

SHORT STORY

Shanta

NUZHAT AMIN MANNAN

It was a deafening roar. The fighter planes thundered by close to the rooftops, then it was quiet for a few minutes and then it started all over again. For a few muffled moments the silence sounded as loud as the roars. Shanta pulled her shawl closer and covered her ears without knowing what she was trying to muffle: the deafening roar or the steely December silence.

She was rounded off in March along with seven other girls. Huddled in the gardener's shed at Rokeya Hall, she had kept telling herself that Rashid Mama was on his way to Dhaka from Comilla. All she had to do was hide out till he got to Dhaka. And then Mama would take care of the rest. But what if he had managed to come after all? One civilian Mama pitted against all of those men in uniform...

Shanta didn't blame him any more for not being able to make it to Rokeya Hall. "Don't move till I get there," he had said. Abba and Amma had said "Don't come out before Mama comes for you." She had gorged herself on bela biscuits and water and hid a bread knife in her waist hoping to face whatever happened in the event Mama didn't reach the gates of Rokeya Hall. Many others trying to leave or return had not made it. The leafy precincts of University of Dhaka had the stillness of crematorium. No. The University had the stillness of a full-to-the-rafters court room, suspended in a hush. Waiting.

"Who are you? Truth, nothing but the truth," the men in uniform barked. "Bengali and innocent," the men and women at Dacca University replied. That was the Truth. Not that it mattered to them. A volley of abuse came and then

bayonets rammed in. The thrusts like fire seared through quiet Bengali flesh.

Shanta felt her wrists trembling behind her back as the crazed men before her exchanged obscure pleasantries on how balmy March was that year compared to the previous one.

"Ask the *khatoon* her name." They asked a man to help them across language barriers.

"Sharmin."
"We will disembowel her if she doesn't tell us her name truthfully."

"Truthfully, Sharmin. Pet name Shanta."
"Shanta and Hindu."
"Shanta and Muslim."
"Shanta and anti-Pakistan, anti-qom!" they hurled menacingly.

"Shanta and peace-loving Bengali, truthfully."
"Ask the *khatoon* to get into the jeep waiting outside," they said abruptly returning to an official tone.

For a week it was a diet of Seduxens crushed into her rice. Rice and sedatives. For breakfast, lunch and dinner. Some were on force-feed tubes. The woman who brought in the tray told Shanta she was in a hospital.

"Why?"
"You are sick."
"Sick?"
"Aren't you?"

It could have been a hospital or an asylum. Rashid Mama would never locate her now, she thought drowsily mixing the rice with omelette into the shape of a ping-pong ball. Her lower lips trembled all the time and there was a new quiver in her tendons. The rice made her tremble, her eyes puffed and she was walking over water, in sleep and wakefulness. There was a tin pail in the corner. She was often nauseous.

It would have been a week since she was at Rokeya Hall, waiting. Or more. Or less.



Shanta had asked, every now and then, "What time is it?" "What's that to you?" the woman who took her tray scowled.

The door was padlocked. The scowling woman rapped on the door and rattled some plates on a tray.

Someone opened the door from the other side. It closed again. Shanta drifted to sleep. Imagine, rapping like that just to bring in rice.

In a few weeks, Shanta would be fidgeting, knocking on the door to ask if it wasn't time to bring in her some rice. When she had eaten, she would run to the pail and throw up... every morsel she had ever eaten in her nineteen years.

The Seduxens were withheld without a warrant.

And then they came. "How do you do?" They asked in English. "I am sick. My mother will be worried for me."

"You are not sick."
That seemed like a lie to Shanta.

"In fact, you have never been better. We salvaged you." The official tone was comforting. Like the comfort when something terrible happens and you are told it will not hurt.

"Tell us about yourself." They sat two feet away from her on wooden chairs.

"I don't know where I am. I don't know what time it is. I don't know where my mother is."

"Mother? You mean Joy Bangla?" one of them asked with grim disbelief etched all over his face. There was a deafening silence.

"You are in custody. You are safe. This is a camp in Belhata Primary School. It is August. Think no more of your mother Joy Bangla," one of them said watching Shanta's lips quiver.

They sat on the bed staring at Shanta. "Tell us what Shanta means," they said disrobing her.

It was April. They had insisted it was August.

After that there were other camps. Rat-infested godown floors stacked with sacks of coarse rice. Unclean sheets on nice beds. Ferry ghats. Jeeps. Verandahs. Clubs. Bungalows. They kept on asking "Tell us something about yourself. What does Shanta mean?"

