

MICRO-FICTION

Worders

SABRINA AHMAD

Almost there

The room looked the same as it always had. The bed that was getting too small for you, so that your feet stuck out over the edge. The mat with the grape-juice stain that we could never really wash out. The posters of your favourite rock-stars and wrestling idols. Mystery novels clashed with Physics and Chemistry textbooks on your bookshelves, and I think I spied a zany magazine tucked into a corner. Your clothes hung in your closet; some of them still smelt of you. Sitting here, I could almost pretend you'd never agreed to drive home after those drinks.

Epiphany

You awoken to an empty house. The girls are out again, as you knew they would be. The flat is yours at this hour...or is it? Feminine smells assail your nostrils: perfume, scented soap, talcum powder. As you wander from room to tastefully decorated room, you seek yourself in them in vain. Furniture that your wife scrimped and saved to buy, photographs of your daughters vying for wall space with their framed diplomas; testament to their busy, demanding lives. Do you, jobless old man, play any part here beyond that of the silent spectator? Only one way to find out...

Art

He traced the shape he desired, with a long finger. It had to be just right. He picked up the instrument, and began. He flinched and a tiny curl of smoke rose from the surface. Finished, he smiled, satisfied, as he popped the remainder of the cigarette between his lips, and surveyed his handiwork. Her name, bleeding, on his palm.

Love at first sight

His eyes were limpid pools of chocolate, and he looked up at her with more adoration than she'd ever received. Gingerly, she reached out and cupped his face in her hands, stroking him along the jaw-line. Eyes shut, he leaned into her, savouring her tentative caresses. She knew right then, that this was the pet dog she had always wanted.

Stiletto Heals

Last evening was the last straw. She came home after a week of recuperating at a friend's place, gathering courage. He heard her footsteps and came roaring, reeking of booze, five o'clock shadow and dirty wife-beater testament to chronic failure. He lunged. A high heel to the groin ended the six months of abuse that their sham marriage had been.

Sabrina Ahmad is a young Bangladeshi-American writer who is currently in Dhaka

Home

RABAB AHMED

I find a certain silence
within these covered walls and sounds
of a throbbing city outside;
car horns collide with cawing of crows,
a smell of gardenia dances with a stench of garbage
thrown every which way along the broken streets.

I feel a kind of pain,
when I think about what 'home' is;
juxtaposing images of New York City
with the faded mossy walls of Banani.
The pictures in my mind slowly drip,
like rainfall slipping off guava leaves;
they seep into banks of memories
hidden in my grandmother's almirah,
locked away in blankets of innocence.

I think of certain faces,
their thoughts resting upon me,
amidst skyscrapers and 'westerners',
knitting the scrap of time till my return.
I place myself in that home,
watching colored beads of various emotions
come cascading down listlessly,
waiting for a beginning that ended long ago.
I find myself in this home,
where the air breathes the past,
flickering like a fluorescent tubelight,
hiding my detachment under the bed
as the present wavers mockingly.
The worlds inside me come to a standstill;
images turned upside down,
like stagnant raindrops on a car window,
momentarily lit up by passing neon lights.

The surrounding silence exhales with me,
the fragrance of flowers begin to fade
as my soul takes a midnight stroll
along the shores of Long Island,
beneath the bridges of Manhattan,
within the streets of Dhaka,
up on the roof of Banani.
Slowly and uncertainly it comes to rest,
quietly floating somewhere in between.

Rabab Ahmed lives in New York, and recently completed a Masters in English Lit from Rutgers University, USA.

