

While negotiating the teaching job he had mentioned Miyajaan Munshi's name. The family said, "You know Miyajaan Munshi? Enough said!" Now, as dusk descended, he is feeling a bit depressed. He hardly knew anyone in this neighbourhood besides Miyajaan Munshi. Besides, he was not good at taking the initiative and striking up casual conversations with people. The idea of spending the evening indoors seemed unbearable to him. Deciding to go out for a spell he pulls on his trousers. Outside, he encounters the chill of a winter's evening. Lacking funds for a rickshaw fare he starts to walk briskly from Begum Bazaar down Nazimuddin Road.

At Chankharpool his pace slackens. There are a few beggars on either side of the road pleading for just one taka from him in exchange of which they are ready to set him afloat on the bottomless ocean of their prayers and good wishes. But he turns then down.

Soon he passes the Dhaka Medical College, Doyel square, the Bangla Academy, the TSC (Teacher Student Center of the Dhaka University) and reaches the Shahbagh area.

Here he feels assaulted by the traffic, the crowds, the blinding lights, the honking of cars, the ambulance sirens, and the music blaring from microphones along with advertisement and religious injunctions pitched in crude tones. He feels further depressed and is reminded of some lines from a new young writer: "At last, walking the streets of this feeble, drooping city, I discover the 'motive' behind my inner man, powerless, un-intellectual, unfeeling..." At that point he lights a cigarette while standing in front of the National Museum and observes the blinking of the neon lights of the cardiac section of a nearby hospital. Around this time he notices a group of homeward-bound people anxiously waiting for a bus that doesn't arrive. Where to go now? There are no restaurants or cafes in this city where one can sit for a while in peace. He thinks of all that he has read in books about the sidewalk cafes of Paris, Café de la Nouvelle Athenes, about Toulouse Lautrec's Moulin Rouge, Montmartre, Pigalle, etc. Crushing underfoot the stub of his cigarette he advances towards Aziz Market. That's when he notices the yellow banner with red letters announcing the inauguration of the open-air rooftop restaurant of a sixteen storey skyscraper. It says "Happy Opening! 5th December! Dream Plaza, Shahbagh"

Beyond Aziz Market he locates the sixteen storey Dream Plaza. At the entrance, having been greeted by a welcoming group, he takes the lift up to the rooftop restaurant. He enters a magical world of lights. At the entrance, some young girls in red saris hand him a yellow rose.

Having been showered with so much honour he ends up thinking about how he has yet to find a job that would allow him to live with some dignity. He is a tumble weed adrift in this heartless, indifferent city. Or, one might say that from a lack of care and attention he is growing like a wild weed. Once upon a time, he had made a huge effort to study Dostoevsky, Chekov, Gorky, Tolstoy, Hardy, Maupassant, Tagore, Jibanananda, Manik, 'Putul Naach', Bibhuti, 'Pather Panchali', Tarashankor, 'Hanshuli Baak', Kafka, Camus, Sartre, etc. etc. He had even managed to get published here and there some essays written in his immature hand used to doing class assignments. Since then he had been filled with the consuming desire to see his name included in list of great writers. Now, this desire seems nothing more than a struggle to be a part of the rat-race.

At a literary conference in their district town he had once made the acquaintance of an editor who was visiting as the chief guest, and on the basis of

this link he had subsequently gone to see him at the well-lit newspaper office where the editor had failed to recognize him. He had come away sad and disillusioned. That disappointment had been alleviated somewhat a few months later when a short story of his which he had mailed to a well-known daily had been published in their literary page. But even after that he was filled with fresh frustration when he realized that he knew nothing of the stuff being discussed by the literary groups at Shahbagh, such as Foucault, Derrida, deconstruction, 'Madness and Civilization', Edward Said, Lorca, Umberto Eco, Bloom, Spivak, post-Modernism, post-feminism etc.

One day, having saved about 150 takas of his tuition money he went searching desperately for a book on post-modernism at the book market of Shahbagh. There the intellectually half-baked salesman handed him a volume titled 'The Illusion of Post-Modernism' costing seven hundred takas and started writing out the cash memo. Embarrassed, he explained his inability to buy the book and fled from the shop. Right at that moment, a young man in a shabby shirt lighting a cigarette said, "One really can't afford to buy such books here." Then letting out a lungful of smoke he told him about the photo-copied edition of the same book to be found at a book store on the fourth floor of a Chinese restaurant in Nilkhet. With a sigh of relief he walked out and from that shop at Nilkhet he bought his book on post-modernism for only 80 takas! He spent an entire sleepless night studying this tome, understanding precious little.