Shanta. Sweet dusky complexion. Raven black hair. Eyes like bird-nests. Shanta with spread legs, speechless eyes, monotone voice.

Shanta, mere Truth. It took a toll. Her abdomen went flabby. Her neat waist was gone. There were outbreaks of thrush every now and then. It was a surprise she didn't catch something

nasty like the others had. They were nervy. There was this rotten after-taste that they could not clean out. Their flesh smelt of pulverized dreams.

Their sweat made them look like they were afraid, even though they just complained about the Bloody Monsoon all the time. And the Bloody Boys who were becoming more than a nuisance.

What time was it? Season? Was it the season to sow or reap? Either way, Shanta couldn't tell. The doors were left unpadlocked. But where to go now when you couldn't tell the time, distinguish night from day, or life from death, or madness from sanity?

If only she could find the woman with the scowl who brought in the tray. She had the answers. She believed Shanta was sick. Shanta had no idea she was this sick.

"Tell me about yourselves," she said suddenly one afternoon.

"Muslim and Punjabi," they said amused at her mood.

"The truth now. You sleep with me, so you owe me the truth now," Shanta dared them.

"We owe you nothing but that is the whole truth, Muslim and Punjabi."

It was. Eleven o'clock. November 30. Shanta never saw them after eleven a.m. that day.

Shanta sat in front of a group of foreign journalists and droned:

The Boys from Sector Three rescued me. A woman with a rifle strapped on her shoulder held my hand and I stepped into their jeep. I figured they wouldn't mind if I asked them the time. One of the boys passed me his shawl. It smelt of hay and sunshine.

The Boys brought me to an empty house on Tejgaon Road in Dacca on the 12th. I think. I saw the flag of Bangladesh hoisted

from a pole on the roof. The Boys had jumped out of the jeep. The woman with the rifle held my hand again and I stepped out into my new shelter.

The journalists pressed on and on wanting to know everything. The Truth...the Truth...Come, come...They wanted time, date, name, truth.

The truth is--between Rokeya Hall and 'Joy Bangla' everything had changed. The boy had become the man, the farmer had become the guerilla, the poetry-loving Bengali had become a valiant race. That wasn't what the journalists were after.

"What about you?" they asked her soberly with their biros suspended from their teeth. "We will all head home," Shanta said gingerly wiping a bead of perspiration above her lips even though it was December.

Shanta sat on a *mora*, stirring a huge pot of rice. The group who had rescued her would eat a meal she would cook. Then they would all be on their way, getting back to being the boy, the girl, the poet, the fisherman, the peace-loving Bengali.

Victory was a deafening roar. A MIG thundered by and then it was quiet for a few minutes and then it started all over again. For a few moments the silence sounded as loud as the roars. There was a tinkle of a rickshaw bell or two. There was a *turang* of the crooked gate in the garden.

The group ate their meal together. But there was such a silence. It crouched over Shanta. It was breathing hot air into her braid. It blew fire down her neck. It prodded her on her back.

That was Truth, if you must ask. Quiet but unmistakable. Truth had finally come home.

Nuzhat Amin Mannan teaches English at University of Dhaka and edits Panbrajok (www.panbrajok.com) a web magazine for literature and travel.

Talking With Vassanji in Toronto

RUTBA YASMIN

M.G. Vassanji, who describes himself as an Indo-African Canadian writer, was born in Kenya on 30 May, 1950. Being of Indian descent, raised in an Indian-African community in Tanzania and having studied in the US, several languages and cultures have contributed to the making of the man and the author. In 1989, with the publication of his first novel, *The Gunny Sack*, he wound up a career in nuclear physics. He was awarded the Giller prize twice in 1994 for his *The Book of Secrets*, and for *In-Between World of Vikram Lall* in 2003. His most recent novel *The Assassin's Song* was published in 2007. His other works include novels *No New Land* (1991), *Amriika* (1999) and two short story collections: *Uhuru Street* (1992), and *When She Was Queen* (2005).

When the literary editor of *The Daily Star* suggested an interview of Vassanji (since both of us live in Toronto), I got excited about it. Checking his website, I emailed his publicity contact requesting an informal meeting or interview. She promptly replied that she would let me know. To my amazement, a little later she gave me the personal email of Vassanji and asked me to contact him directly. I wrote to him and told him about *The Daily Star* and he agreed to meet me the following week.