SAARC Folklore Festival 2007: Delhi Part I

KHADEMUL ISLAM

I landed in Delhi on the afternoon of December 6 expecting it to be colder than Dhaka. But surprisingly enough it was not and I felt somewhat disoriented at having packed so much warm clothes in my luggage. Less space for books that I planned to buy, I thought a little sourly. We drove in a microbus through dry, dun-coloured Delhi streets towards Indira Gandhi University campus. I had only just met my fellow Bangladeshis, at Delhi airport when we were being picked up by the event manager's representative. They were all academic folklorists here to read papers at the international folklore seminar and I, the journalist, distinctly felt the odd man out. But we soon became acquainted, exchanging small talk as we peered out of the microbus windows at dusty neem tree leaves scattered over a scabbed earth that looks desolate to Bengalis born to the lush green velvet of their countryside. The party consisted of Dr. Shamsuzzaman Khan (ex DG of Shilpakala Academy), Dr. Mahbubul Haque of Chittagong University, Dr. S. Jamil Ahmed of Dhaka University's Department of Theatre and Music, and Professor Muniruzzaman (retired) and his wife. The event had been organized by FOSWAL (Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature, the organization's cultural wing) in collaboration with the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, the body that is responsible for the Indian foreign affairs ministry's outreach programs. When Ajeet Caur, the head of FOSWAL, had sent the invitation, I had demurred. What could I contribute? My idea of folklore was not particularly different from that of the average Bengali acquainted with *jatras* and *bhatiali* songs. However, Ajeet Ji had insisted, and saying no to her can be a difficult proposition - I had met her before at SAARC's writers conference in April. So a deal was struck: I would report on the event for my newspaper, and not have to present an academic paper. Okay, she said, but at least be the chair of one session. Fair, enough, I had replied. So here I was now winding through streets where the traffic divided and re-united amoeba-like around cows drifting dreamlike across engorged roads.

exquisite movements of the young Kashmiri male dancers was to feel renewed in some vital, earthy way, to shed the micron-thin, urban, westernized skin of my everyday life. The festival brochure said that we South Asians "are connected at a deeper level through different forms of articulation; through our shared myths, traditions, cosmologies, rituals and folk knowledge systems that together constitute our cultural identity." But brochure language is merely brochure language; live folk performances seen rippling through the Delhi night air felt quite something else.

And it was doubly lovely to watch the Bangladesh folk artist troupe perform their *Kushan Gaan*, an indigenous art form. Led by their inspired *gayen* or lead singer Kripashindhu Roy, they presented *Asuamedh Jagna*, an episode from the Ramayana. But it was eons away from the bookish, middle-class Ramayana of my thoughts. This was the people's Ramayana, adapted, textured and layered through centuries of art rooted in common life. Though it was getting cool-ish in the outdoor arena, though all the Delhi-ites gathered there could not exactly follow the Bengali language, yet the vibrant energy, plus the raucous comic bits, of the troupe communicated itself effortlessly to the audience. Though there had been some kind of a foul-up between FOSWAL and Bangladesh authorities initially regarding the participation of the troupe in the festival, it was heartening to see that they had made it to Delhi. I sat entranced through their performance; a part of me rang to their rhythms, to their spirited songs and beat, to their makeup and glitter and their blazing, earthy lack of inhibition. Folklore performance had begun to touch me.

It was a feeling that stayed with me through most of the conference over the next three days held at the Academy of Fine Arts and Literature building, the institution that is the parent body of FOSWAL -- yes, dear readers, there is a certain irreducible acronym-laden component to the whole affair. During the April SAARC writers' conference, I hadn't seen this particular building. It is Ajeet Caur's base - a beautifully designed redbrick construction whose inside spaces float on high cathedral-like light and air. The building's basement is both a space for training poor women in various trades as well as a folklore museum, rooms where amid the free chatter of working women one could view some old paintings too. There was one that I especially grew fond of: an 18th century Mughal etching of two women with their arms around each other, one holding the sagi's wine vessel, and the other the drinking cup. On the ground floor was an art gallery (whose removable walls now extended the space for the conference) that showcased not only Ajeet Ji's daughter Arpana Caur's world-famous museum-quality works, but also housed the FOSWAL office-cum-library. Upstairs were a canteen and studios, plus a drawing room space with chairs and floor mats/gaddis for sitting and *gup-shopping*. Balconies extended beyond into the sunlight of the Siri Fort area, which in the early 14th century had been Alauddin Khilji's capital. At the very top (the 'apex', to use another SAARC favourite term!) was Ajeet's bedroom, its wooden floors and shelves asprawl with books and carpets and hundreds of gift objects and shawls, and a working bed with phones blinking on and off by its side. I wondered at this woman's willpower. I had read her Sahitya Akademi Award-winning autobiography *Khana Badosh* (translated into English as *Pebbles in a Tin Drum*) where she described leaving behind an abusive husband to land with two small children in Delhi's Working Girls' Hostel. To "supplement (a) monthly salary of six hundred and fifty rupees" she wrote articles and did translation work for the USIS, which left her with nothing after rent and school fees for the girls. Still she carried on, hanging on for days on end "on a bottle of milk costing eighteen paise and half a loaf of bread costing thirteen paise."

