

SHORT STORY

# Green Chilis

NEEMAN SOBHAN

He would forever remain 'The Groom' in my memory. I never saw the man in normal attire, or ever again, except on his wedding day in that clownish uniform, which is the traditional garb of Bengali-Muslim bridegrooms. At least, I thought it clownish then, because men of that era, without benefit of role models among cinema heroes who now swagger equally in traditional or western attire, were neither able to carry off the long, cream *sheruani* coat and tight pajamas with grace, nor balance that crown of turban and garlands without looking as if it were a basket of vegetables to sell. They didn't even have the confidence to refuse the kerchief that they were made to put against their nose as if warding off some bad smell.

"It's supposed to show their modesty," old Paagli Nani, the madcap sister of my maternal grandmother, explained to us sisters and cousins. We didn't need to be told that this was the male version of the token shyness to be displayed in public by the bride with her lowered head and submissive posture enlivened by tearful break-downs at the prospect of leaving her paternal home. How we made fun of that 'correct bridal mien', giggling ourselves into the easy hysteria of extreme youth which brought the wrong sort of tears to our eyes.

"You girls better learn to be shy if you ever expect to be a bride!" our nani would cackle as she stuffed another betel leaf cone into her mouth. "Nonsense!" we protested. My cousin Mini was vociferous: "I will never be a silly Bengali bride, thank you. I'm going to elope and marry Paul McCartney or George Harrison." I adored the Beatles too, but marry one of them? I was never sure about that, and surely there was something compelling - and romantic even? - about the terrifying rigmarole surrounding a Bengali wedding, or why would our Cheeni be getting married to a stranger?

Cheeni was the elder sister among us pre-teens and known as Cheeni Apa; but by the rules of Muslim Bengali family relationships, she was actually a Great Aunt and thus qualified to the grand title of 'nani'. We refused to call her 'Cheeni Nani'; it was absurd enough that our matronly mothers and aunts, so much older than Cheeni, addressed her as 'khalā' (aunt). The person responsible for all this confusion was my maternal great-grandfather, who had had five wives, though never two wives at once. We heard that they entered his life in succession, bore children, and presently perished. Cheeni was the daughter of his last wife, thus the youngest stepsister of my maternal grandmother.

woman in spite of being five foot nothing in the flat-heeled sandals under her cotton saris. I can see her sitting at the study desk in her spartan room in Great Uncle Rizwan Nana's Dhanmondi house. Whenever my family was visiting Dhaka from then-West Pakistan, and we came to see this brother of my grandmother, my sister and I would rush with our other cousins to see lively young Cheeni Apa, forever studying for some exam. She would put away her books and draw us plump girls to her narrow lap.

I remember on one of these visits, perhaps during her BA final exams, lunch being sent to her table. My mouth watered as she mixed hot rice with ghee and mashed potatoes. "Khaab? Want some?" She winked at me and making a ball of the simple, fragrant food pushed it into my eager mouth. It was delicious, and everyone wanted a mouthful. We watched fascinated as she took a crunching bite from a long green chili with a mouthful of rice. She grinned approvingly, smacking her lips. We whined: "Give us a bite!" She widened her eyes in mock horror: "Are you crazy? It's ferociously hot, *shaanghatik jhaal*." "But you ate it!" Our indignant tone accused her of lying to deprive us of this crisp treat. "Ah, but I am a witch, don't you know?" Her eyes twinkled. "I can eat a whole bunch of hot green chilis without a tear in my eyes." I had once bitten one of her chili peppers and felt the sting, so I believed her.

When she suddenly decided to marry 'The Rich Doctor from London' there was talk among the relatives, but general approval as well. It was felt that Cheeni had made a brilliant match and an astute move that would liberate a poor relation like her living on the kindness of her eldest stepbrother, my Great Uncle Rizwan Nana.

He was my grandmother's own brother, from the same mother, the first wife of my great-grandfather, who died at childbirth number three: our 'madcap Paagli Nani'. This triumvirate comprised the Elders of the Family, who had raised, educated and married off all the other siblings - dozens of my great-aunts and uncles, of which Cheeni was the youngest. She was the same age as the younger son of Great Uncle Rizwan. Though aunt and nephew by relationship, she and our dashing young uncle, Raihan Mama, were childhood playmates and close friends.