When we reached his house, the man who opened the gate and took us inside appeared to be a very simple man in an ordinary house. He offered us coffee which my husband readily accepted but I declined: even in this cold a cup of tea in the morning is enough for me. Setting the coffee to brew, he came back and sat with us. Ahsan quickly took a few snaps while we're getting started. M.G. Vassanji has an easy air about him and from the start I felt quite comfortable talking to him.

To my question about when he started writing, his honest reply was "I can't remember" for him, writing had always been there and he had enjoyed writing even during his school days. But growing up in Tanzania, East Africa, meant that "writing was not an option" in terms of a career. That led me to ask about his somewhat startling switch from being a physicist working at the Canadian Chalk River nuclear agency to being a writer. But to him the switch had been smooth, stating that he had been already involved in writing for eight or nine years before his first novel *The Gunny Sack* came out, and that he had almost finished writing a collection of short stories when he decided to quit physics and concentrate solely on writing.

I wondered if anybody had inspired him in all his success, but again he gave an unexpected answer: "Nobody" he chuckled, adding good-humouredly that "nobody encouraged that sort of thing in those days, though nowadays we encourage our kids..." Presuming that sheer delight in writing must have led an MIT graduate and Pennsylvania PhD in physics decide to take up the pen without being inspired by anybody, I asked what he enjoyed about writing the most. "It's not enjoyment..." was his direct answer. He elaborated, "I write because I have to...sometimes I enjoy it, but it is something I have to do; it's hardly enjoyment - a struggle is involved, to get a drive, to worry about publications and what will happen afterwards, to decide whether it is the right thing to write... trying to make something as good as possible, even better than possible..." In other words, even for a successful writer, it's a hard row to hoe some days of the week!

I asked him about his time at MIT. As a student in the US, Vassanji had wanted to go

back to Africa, to teach, and that had influenced his choice of studies. First, he could not decide between electrical engineering, physics and maths because though he liked all three, electrical engineering would take him further away from his Tanzanian home. He chose physics. When he finished his studies in 1978, teaching positions, however, were scarce. He came to the Toronto University in 1980 and began to teach one course but mostly did research work. He also had a job at Chalk River atomic power station but missed being in a city. As he plainly admitted, "It's a small place, very beautiful but I can't live there. I love the countryside but I like to come back to the city." So why did he choose Toronto to settle down? His reply was illuminating regarding his view of Toronto, in comparison with other places where one was also a minority: "Coming to work at U of T... I felt Toronto was perhaps the only place where I could live in Canada. Though there were problems, in the 1980's, in the communities in Don Mills (away from downtown, immigrant communities), there've



been problems but... even then it was diverse... I've been a minority in Africa, a so-called minority in India... but Toronto makes one feel comfortable."

Had he visited India? Yes, he said, though it was only in 1993 that he made his first visit. When I asked him about it, he quickly replied, "It's like my soul was released." And then added, laughing, "Though I do not believe in a soul but whatever it stands for..." It was also a painful experience, specially witnessing the division between the communities and the events in Gujarat (where his ancestors came from). The community in Africa when he was growing up was never split along such lines. As he explains, "...the word 'partition' was not even there in our vocabulary... To go there and suddenly see such divisions..." It was the only thing that alienated him from an otherwise all familiar set-up. He mentioned Pakistan, which he considered a worse example of such divisions. He asked me whether I had seen the Pakistani movie *Khuda Ke Liy*. It was, Vassanji said laughing, overall a progressive movie, anti-terrorist, but in the end, "this man who lives in the US tells his white girlfriend, 'a thousand years we lived as conquerors and then we left'..." This statement, the essence of the Pakistani mind. He added that it made sense, since Aisha Jalal (a Pakistani novelist in the US) had told him that the history syllabus in Pakistan is government controlled.

We turned to his last novel *Assassin's Song*, which deals with these issues. It was launched in India in August 2007, where it had garnered wide praise. Since most of his works deal with the complex issues of exile and migration, as well as of communalism and its impact, I asked him how he wanted to address readers not very familiar with the experiences most of his

characters go through. He said he didn't want to address them. That raised the question of his target audience. He replied that while young people might say that they didn't care who read their books or not (adding jocularly, "Why send it to publishers then?"), to him it was very important. He has to think of his readers in Canada, and also India, as well as Africa, and added that it was impossible for him to ignore any of them.