From that to this! Ajeet Ji's life experience no doubt contributes to her occasional fits of imperiousness, when she will not brook 'no' for an answer, an imperiousness that is tempered however with a genuine bouts of affection for persons she thinks speak with a straight tongue.

I paid attention as the seminar papers were read out. The feeling of tuning into something vital that I had felt watching performances at CP park never left me. Some papers I got the general drift of, others I could not quite follow with their enquiries into esoteric aspects of myths and legends. Some of the



Standing in front of the Academy of Fine Arts and Literature building left to right: Dr. Mahbubul Haque, Prof. Muniruzzaman's wife, Khademul Islam, Dr. Jamil Ahmed, Ajeet Caur, Professor Muniruzzaman and Dr. Shamsuzzaman Khan.

papers were also no doubt material written a while back being recycled again, a time-honoured academic tradition. The tone of the seminar, though, was set by a combative keynote paper on the first day by Dr. Jawaharlal Handoo, a familiar name on the folklore conference circuit. He discussed folkloric traditions within the 'feudal paradigm' of Indian society, and used that as a platform to launch a blistering attack on postmodernism and postcolonialism, with some added digs at English writing in South Asia. Speak the language of 90 percent of the people of South Asia, he pleaded, connect with them, come to know them, be of them, listen to their songs and dances and folklore, and thus will be revealed to you your own and your people's soul. The Bangladesh academics in general presented papers of utter sobriety on the oral traditions and popular culture of Bangladesh, one with reference to our

language movement. Dr. Jamil's paper, however, on the Manik Pir cult in western Bangladesh and south-eastern West Bengal, forcefully delineated the fundamentalist threat to the 'subversive' subtexts inherent in such syncretic practices. Our evenings were free, and over dinners I got acquainted with other participants, such as the Sri Lankese diplomat Nihal Rodrigo, who seemed to know every senior member of our own foreign office establishment. Once I ducked an IIC dinner to go sample Khan Chacha's seekh, kebab, rumali roti at Khan Market, jostling in line with Delhi's hip young and tourists.

Other papers I liked were Dr. Malashri Lal of Delhi University, who attempted to show how smaller-scale, regional folklore perhaps underpinned the grand narratives of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, the complex web that folklore weaves. The Sri Lankese English language poet Sitakant Mahapatra lamented the loss of trees and languages, of habitats and songs, of the disappearance of whole folkloric traditions as modern state structures were 'grafted' onto an ancient civilization and culture. Susan Daniel made an impassioned appeal for the preservation of the Todo culture of the Nilgiri mountains of Tamil Nadu. Dr. Fouzia Saeed from Pakistan elucidated in elegantly simple terms the place of women in folklore primarily as 'tradition keepers', and how yet its interstices provided them with emancipatory spaces.

Soon it was over, and it was time for the last session. I presided over it and listened and did the task that is the sad lot of such *eminences grise*: looking at the clock and discreetly reminding presenters of their allotted time. In my closing address I said that I as the rank outsider had perhaps enjoyed the seminar the most. I told them of my interest in Bangladesh's *jalmahal* politics, which had led to peasant clashes, particularly my ongoing research in one such struggle during the '90s in the Sunamganj area. There the villagers and Bede community had mobilized spontaneously against a brutal, state-aided deprivation of their millennial-old fishing rights, a mobilization that had taken shape and form through songs and dances. It was the folklore of protest, the voices of the *kishan* raised in chants. I confessed to the audience that though in my research I had been attuned to only the political aspects of the struggles of the *jalmahal* disenfranchised, from now on, thanks entirely to them, I knew how to listen to the spontaneous protest songs of the poor, which to me was the purest of pure folklore.

Afterwards a resolution was passed that folklore be given a special place in the SAARC cultural agenda, and that working groups be formed in each country to explore, collect and preserve folklore, as well as the establishment of an institute for such an enterprise.