I remember him walking into her room singing a popular song of that time: *Cheeni aami cheeni, ogo nondini*. We would crowd around her desk, and at her whispered order to ignore him, we would pretend to be blind to his presence till we started to giggle. But Cheeni remained cool till he broke down her reserve too. He was a tease. If she were telling us a ghost story he would debunk it. "What an idiotic story. The real '*petni*' (ogress) in the story is this woman," he would say, playfully hitting her on the head with the magazine in his hand. "Just look, her feet are turned back to front." We would scream and scramble to hide behind Raihan Mama's back. Cheeni would slap Mama's arm and shove him out of the door, "Get lost, you!" He would put his head around the curtains, with his eyelids turned outwards. We would scream and hide behind Cheeni's chair. "Hahaha...she isn't safe either. Look at her feet!" We would run to stand helplessly in the middle of the room, screaming our heads off, not knowing whom to trust. Once, in walked stern-faced Beena Nani, (Raihan's mother and Cheeni's step sister-in-law) and snapped at all of us, but mostly at Cheeni, "*Ai, ki hotchichey?* What's all this noise and childishness? And Raihan, what are you doing here?" Cheeni gave Raihan a vicious look as he departed. After Beena Nani the spoilsport left, Cheeni was in a foul mood. "Just wait and see what I do to your Raihan Mama for getting me into trouble. I'll bite off his stupid head like a green chili." We dragged Raihan to Cheeni's room for the punishment, but it was no fun. Cheeni was just cold and unresponsive as Raihan bent over her speaking into her ears. We saw her flick his hand off her shoulder, then when she didn't know I was there, she let his hand stroke her fragile shoulder while leaning her head against his sleeve.

Oh! We adored the two, and our visits to the otherwise morose house of our Great Uncle Rizwan, composed of the many widowed and ailing female relatives given asylum in this household, were always enlivened by them.

After the wedding was announced, we heard our mothers discuss how 'poor Cheeni' had struck lucky and would now be a woman of means, living abroad. The Bengali phrase they used literally translated as: 'Her forehead has opened up.' Although I knew that the Bengali word for forehead, *kopaal*, was both a part of the face and the fate supposedly written on it, to me it sounded like a grave injury. "He is old and ugly," Cousin Mini brought fresh news about Cheeni's husband-to-be. We were horrified. Bridegrooms were obliged to be good-

looking and young; it was an unspoken rule of the wedding game, just as all princes in fairy tales were required to be handsome.

It was the early '60's. The wedding was to take place in the most glamorous hotel of Dhaka called Shahbagh. I was barely ten that year and this was the first family wedding that I remember attending. Uncomfortable in my scratchy organza dress, sewn with extra frills and fuss by my mother so all her sisters would die of envy at her skills, I followed my cousins to the dressing room to peek at Cheeni Apa as the bride. We stood at the door, suddenly shy and hesitant as if facing a stranger. Overnight, Cheeni had become an object, 'the *konay*', or 'BRIDE' in capital letters. There was nothing of the pretty girl who fed us lumps of fragrant hot rice and mashed potatoes with ghee. Her delicate collar bones were hidden under layers of gold necklaces studded with gems.

The smile on Cheeni's lips was tight and artificial. But when she saw us her eyes lit up and she held out her henna-patterned, be-ringed hands. After we hugged and smelled her alien perfume instead of the familiar talcum powder, we let her be ogled by the throngs waiting to view the bride seated beside the bridegroom on the flower-decorated stage.

