

NON-FICTION

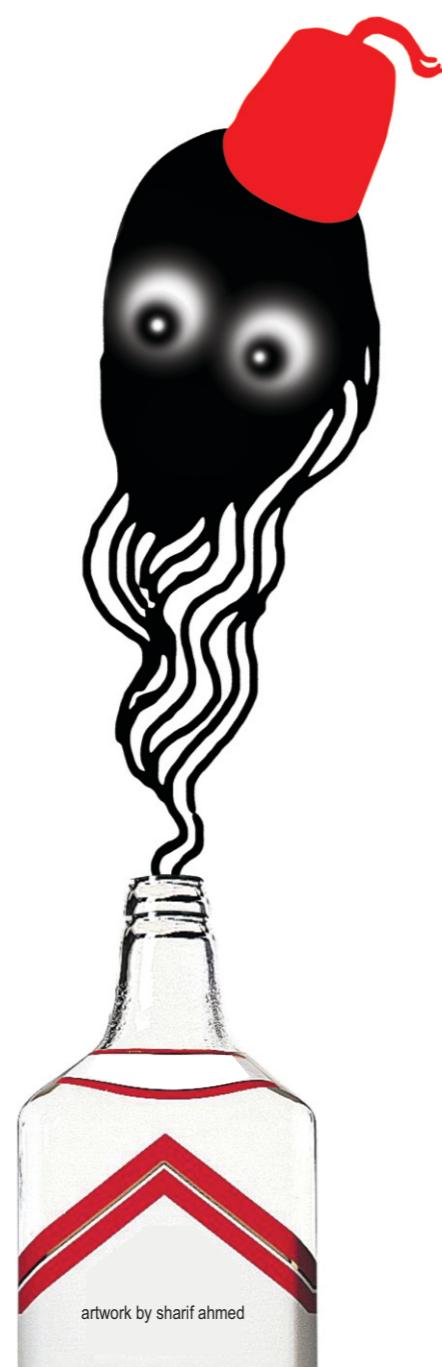
An Aladdin Tale

SHAHID ALAM

The yells were issuing out in unbroken waves. As went 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.

The antecedent to it is to be found in our tenant of our adjacent building of 1938 vintage. It has since been demolished, to be replaced by an imposing modern structure. Then, a few years before the night of screaming and yelling, my father had rented the one-storied house to the imam of a local mosque. He was just another in a long line of tenants who had occupied the place, and, when the time came, left for other places. I really could not be bothered about the new tenant, except for two things. One, this was the first time, as far as I could remember, that an imam had become a tenant, and, second, there were these stories told by our neighbours and our hired hand-cum-darwan that the good imam called jinns and bottled them up in large glass jars. Oh yeah? Very funny! Tell that old wives' tale to the legions of believers who would lap it up at the drop of a hat! Not to this man of the world who would firmly direct you to the road to perdition for your pains!

As is my wont, I hardly ever visit a tenant's house. I did not ever 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 squirrelled 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 concentrated on more worldly things. And got married. The imam must have come to the wedding reception. My father made it a point to personally invite his tenants.

My wife inevitably got to hear about our rather tenuous version of Aladdin and his uncanny power, and she was amused. We had a laugh about it, and forgot all about it in the midst of the whirlwind of social obligations that are almost inevitable accompaniments to new marriages, until the night some two months into our marital bliss when we almost simultaneously woke up yelling and screaming. I am not certain, even to this day, about the proximity of our individual loud awakenings. What I know is this: Well after midnight, sometime around two (going by the wall clock which showed half past two or so when my eyes happened to fall on it after I had finally calmed down), I woke up and was staring at the roof of the mosquito net. And staring back at me, from a floating position over that roof, or top, whatever you might call it, was a man, looking down at us (my wife, as you might have guessed, was sleeping at my side), or just me. I must have been dumbfounded for a couple of seconds or so, because I was able to take in a great deal of details about that figure, or apparition, or whatever. He had craggy features, was dark in colour, the colour of the generic Bangladeshi, with a full beard that was a combination of black and gray, and he had a white cloth cap (called kistee tupi in my part of Bangladesh, which is greater Dhaka) on his head. A white (probably discoloured) punjabi hid the upper part of a (probably green and white) checked lungi, and that is all I remember about him until I broke the silence. In retrospect, he was not at all forbidding or frightening to look at; he looked more like a rural elder going about his business.

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

other. She broke the silence inside our room as the pounding and shouting went on outside.

"What happened?"
"There was a man on top of the mosquito net!"
"You saw him too?"

I realized that she had probably seen the same vision. And ignoring the loud knocks and gaggle of voices that was a combination of my father, mother, and younger brothers, she proceeded to describe exactly the same man that I saw, or thought I saw, floating over the mosquito net. Dammit, I am not going to psychoanalyze myself! I leave it to those readers wishing to indulge in some spirited psychobabble.