I asked him whose works he admired most among the contemporary writers. The way he said "Nobody" and broke into a hearty laugh made me join in the laughter immediately. But I asked him again, "Nobody?"

"Well," he explained, "I've liked one here and there but that was more like when I was young." So I followed that one up with who he liked when he was young. And again an unexpected answer: "I read garbage when I was young." His tone of self-ridicule made us all laugh, but I couldn't coax him into telling me what sort of garbage he read!

His reading had been very random, a mix of the popular and less popular.

Despite his school having an excellent library in high school, he hadn't read most of the great writers, though one or two had left a lasting impression. He discovered James Baldwin by accident, and had been struck by his *Another Country* (1962). Lawrence Durrell had been another such author. After coming to MIT, a world of books had opened up to him: Conrad, Germans and Russians like Gunter Grass and Dostoyevsky, specially when he took literature courses.

When asked if anyone had influenced his writing, he first said, "Very hard to tell!" And then gave an interesting example to

make his point. He had liked Lawrence Durrell a lot as a young reader. But four or five years ago when the Lawrence Durrell society asked him to give a talk and he went back to the books he used to read and reread, he found that he didn't even like Durrell's work, let alone as much as he used to do. It reminded me of the Bengali short story *Pathoker Mriyo* (Death of the Reader), where the narrator, when reading an old favourite at a later age, discovers how the reader in him who had once liked the adventure stories as an adolescent has died. But he did acknowledge that there were probably some influences: Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, for example, which he read long before it became so famous and had been "quite excited" by it. So perhaps he was influenced to some extent, though I felt these two authors have very different and strongly idiosyncratic styles of their own.

Towards the end of our conversation, I asked him about his upcoming book. It is about India but it's more about him in India, not as a tourist of course. He brings in folk stuff again, not something grand like the stories of Mughals, he admits, rather the stories of small communities (the Khoja community), the Gujarat situation and the like. Though he wondered aloud who was going to read it, just as he had wondered before *Assassin's Song* was published, since it would seem to be of little relevance to most people. But there lies the author's secret which we know as readers. Crossing boundaries, and making it possible to relate to the apparently irrelevant and complex issues from lives unknown, on some simple human ground, or often on not so simple, but on intriguing terms.

Rutba Yasmin taught English at Danul Ihsan and North South universities, Dhaka. She is now a freelance writer in Toronto.

Dhaka Memories

SUPREETA SINGH

It's been a little more than five months since I have been back from Dhaka and with the passage of time Bangladesh is ceasing to be a place, a geographical location, a physical reality which I can point in the map and exclaim "I have been here," because I am no longer sure any more whether I have really been there. Feeling like a deserted lover, Bangladesh haunts me, creeps upon me when I least expect it, in the most unlikely of ways in the reflection of a woman's sunglasses, in the tinkle of a certain laughter, in the rear view of a car, in the folds of a billowing *shalwar*, in the act of crossing roads, or in the columns of cigarette smoke. Abruptly out of nowhere bits and parts of experience rise in front of me, like sudden flashes of déjà vu, mingle with the sense, smell, din, traffic roar, twittering bird, *thuk-thuk* of keyboard keys, television volume, suffuse with the teeny-tiny particles floating in the air and play out its course. I pause, and become a mute witness, while deep, very deep in my heart something stirs.

As one of the participants of an exchange program between South Asian countries, I was posted in Dhaka at Drik Bangladesh, a new media agency, for a period of ten months from November 2006 to August 2007. However, it was not a smooth sailing when the first obstacle came in the form of my parents' objection and the second, more potent, in the form of getting a long-term visa. While I knew that I could win over my parents over time, there was nothing I, or my colleagues at Drik India, could do about bureaucratic red tape. Finally, after long meetings with Bangladesh High Commission officials, I was handed a three-month multiple entry visa on 24 November. On the morning of 5 December 2006 I arrived in Bangladesh.

Influenced by one-sided media reports, I carried a whole baggage of preconceived ideas about my host country. To begin with, there was the legendary poverty of Bangladesh. Then there was the horrible fundamentalist threat lurking everywhere, and thirdly, the need for caution in an extremely conservative society. I was warned, and given sermons on how to conduct myself in Bangladesh by my near and dear ones. And if truth be told, even though I was much more excited than apprehensive, I packed my bags with a year's supply of soaps, moisturizers, perfumes, clothes, books, pens and pencils, among many things, fearing it would be difficult to find anything in a poor country. I had inquired whether I would find any beauty parlor.

