

SHORT STORY

A Winter Night*

PREMCHAND
(translated by Ruth Vanita)

Halku came into the house and said to his wife, "The moneylender's man has come. Give him the money we have; let's get him off our backs." Munki was sweeping. She turned round and said, "We have only three rupees. If you pay him, how will we buy a blanket? How will you spend the winter nights in the fields? Tell him we'll pay at harvest, not now."

Halku stood still for a moment, uncertain what to do. Winter was here, and there was no way he could sleep in the field without a blanket. But the moneylender's man would not listen; he would threaten and abuse them. If he were paid, one disaster would be averted, and Halku could deal with the other, the cold, later. With this thought, he took his heavy body (that belied his name, which meant 'lightweight') close to his wife, and said coaxingly, "Come on, give it, I have to get out of his clutches for the moment. I'll think of some other way to get the blanket."

Munki stepped away from him, and said, rolling her eyes, "Sure, you'll think of another way! Let's hear what you have in mind. Is anyone going to give you a blanket for free? God knows how much we still owe—it never seems to get paid off. I keep saying, why don't you give up farming? Work yourself to death, give up a share of the crop, and that's it. We were born to pay debts for ever. Why don't you work as a labourer? That will bring in enough to survive. This kind of farming is not worth it at all. I won't give the money—I won't."

Halku said sadly, "Then should I put up with his abuses?" Munki said, indignant, "Why should he abuse you? Does he rule our lives?"

But even as she said this her anger seemed to ebb. The harsh truth in Halku's words glared at her like a ferocious beast. She went to the niche in the wall, took out the money, and put it in Halku's hand. Then she said, "You give up farming now. As labourers, we'll at least be able to eat one roti in peace. We won't have to live in fear of anyone. This farming is a nuisance! You toil so hard, have to give up your earnings, and still end up being bullied."

Halku took the money and went out, feeling as if he were giving away his heart. With great difficulty, he had saved these three rupees, one by one, from his earnings. Today, he was losing them. With each step, his head seemed to droop lower with the burden of his poverty.



art work by amina

2 The darkness of a winter night! Even the stars seemed to shiver in the sky. At the edge of his field, Halku lay shivering on a bamboo cot, wrapped in his old sheet of coarse cotton, under a thatch of sugarcane leaves. His companion, the dog Jabra, lay under the cot, his face buried in his stomach, whimpering with cold. Neither of them was able to sleep.

Bringing his knees up to his chest, Halku said, "Well, Jabra, are you cold? I told you to stay home and sleep on the straw. What did you hope to get here? Now put up with the cold, what can I do? You thought I was coming to eat halwa and puris here, so you ran ahead of me. Now cry all you want."

Jabra wagged his tail as he lay, ended his whimpering with one long whimper that merged into a yawn, and fell silent. Perhaps his canine mind realized that his master was being kept awake by his crying.

Halku put out his hand and stroked Jabra's cold back, saying, "From tomorrow, don't come with me, otherwise you'll die of cold. This bit of a west wind is icy as hell. I think I'll get up and have a smoke. The night will pass one way or other. I've already had eight smokes. These are the joys of farming! And then there are the fortunate ones, who lie so warm at home that the cold runs away

in fear if it goes near them. They have thick mattresses, quilts and blankets. There's no way the cold can survive there. It's all the play of fortune! We work hard so that others may enjoy life."

Halku got up, took out a coal from the pit and filled his pipe. Jabra too sat up.

Smoking his pipe, Halku said, "Will you have a smoke? It doesn't help with the cold, but it's a distraction."

Jabra looked at him with eyes brimming over with love.

Halku: "Bear with the cold today. Tomorrow, I'll spread straw here. You can snuggle inside it, and you won't feel cold."

Jabra put his paws up on Halku's knees and put his face close to his. Halku felt his warm breath.

After his smoke, Halku lay down with the resolve that he would go to sleep, whatever happened, but in a moment, his very heart seemed to shiver with cold. He would lie sometimes on one side, sometimes on the other, but the cold, like a demon, seemed to sit astride his chest.

When he could bear it no longer, he gently picked Jabra, and, patting his head, put him to sleep in his embrace. The dog's body smelled bad, yet he experienced greater comfort holding him close than he had experienced for months. Jabra probably

thought he was in heaven, and Halku's pure should felt no disgust towards the dog. He would have embraced an intimate friend or brother with the same eagerness. He was not embittered by the destitution that had brought him to this point. No, this unusual friendship seemed to open all the doors of his soul, so that its every atom grew radiant and shone.

Suddenly, Jabra heard the sound of an animal. This special intimacy had awakened a new energy in him, enabling him to disregard the cold gusts of wind. He jumped up, came outside the thatch, and began to bark. Halku called him coaxingly many times, but he wouldn't come back. He kept running around the field, barking. He would return for a second, before running off again. Duty leapt in his heart, like a powerful longing.