Somehow feeling strangely reassured at a shared experience, I got down from the bed, and opened the door. My mother was standing in front, followed closely by my father and three brothers. Concern plainly showed on their faces, none more so than on my mother. For me. For their daughter-in-law, their sister-in-law. They looked more worried than what I felt. Heck, we must have created some din to have woken up the entire household! Briefly, I told them our experience. Without a word, my mother went to the kitchen, and brought back two glasses of water, muttering some *doa* and ending up by blowing two or three times over each of them.

"Drink," she ordered, and we obeyed. My throat felt dry, and I finished the entire contents of my glass at one go.

My mother was voluble for the next half hour or so; my father was strangely quiet. Eventually, we went back to sleep, and had an uneven rest of the late night until daybreak. That afternoon, my father called my wife and me to give us this message: "I've talked with the imam, told him about last night, and asked him to find other accommodation from next month."

The imam complied, and he left with his family and all the special bottles that he was supposed to have in his possession. I never did get to see those bottles. And I have not seen any hovering figures over my mosquito net to this day, since that late night, so long ago.

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How To Tell A Story

ARUNI KASHYAP

They don't know how to tell a story
They don't chew betel-nut, paan-leaves
Or sit on a mat
made from finely sliced long bamboo
While telling a story

I miss the patchy golden moon
Glowing
Peeping down
Smiling
smell of dry cow-dung
or jasmine
night-queen
mashed marigold leaves...
floating over the perpetual sound of a
Hand-fan made from
Four empty incensed sticks' packets
Stitched,
Fixed on a piece of bamboo stick
That can be moved round and round to
Huddle all of us near Grandma
For the air
story,
security,
cracked hands' caressing extended
to our prickly heat-covered backs.

Grandma! the most courageous woman in the world
From the hide-out of mango-ghost
To the witch in thick-leaved jackfruit trees
who cooks her meal on a human skull, sitting
on the space between two conjoined branches
She knows everything, everyone

From long-legged ghosts to
Head-less kabanda
And glowing ghor jeutee who lives
inside best pillar of your house;--
with the sternest face,
Faced she all

She sent them away
Sometimes, with a handful of mustard seeds
Or
The smell of burnt red-chilies
sown on smolders red
The small iron ring tied with thread around waist
(Stolen in a moonless Saturday
from fisherman's smelly net.)
Or escaped singing a song in front of foxes
Calling blacky, ruddy--
that go bow-bow-bow
the shell of a tumbling giant gourd
she sat inside

There is so much to learn from Grandma
Especially the way of telling a story

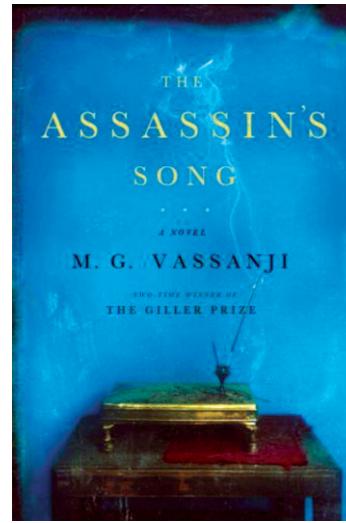
They can't tell scary stories
the way Grandma tells
With a stern
Courageous
Omniscient
I-don't-care-anyone kind of face

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

Making Miracles

RADHA CHAKRABORTY

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



"Everything is connected and has a purpose, there are no accidents" (p. 322).

The Assassin's Song, the latest novel by Kenya-born, Toronto-based author M.G. Vassanji, could be read as an extended meditation on this philosophical theme. The words also encapsulate the

hard-won wisdom that Karsan Dargawallah, Vassanji's protagonist, arrives at through a long, painful journey from innocence to knowledge. In this journey history blends with personal memory to create the groundwork for Karsan's own extraordinary destiny. For he is born, so he is told, to inherit the role of spiritual guide, keeper of the shrine of Pir Bawa, or Nur Fazal, a thirteenth century Sufi saint who had come to Gujarat during the reign of Vishal Dev. Karsan rebels against his heritage and his father's austere discipline to take up work and study in the USA, but the call of destiny brings him back to his family home Pirbaag in the aftermath of the Godhra carnage of 2002. Here he must confront the past, both personal and public, including the circumstances of his parents' separate deaths and the truth about his brother Masoor, who reacts to communal violence by embracing the path of extremism.