From Zia International Airport I was first taken to Drik and then to Pathshala, the South Asian Institute of Photography, which was to be my home for the coming months. Besides me, three more participants, Tulika from India, and Navraj and Balkrishna from Nepal were there too. Tulika and Navraj and Balkrishna would be working with an NGO and Navraj and I were to work in Drik.

The first few things that struck me about Dhaka, where I landed first, were the wide open roads, the innumerable universities, malls as well as hospitals, the splendid multicolored and festooned rickshaws and the traffic. Coming from Kolkata, I am used to all these in my home city, but the differences were in degree. Dhaka is a smaller city than Kolkata with almost all places connected by rickshaws. Unlike Kolkata, there seemed to be a surplus of malls and hospitals, and the traffic moved at a snail's pace. Also, the sudden appearances of fancy-looking apartments and houses, their structure and design overblown as if bursting out of the architect's drafting boards, looked far from poverty stricken. My notion of a poor country began to lose wave.

The ideas of an extremely rigid society also began to get jolts. There were less burqa clad women in Dhaka than in Kolkata, many young women were dressed in jeans, there were quite a few cafes, like Mango, Kozmo and Coffee World for lounging and meeting people, lovers were holding hands in the open and sitting huddled together in Dhanmondi Lake, and most of the people were friendly (which my friends informed me was because of my gender!). However, certain restrictions did apply. Wearing jeans meant a long kurta, and no short top, with a dupatta thrown on the shoulders. And one of the few frustrating things was being started at by curious eyes and gaping mouths whenever and almost wherever I walked. Men passed remarks. Although harassment of women is also a common feature in Kolkata too, the constant gaping and commenting was very unnerving in the beginning at least. In Kolkata things are comparatively better and I know how to handle them, but in Dhaka I was at a loss. After some time, however, I could ignore it easily.

It helped very much that I was working in a communication project at Drik since it meant meeting a lot of photographers from not only in Bangladesh, but all over the globe. Some of my colleagues took me along with them for socializing after work, and many of them have now become my good friends too. Interestingly, many people I came across in Bangladesh had fairly tale ideas of Kolkata, that it was a magical city of art, culture, books and Sunil Gangopadhyay. Even if I sometimes detected some suppressed hostility towards India, Kolkata was seen differently. They were fascinated with the city.

In the many moods of Bangladesh, I woke up to old signs in new postures. If Dhaka took me meandering to cramped by-lanes in rickshaws donning a burst of colors, bells and strings, then the backwaters of Chandpur cradled me in her formidable, resistant yet soft green rolls of wave and wisps of yellow



mustard strands. If in Dhaka I felt immersed into the hectic wheel of everyday urban life between cups of tea and coffee, in Sunderbans I lapped up the luxuriousness of being in raptures at the sight of brilliant stars shining so palpably that I felt I could pick them out like pebbles and store them in my mind's vision. If in Dhaka I daily crossed the footbridge over a trickling river on my way to work, in Gaibandha I gently glided on the immense Brahmaputra, with the wind chafing my face and the buoyancy nurturing my soul. The places I frequented most were Old Dhaka and New Market. In Old Dhaka I would go to Dhakhineswar temple, Ramkrishna temple, and visit a family I had become friends with on my way there. Tulika would sometimes accompany me to New Market and we would do window shopping, and occasionally come back with our hands full. Sometimes I would tag along with Drik personnel and we would buy all kinds of groceries, and treat ourselves to *fuchikas*. Food, though, was a difficult challenge. Being a vegetarian here was not easy. The very concept of a pure vegetarian was non-existent, where a "veg" soup would invariably consist of chicken! Only an eatery called Escape from Shanghai where I hung out with my friends came up with purely vegetarian sandwiches. Not even at Cooper's or King's Confectionary could I find a vegetarian patty. The only things I could eat when I was out were pizza and ice cream. And it began to show!

On a personal level, looking back I remember Bangladesh mostly as a private adventure where I experienced the best feeling of all that of liberation. I had chalked out a life of my own, with my work, colleagues, friends, where I carved out an identity for myself without any prior belonging or attachment. I forged new ties and made abiding relationships that told me a lot of things about my character and nature I only hoped that I have. In the end all I can say is I had no inkling whatsoever that in the short span of ten months I would build such an enduring relationship with Bangladesh. I would never be able to do justice in writing about how I feel about the country because there is so much to her. And that says a lot.

Supreeta Singh currently lives in Kolkata.