We raced to find a spot closest to where the ceremony would take place. I saw the groom as he came up to take his place on the velvet cushions. He looked huge, his bespectacled face half hidden under the *sehra* of flowers. I assumed he was ugly, but when he stood up at the bride's arrival I only noticed his tender expression as he looked down at his bride, no higher than his shoulder. She sat down gracefully in a cloud of pink and gold, a tiny but imperial figure. A murmur started in the crowd. Then instead of lowering her head coyly, she looked up steadily, almost defiantly, at the audience. The buzzing faltered into momentary silence. Then, more shocking, she turned sideways smilingly at her groom! A guest sneered, "How shameful! Must have known the groom; perhaps some affair-taffair?" Paagli Nani rushed to her stepsister's defence: "Rubbish! She never saw him before in her life. Don't go by her smile. She is actually sad and heartbroken. I know my poor sister is marrying to escape." One woman smirked, gesturing with a finger beside her temple to indicate someone with a screw loose in the head. My grandmother appeared from nowhere, scolded her madcap sister, and turned to the guest, "Our Cheeni is a modern girl, not shy and foolish as we used to be. She grew up motherless, and needs all your prayers so she will always be as happy as she looks today." My grandmother's dignified words made the guests move away. Paagli Nani continued, "Ha! Anyone can see from Cheeni's eyes her heart is breaking! Her *kopaal* is like mine..." She struck her forehead sniffing and we moved away in embarrassment. I turned to check Paagli Nani's forehead. It was true; she had the same narrow forehead as Cheeni.

Too soon the rituals were over. The mirror in which the bridal couple had viewed each other under the canopy of her veil and the silver bowl of almond-studded rice pudding from which they had fed one another other had been taken away. Then Rizwan Nana took Cheeni's hand and put it in the groom's hand. Cheeni stooped down to touch first her stepbrother's feet, then her two sisters and sister-in-law's. The three beaming nanis patted her head in blessing. One of the guests whispered, "Strong girl! No breaking down into tears, no emotions!" Then before the final farewells, the bride was taken to the dressing room for a final adjusting of sari and a trip to the toilet.

We followed the small group of women into the dressing room. Cheeni suddenly pulled me aside. "Listen, was your Raihan Mama in the hall when I was on stage?" I had seen him once in the distance yelling at a waiter in an uncharacteristically foul mood. I just nodded to Cheeni. She whispered, "Can you give him this? It's top secret, okay?" I nodded vigorously. This was like a game from those jovial old times at her desk. She passed a folded paper into my hands. "Make sure you give it to him when no one is around." Then she hugged me quickly and with a strange smile she turned towards the mirror. Something askew in that smile pushed me to blurt out: "Cheeni Apa, are you happy or sad?" She stopped in the act of adjusting her veil and looked at me blankly for a second. "Happy," she said decisively, and turned to the mirror to reapply her lipstick. I had never seen her with coloured lips. The alien mouth was unsmiling. "Truly?" I asked. "Yes. And be sure to tell your Raihan Mama that I am extremely happy, okay?" Suddenly she smiled. It was the wicked grin of her green chili moments. "Ferociously happy! *Shaanghatik khushi!*" Her eyes flashed and burned as if her tongue was on fire, but not a tear appeared.

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## Dhaka Memories: End of an Era

SHAHID ALAM

The red embers spewed out of the iron locomotive as it made its way along the tracks, pulling several passenger carriages, one winter evening. A boy of six or seven stood a short distance away from the tracks, alternately terrified and fascinated, not knowing whether the red balls flaming up and raining down would reach him. He wanted to get closer, wanted to have an even closer look at the cascading shower of red, but instinct held him back, as the steam engine roared past him. Steam belched out of its top, bells clanged furiously, accompanied by a piercing bellow from its inside that was a "who-oo-oo-oo-oo-th", barging in on the all-too-familiar periodic "whoosh-whoosh" of its steam engine.

That little boy was yours truly, then a student of kindergarten or Class I at Holy Cross School (oh yes, we boys were allowed to continue till Class III, after which came boys' schools), who was about to head home located only a couple of hundred meters or so from the railway tracks, one of the very few houses that were dotted around Elephant Road. There were wide open spaces to let a boy run free, and a variety of trees, including olive, mango, *amlaki*, and other fruit-bearing flora, whose bounty was there to take for the asking. And we took in plenty, but the cornucopia never seemed to dry up.