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," Bapuji 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 Pirbaag. Punctuating these personal narratives are moments in public history where communalism 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 Pirbaag, once dedicated to the ideals of secularism and tolerance, finds itself no longer immune to

onslaughts of communal violence. "But I don't want to be God, Bapuji!" Karsan protests to his father before leaving for America (189). But as the narrative draws to its melancholy close, a wiser Karsan acknowledges that escape from history is not an option, and understands the mythmaking impulse of the human mind: "I have resolved to remember, construct a shrine of my own out of the ashes of Pirbaag: a bookish shrine of songs and stories. This is my prayer, if you will, this is my fist in the air, my anger... it is my responsibility, my duty to my father and all the people who relied on us" (316).

Peopling this narrative of pain, disillusionment and eventual self-knowledge are an array of characters from the many worlds that Karsan traverses in his circuitous route back to where his life began. We vividly remember Salim Buckle, who pays with his life for a moment of communal tension in Karsan's childhood; Raja Singh, the truck driver whose supply of newspapers and magazines keeps the cocooned young boy in touch with the world outside; Mr. Hernani, whose bookshop in Ahmedabad becomes Karsan's favourite getaway during adolescence; and Elias, the Jewish boy from whom Karsan learns of the possibility of applying for higher studies abroad. There are also the women in Karsan's life: the mysterious girl with the large nose ring, the subject of his adolescent dreams; Shilpa the seductive devotee of Karsan's father, the chink in the holy man's spiritual armour; Marge, Karsan's partner in a short-lived marriage that ends in tragedy; and Nita, the casual acquaintance from his days at the US university, who becomes his emotional mainstay when his world threatens to collapse around him. We encounter Major Narang, whose task it is to track down the absconding Masoor, Mr. David, the Christian schoolteacher accused of being a paedophile, and Nur Fazal himself, whose shadowy but powerful mystery haunts the entire narrative. Most believable is Karsan's delightfully portrayed mother, who sneaks off in a burqua to watch Hindi films in defiance of her husband's credo, sends her US-based son parathas and theplas wrapped in pages of his favourite Indian magazine, and makes a public display of wifely jealousy that eventually drives her to her death. Not all the other figures are equally lifelike though, some of them appearing perfunctorily to serve some obvious thematic purpose before dropping out of the pages of the narrative. But then realism is not Vassanji's favoured mode, and since everything is filtered through Karsan's consciousness and rendered in his voice, we see every other character through his eyes.

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 Chakraborty is an academic and translator

Going Places

RUBANA
(written at Kolkata airport)

The airport is looking strange at 5:00 in the morning. The guards at the gate have not bothered to check the ticket, the salesperson at the Port lounge did not seem to be in his usual hurry to spill coffee on my shalwar kameez, the women in the rest room look rested and resigned to being there at that hour. A whiff of Channel's 'Chance' takes me by surprise and I look around to trace its source. A young woman in her early 20's from Jet Airways is changing into her uniform. I have had the opportunity of being served by her in a couple of domestic flights and she's one of the most jazzy stewardesses I have seen in my life. At 5:00 she is as plain as I am, with the plainest expression on her face, no different than mine. I quickly conclude that it must be the hour that de-beautifies people and that perhaps, early mornings and airports do have flexible faces and passions.

Meantime, my mind ticks away counting down to the last possible second of being efficient in a supermodern universe where the race is open to all in transit, journeying from one point to the other, making trips to meeting people, sealing business deals while most of the work is done on board, over a breakfast tray served with stale croissants, sad looking peaches, and a couple of squid-like scrambled eggs. 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 adjustable seat with digitally controlled panel, along with facilities to make calls, make use of the photocopies/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

with the features of the alien land gradually settling in. On board, a traveler invariably notices a piece on the best destinations to travel to and that routinely happens to be a heavenly island in an exotic setting. The mind seems firmer in space than on the ground at that point. Handling nostalgia is relatively easier for us as most of our memories are frozen into photo gallery folders on our lap tops. This is the time when travelers like us are finally alone and this is the moment we cherish the most. This space is what Marc Augé, the French anthropologist calls a "non-place" and this is what we adhere to and I personally celebrate 'Here' and 'Now'.

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 hamlets, 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 "invenire", 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 do we 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.

Three-wheeled Life

PARTHAPRATIM MAJUMDAR

(translated by Shaheen Afroze)



I won't go to the school sir I feel ashamed to go there
This is all I have now — friends this year I did sit for
the secondary school exam, but my father's liver burst —
the morning's sun has circled to noontime fire

What? Here? — Phone? — Go down this alley
right by Jamuna Stores — there sir you can see it
Now where? — School? — you're still teacher class ten
I still remember sir your 'Stopping the woods...'

Am I talking too much? Sir I didn't need to before —
Now — you know? — sir so many different kinds of people
who hop aboard without fixing the fare, when
it comes time to pay: 'All you rickshawallahs the same...'

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.