in wedlock for a couple of months or so. That the "united" unraveled into disintegration a few years later is another story, and will not be related here. But, then, life was a kaleidoscope of colours, everything was right with the world, and, what, we worry? Certainly there was no call for a simultaneous cacophony of yelling and screaming. But we did, and, thereby hangs this tale.

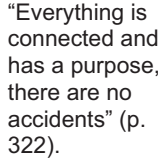
As is my wont, I hardly ever visit a tenant's house. I did not even do that to the imam's residence either. Naturally, I never got to see any of the bottles of imprisoned jinns that he was reputed to have squirreled away in some part of the house, let alone any jinn. To tell the truth, I never bothered to dwell at any length of time on the imam and his captive jinns. You just can't with any such cockamamie story. Go read 'Aladdin and his Wonderful Lamp' instead. That would be a more interesting and satisfying undertaking. And so I banished the tale completely out of my mind,



And then I felt myself sitting up, and heard myself exploding into an insistent series of loud bellows, and I became aware of my wife also sitting up next to me and screaming at the top of her voice. And the apparition vanished into thin air. Just like that. As the cliché goes, one moment it was there, and the next it was gone. But my nightmare stayed with me until I vaguely became aware of loud pounding on my door, and shouts outside of it. That is when my howling stopped. As did my wife's shrieks. And we looked at each

Shahid Alam is currently Head, Media and Communication department, Independent University, Bangladesh.

***The Assassin's Song*** by M. G. Vasssanji; Delhi: Viking/Penguin India New Delhi; 2007; pp. 375; Rs. 450



Vassanji, winner of the Commonwealth Writers Prize (1990), is known for his preoccupation with the ways in which the collective past can affect individual lives. In *The Assassin's Song* the past as history is often indistinguishable from myth. "[P]eople have a need of miracles," Bapu-ji tells the young, uncomprehending Karsan (p.175). The novel's grand design spans many centuries and covers several continents, switching back and forth between the tale of the fictional Nur Fazal in the distant past and the story of Karsan's growth to maturity in the present. Within these two framing narratives are enfolded several others: the confessions of Karsan's father, for instance, the legend of Pir Bawa's wife Rupa Devi, or the tale of Balak Shah, the child saint buried in the rival Muslim shrine opposite Pirbaga. Punctuating these personal narratives are moments in public history where communism reared its ugly head. Partition, the anti-Sikh riots after Indira Gandhi's assassination, the demolition of Babri Masjid, and then Godhra as if to depict history as a cycle that repeats itself, rather than a linear narrative of progress. It was religious persecution that brought Nur Fazal to India, and the same motif recurs in the death of Karsan's father when the shrine of Pirbaga, once dedicated to the ideals of secularism and tolerance, finds itself no longer immune to

Though the novel has moments of poetic, elegiac intensity, it does not always live up to the demands of its epic sweep. The personal, quirky elements capture our imagination far more vividly than the passages of philosophizing that intersperse the narrative. A sense of the inevitable hangs over the entire novel. We feel no surprise when Karsan finds himself back in Pirbaag against his will, nor can we share his excitement upon solving the mystery of the Assassin's identity, for too many clues have been planted in the text already. What makes this novel worthwhile all the same is Vassanji's deep awareness of the wounds of history and his faith in the human endeavour to heal them.

Radha Chakravarty is an academic and translator

**RUBANA**  
(written at Kolkata airport)

By 5:15, I decide to look at each of the slides of travelers, sandwiched between bordering skies and long immigration queues.... The cash dispenser gives us money, the duty free gives us the ultimate mall experience, the book shop offers leafing through the latest paperbacks, the Mac/Subway offers even the choice of a whole wheat bread making their ultimate point of Capitalism: consumers are made to feel that their welfare is what matters most to the Macs and Subs of the world. Then we rid ourselves of the luggage and face the question of being registered and sorted out at every single counter that pops up en route to the lounge. The lounge, if one's lucky to be traveling business class in France's Charles de Gaulle or New York's Club Lounge, then that temporary home may even have an adjustable seat with digitally controlled panel, along with facilities to make calls, make use of the photocopiers/scanners, play games et al. What surfaces from this comfort scene is simply the sense of home. If only we could control our minds and program it to take a break from familiarity and if only we could do with just more modern options instead of opting for our routine which only wants the old duvets, the old beds, the old aroma in our living places, world would be simpler. The supermodernity that we tread upon in travels, has sleep, appetite, knowledge, hygiene, entertainment and very often, even companionship guaranteed. The space becomes an inner space and while one travels, the whole being simply defeats borders that are dulled by cartographic dimensions and transcends to the next level of evolving into a newer one

Then what do we do with history? History surely cannot be re-written in a transit lounge...Berlin Wall, the Beatles, Gulf War, USSR's evaporation into the thin air, '71...? The revolutionizing moment had already happened and often we indulge in over-investment of meanings and happenings. This excess overload of events that link our past to our heels, and this expanding and multiplying image of time often unsettle us. In fact, the contradiction of not being able to address history and 'now' is a puzzle that supermodernity cannot solve. In moments, through satellites and aerials on our helmets, we are subjected to a spatial generosity that does not really match the world in which we live in, but it does make us re-think about our space. Is home only an "invirene", a Latin word for invention? Does reality lie in where we are or where we travel to or where we are in transit? Does birth only assign us to a residence? If Identity requires minimal stability, and if we do go back to our anthropological places, then we do not only live through what we are no longer? As much as monuments mark places, don't I mark my own space as well? The signboards in my neighborhood make my business card, my itineraries reflect my tomorrows, my spatial exposure defines my worth. If history is never erased and if my current transit position is never completed, then what and where am I? My confusion then reduces my travel to a photo gallery of images that my gaze quickly picks up on. As a traveler, I seek no home as my transit lounge in Kolkata/New York/ Paris offers me a temporary anonymity accompanied by a relative sense of liberation. While I am freed of my baggage, I rest and look forward to the next on board meal, incomplete with messy menus and indiscriminate announcements, but the flight takes me away from my mundane today's and I greedily give into my sense of non-identity only labeled by the boarding card and the passport that have my name on them. My 'now' has become a moment 'elsewhere' as I am now speeding through clouds, enjoying my 25-minute ride to Dhaka, completely unsure of what awaits me "home."

Rubana is a Bangladeshi poet pursuing higher studies at Jadavpur University, Kolkata.

They can't tell scary stories  
the way Grandma tells  
With a stern  
Courageous  
Omniscient  
I-don't-care-anyone kind of face

Aruni Kashyap is a young Assamese poet at St. Stephen's College, Delhi

**PARTHAPRATIM MAJUMDAR**  
(translated by Shaheen Afroze)



Don't be shy if you need anything say so sir  
From morning till night you'll find Subrata here.

Shaheen Afroze is a schoolteacher