The railway line snaked across what is now the asphalt strip called Kataban road, and the trains ran over it and under Hatirpool, the humpback bridge over which rickshaws and horse carriages huffed and puffed, along with the rare car. My parents, siblings, and I would occasionally ride in the carriages to visit relatives and family friends in Rankin Street, Becharam Dewry, and other places in what is now referred to as the 'old town', but was then the very heart of Dhaka (in some ways, it still is). I vaguely recall the quaint street lights that one still gets to see in old photographs and period movies, placed at regular intervals along the main thoroughfares. The carriage would stop on the other side of the rail tracks, and we would cross them on foot to traverse the short distance to our house.

But, more than anything else, I was fascinated by the steam locomotive. Every so often I would stand under a majestic eucalyptus tree that stood a few meters away from the tracks, and watch the trains go by, with the steam engines pulling along a long line of carriages. The rhythmic clack of the massive iron wheels would automatically stimulate me into mentally reciting over and over the refrain that was in perfect cadence with the sound that they made: "*Jhikir jhikir Mymensingh, Dhaka jaito koto deen*." The train guards waving green or red flags, the sight of men shoveling heaps of coal to feed the gigantic boiler, sweat streaming down their faces and bodies, and the driver manning the locomotive all together was an awe-inspiring sight. I wanted to one day be an engine driver, in command of an entire train, going places, free as a bird, the master of all that I surveyed.

The eucalyptus tree under which I conjured up such romantic visions around the steam train was also a silent witness to one of my heroic rescue



art work by anyana

efforts (not that I have had many of those!). The place teemed with raucous birds of so much variety that I am unable to recall many of the species. One that I do remember, but have not seen for years in Dhaka city, is the kite. This predatory bird's screech was often a harbinger of doom for some poor victim. One morning I was making my way to the tree for train-watching when I heard the screech of doom, looked up, and there was a kite flying quite low, with a chicken gripped firmly in its talons. It was flying low enough for me to see the little thing, and hear its loud terrified *cheep-cheep-cheep*. I ran after the pair, screaming and yelling as I went along, until, as if my unasked prayer had been answered, the kite perched on the lowest branch of the tree, seemingly oblivious to my outrage, ready to tear into the little thing it had in a vice-like grip in its claws. At which point I let loose with a hail of stones. You see, small stones positioned inside the railway line inevitably found their way well outside their location. Thank heavens for such small mercies! I did not succeed in hitting the bird, but disturbed it enough for it to drop the chick, and then fly away, probably with a baleful screech aimed at my direction. The chick survived and I took it home. It grew up to become a rooster, and ended its life by getting sacrificed for our dinner table.

There were sad tales, too, about the track. I pride myself on having a sharp memory, and I remember, when still a little boy, I saw a man lying on one side,

having been cut in half by an overnight train. After all these years, that scene refuses to fade away from my memory. He was a thin man, clad in a white *punjab*, with a full white beard and white hair probably reaching below his neckline, lying on his back, with his body cut in half. The blood had coagulated by the time I got there, and the distinct stench of decay was in the air. Poor soul, cut down in the evening of his life. And then there were those fires lighting up the night sky as the rows of thatched-bamboo barracks, which stood approximately in the area that now houses the Dhaka University Press and its adjoining buildings, burnt down, with tales of incinerated residents. I never got to see them.

The romance I have associated with the steam engine and the railway line was enhanced by the numerous journeys I undertook to visit my father who had been posted, alternately in (greater) Chittagong and (greater) Sylhet area. Besides people watching and vistas rapidly passing by as the train

chugged along, I remember a particularly interesting episode. I was then ten or eleven, and traveling with my mother and brother. We shared the compartment with a lovely girl of fourteen or fifteen, and her mother. At a brief stop in Luxam or Akhaura, a young man in trendy drainpipes and a blazing red shirt was standing on the platform, staring intently at the girl, who was sitting by the window and studiously avoiding his gaze. As the train resumed its journey, the fellow took a step forward and winked at her several times in rapid succession until he disappeared from our collective view. Even then I thought that a pretty strange way for expressing romantic interest. Oh well, whatever titillates!

Sadly, the steam engine has become a relic, a victim to the inexorable demands of time. Not too long ago I watched, either on National Geographic or on Discovery, a documentary that recounted the early days, the years of glory, and the sad end of the steam engine in India. A lump developed in my throat. I had just finished watching the end of an era, when train travel was a rhapsody of romance, when Time took its own sweet time in moving forward, when I could take all the time to indulge in endless flights of fancy. A part of my romantic self had just died a second death with the end of the film.