Then the seminar was declared closed, and we went out into the evening air, laughing and talking, clambering into minivans to get back to our own destinations. The academic delegates would fly out the next day. I would stay on for a few more days, talking to more Indians, learning and listening. And sometimes arguing, strongly.

It was now starting to get much cooler in Delhi.

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star. The above is part of a continuing series on Delhi.



SAARC Folklore Festival

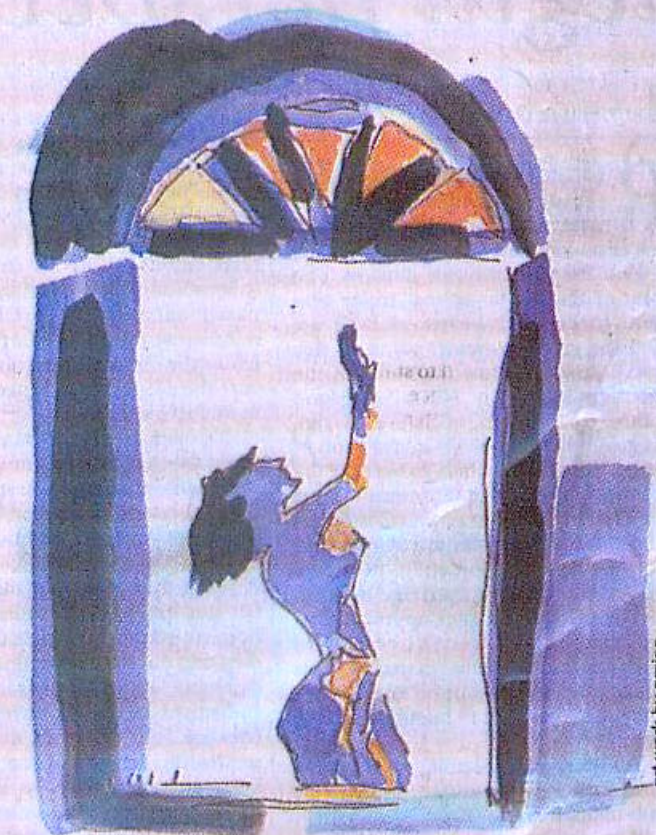
December 6, 7, 8, 9, 2007

Venues

- Academy of Fine Arts and Literature
- Connaught Place, Connaught Place, New Delhi

(where two non-South Asian academics, Lauri Harvilahiti of Finland and Ulo Valk of Estonia had also been invited) was in tandem with an ongoing show of folk songs, dance and theater performances in Central Park, Connaught Place, as well as at other venues, during evenings by troupes from all the SAARC countries.

By the time the academics were settled in their campus guest-houses and I was taken to my digs at the India International Center (since I had asked to stay beyond the seminar-festival time in order to meet Indian writers and publishers in order to here I borrow a FOSWAL line - foster my own brand of 'cultural connectivity') I was ready for a quick shower and change of clothes. Then I was taken to Connaught Place, where the central park stage erected for the performances was surrounded by rings of spectators. I was somewhat late and missed the opening ceremonies. Behind the stage was a profusion of folk performers in various costumes and dresses, waiting to go on, an open air theater dressing room atmosphere with makeup being put on and voices talking in a bewildering variety of languages. A couple of the performers with spectacular headgear were smoking some aromatic leafy *bidis* to perhaps quell stage nerves, others were squatting amid a truly astonishing array of different musical instruments. Looking on at the scene I was hit afresh with the monumental diversity of peoples and cultures that nestle within the SAARC region, within this subcontinent. And later (seated behind Veena Sikri, the ex Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh, who told me to make sure to extend her good wishes to the people of Bangladesh), to watch performers ranging from Afghanistan's legendary Ustad Gul Zaman, to the sweet-voiced chorus of the Sri Lankese singers, to Teejan Bai's outrageously energetic rendition of Chhattisgarhi folk songs to the delicate,



Sin

MOHAMMAD SHAHIDUL ISLAM

As I watch the moon go down,
a crow caws through the coconut tree;
under the shadows of trees
a fisherman moves with his lantern;
and I hear,
beyond Himchari,
from the mosque, from a faraway small hill,
ringtones for me,
my cottage shakes, this late night call.

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