A few days later, having gone to the office of editor of the literary page of a well-known newspaper and not finding any room to sit he was standing around and ended up asking, "What exactly is this 'post-modernism'?" Upon hearing this, the editor frowned and a look of helplessness clouded his face. He mumbled, "Post-modernism is...er...well, it's just one of those things, if you know what I mean! But let me refer you to a book... what's the title now...anyway, you'll get all the details there." Just then the editor's cell phone started to ring melodiously and he was distracted. Next to him sat another man typing away furiously, who turned to him saying, "This post-modernism stuff is not really easy to understand. You might want to read that book by Eagleton." A few days later, at a used books store in Nilkhet, when he addressed this issue to a professor recently returned from the US, he was given an explanation that submerged him within a world of illusion for three consecutive days!

Now, one of the girls from the welcoming group asks him: "Are you by yourself, sir?" Just then a feminine voice rings out behind him, "No, I'm with him." Turning around he is amazed to see a young woman. They enter the restaurant together and sit down under a colourful umbrella. A chill wind blows stiffly. He looks in wonder at the girl. He ought to say something to her like, "I don't believe we have met before, have we?" But he says nothing. When the waiters arrive with their trays and start putting the dishes on the table he forgets that he has only 10 takas in his pocket. The girl says, "But we didn't order anything!" One of the waiters says with a smile, "Today we aren't taking orders; instead, we will serve you with dishes selected by us, and we won't even charge you for them because today you are our honoured guests at our restaurant's inaugural dinner." Now he looks properly at the girl's face and observes her extraordinary eyes brimming with sadness. Her face, dried out and haggard, is touched with unbearable gloom. Her body is so thin that there is no sign of youth on it. He reflects on the fact that he has never experienced an evening as delightful as this, yet the presence of this shabby-looking girl in front of him is about to ruin the enchantment

of this evening. Still he wants to relish with joy the hot dishes laid before them. "Shall we start?" The sound of this invitation wakes the girl from her reverie. Taking a crunching bite of the wonton, she lifts a spoonful of soup to her mouth. While eating they look around at the vivacious young people at the other tables, immersed in intimacy. They are the only ones sitting gloomily, not even talking.

He feels bad watching the girl quietly eating with her head hanging down. Trying to be friendly he asks her, "What do you do?" The girl replies, "Nothing much! I sell incense sticks. This cloth bag that you see here is filled with packets of incense sticks which I buy wholesale from the company and try to sell to retail shops." He is quite intrigued by this. What's a girl like her doing selling incense sticks? Couldn't she have found a better job? Now he looks more closely at the girl. Under the bright lights of the restaurant the girl's face becomes clearer. With a touch of soap, cream and other cosmetics, even this face could have been beautiful. Now he decides that this girl could not have come from a family lowly enough to make a living from selling incense sticks. Then who is she? He gets carried away with these speculations and as a result his soup gets cold. He continues to sip the cold soup and takes slow bites from his crunchy fried chicken, but tastes nothing. The girl has almost finished her meal and yet neither has asked the other's name. Having finished, the girl wipes her mouth with a clean pink handkerchief and falls back into a despondent mood. Just then the band strikes up the music to entertain the guests. But he doesn't like the noise.

He wants to go outside with the girl and tells her so. She agrees, and leaving the music behind them, they walk out. Not having decided where to go, they start walking towards Shahbagh Avenue. The girl's cloth-shoulder bag is stuffed with incense sticks and other things and looks bulky and ungainly. But he can't mention this to her, and walks beside the girl feeling a bit awkward.

It's quite late, and the streets are empty. He suddenly feels anxious and sad at the thought of being separated from this girl. He didn't get to know anything about her. When the girl takes out a faded red shawl from her shoulder bag to wrap around herself, the distorted shape of the bag returns to normal. Soon they arrive at a bus stop. The girl is itching to get on the bus. He thinks, if she is so eager to leave without making any conversation then what was the point of her announcing at the restaurant that she was with him? He wanted to ask her about this but his inherent shyness stops him from doing so. Then, merely saying "Okay, I'm off!" she gets on the just-arrived bus headed for Mirpur.

Crossing the road he comes up to the museum and starts walking briskly. Now the streets are absolutely empty. Near Doyel Square he is mugged by a group of heroin addicts. Finding only 10 takas in his pocket the muggers fling the money to the ground and admonish him to carry more money in the future if he roamed the streets at night. When one of the angry young men, a lanky youth, threatens to drive a knife into his belly, another boy starts to search through his pockets for the knife. Just then a car with its headlights glaring drives by and the muggers flee. That he almost lost his life doesn't cross his mind, rather he rejoices at the fact that his 10 takas are intact. Then, suddenly remembering the girl, his joy vanishes.

It is now past midnight. Arriving home, he finds Miyajaan Munshi preparing to shut the collapsible gate. Seeing him, Munshi stops and scolds him for staying out so late. "Do you have any idea how late it is? If something happens to you one of these days, who will help you out, pray? Now go and get a bite to