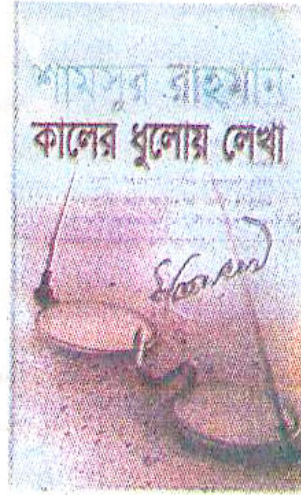
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## Poet Shamsur Rahman born October 24, 1929

(Translated from Shamsur Rahman's autobiography *Kaaler Dhuloy Lekha* by Khademul Islam)

I grew up in a non-literary household. Though in our home nobody ever took any interest in either music or painting, in my childhood I did have brushes with Dhakalya culture. Many a time did I hear *qawwali* and *merashin* songs. *Merashin* songs were a type of feminine songs that at one time was very much heard in old Dhaka. In reputable households, after women had confined themselves for forty days in the birthing room, festivities were arranged, and for those festivities the *merashinis* would be called, where for a fee they would sing songs to the accompaniment of drums. They performed at weddings and marriage ceremonies too. Of course no such excuses were necessary for *qawwali* sessions. Whenever the head of household wanted such a session the *qawwali* singers would arrive at the house. They would sing the whole night in front of a jampacked audience. There would be contests between two groups of *qawwali* singers. The enthusiastic, drunken audience would throw cash at the singers. And in neighbourhood after neighbourhood, on the last day of *Chaitra* month, there would be the feverish flying of kites. And even though I could not fly kites, yet I loved to see the kites flying in the sky...

I derived the most enjoyment from our open roof. Above me would be the open sky. In the sky were clouds, the moon, the sun, stars, birds, and during the kite season - kites! In the sky I would discover varieties of trees, the incomparable faces of princesses in fables, sometimes *Pashaboti*'s face would bloom, and at other times pictures of riders on horseback or flowers more beautiful than even those in the garden of Mr. Harner. In short, I would be entranced by an amazing celestial garden. Whenever I had a break from the study table I would race off to the roof. Many of the thoughts, reflections and dreams of my childhood, adolescent and youthful years bears the impress of that *Mahut-tuli* roof. Alas, today there is no way of getting there - to even think about it brings despair. Within my mind sunshine and moonlit nights, the green leaves of trees, the muddy waters of a pond, many shaded faces, diverse birds come crowding. The whispering of those lost days comes floating into my ears...



### Mask

SHAMSUR RAHMAN  
(Translated by Kaiser Haq)

Shower me with petals,  
heap bouquets around me,  
I won't complain. Unable to move,  
I won't ask you to stop  
nor, if butterflies or swarms of flies  
settle on my nose, can I brush them away.

Indifferent to scent of jasmine and benjamin,  
to rose-water and loud lament,  
I lie supine with sightless eyes  
while the man who will wash me  
scratches his ample behind.  
The youthfulness of the lissome maiden,  
her firm breasts untouched by grief,  
no longer inspires me to chant  
nonsense rhymes in praise of life.

You can cover me head to foot with flowers,  
my finger won't rise in admonishment.  
I'll shortly board a truck  
for a visit to Banani.  
A light breeze will touch my lifeless bones.

I am the broken nest of a weaver-bird,  
dreamless and terribly lonely on the long verandah.  
If you wish to deck me up like a bridegroom  
go ahead, I won't say no  
Do as you please, only don't  
alter my face too much with collyrium  
or any embalming cosmetic. Just see that I am  
just as I am; don't let another face  
emerge through the lineaments of mine.  
Look! The old mask  
under whose pressure  
I passed my whole life,  
a wearisome handmaiden of anxiety,  
has peeled off at last.  
For God's sake don't  
fix on me another oppressive mask.

Kaiser Haq is professor of English at Dhaka University.  
1. Referring to Banani cemetery

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.