3

Another hour passed. The night began to rekindle the cold with gusts of wind. Halku sat up and buried his head in his knees that were folded against his chest, but he remained just as cold. He felt as if all his blood had frozen, and ice flowed in its veins instead of blood. He bent down to look out at the sky and assess how much of the night remained. The Seven Sages were not yet halfway up the sky. When they reached the zenith, day would dawn. There was still more than a third of the night left.

There was a mango orchard not far from Halku's field. The leaves had begun to fall and lay heaped up in the orchard. Halku thought he would go gather leaves, get a fire going and earn himself. If anyone saw him gathering leaves at night they would think he was a ghost. There might be a wild animal hiding there, but he couldn't bear to keep sitting here any longer.

He went into the nearby lentil field, pulled up several plants, made them into a broom, and, taking a smouldering dung cake in his hand, set out for the orchard. Jabra saw him coming, ran up, and wagged his tail.

Halku said, "I can't bear it any more, Jabra. Let's go collect leaves from the orchard and warm ourselves. When we're warm, we'll come back and sleep. There's still much to the night left."

Jabra expressed his agreement by whimpering, and ran ahead to the orchard.

Darkness lay thick in the orchard, and in the darkness, the cruel wind crushed the leaves. Dew showered down from the trees on to the leaves.

Suddenly a gust brought them the scent of henna flowers.

Halku said, "What a nice perfume, Jabra! Can you smell it?"

Jabra had found a bone lying on the ground, and was worrying it.

Halku put the fire on the ground, and began gathering leaves. Pretty soon, he had a large pile of leaves. His hands were trembling and his bare feet felt as if they were dissolving. Yet he kept building a mountain of leaves. He would burn the cold in this fire and destroy it.

In a short while, the fire flared up. Its glow touched the leaves of the tree above and ran ahead. In that flickering light, the mighty trees of the forest looked as if they held up the boundless darkness on their heads. The light floated and bobbed like a boat in the joyful ocean of darkness.

Halku sat before the fire, soaking in the warmth. The next moment, he took off his double-folded cloth, kept it by his side, and lay down with both legs spread out as if challenging the cold to do its worst. He could not hide his pride at having won a victory over the boundless power of the cold.

He said to Jabra, "Well, Jabra, you're not cold any more, are you?"

Jabra whimpered as if to say, "Why would I be cold now?"

"If I'd thought of this earlier, we needn't have suffered so much in the cold."

Jabra wagged his tail.

"All right, come on, let's jump over the fire. Let's see who wins. If you get burnt, though, I can't get you any medicine."

Jabra looked at the fire with fearful eyes. "Don't tell Munki tomorrow, or she'll fight with me."

So saying, he jumped and went clean across the fire. The flame touched his feet, but that didn't matter. Jabra ran round the fire and came to stand by him.

Halku said, "No, no, that's not right! Jump over the fire." He jumped again and reached the other side of the fire.

4

The leaves were all burnt. Darkness spread once more through the orchard. There was a little fire under the ashes, which flared up a bit when a gust of wind hit it, but then closed its eyes again the next moment.

Halku wrapped himself in his sheet once more, and sat by the hot ashes, humming a song. The warmth had entered his body, but as the cold increased, he sank into an indolent state.

Jabra barked loudly and ran towards the field. Halku sensed that a large herd of animals had entered his field. Perhaps it was a herd of antelope. Now he could clearly

hear them jumping and running, and then it seemed that they were grazing in the field. He began to hear the crunching sounds of their chewing.

He told himself, "No, no animal can enter the field while Jabra is there. He'll tear it to pieces. I'm imagining things. Where? I don't hear a thing. How could I be so mistaken?" He shouted aloud, "Jabra, Jabra!"

Jabra kept barking and did not return to him. Again, he heard the sounds of the crop being eaten. He could delude himself no longer. The thought of moving was bitter as poison. How warm and comfortable he was, sitting here! To go to the field in this freezing cold and chase the animals seemed intolerable. He didn't move.

Again, he called out, "Hillo! Hillo! Hillo!" Jabra barked again. The animals were destroying the field.

Halku got up with firm resolve and took a couple of steps; but suddenly a gust of such cold, sharp wind hit him like a scorpion's sting that he came back to the dyig fire, sat down, scratched the ashes, and began warming his cold body.

Jabra grew hoarse with barking, the antelope continued to consume the entire crop, and Halku sat peacefully by the hot ashes. Inactivity, like a network of ropes, held him fast on all sides.

He lay down, wrapped in his sheet, on the warm ground near the ashes, and fell asleep.

When he awoke in the morning, the sun was up and Munki was saying, "Do you plan to sleep all day? You sat here, while the whole field was destroyed."

Halku got up and said, "Have you been to the field?"

Munki said, "Yes, it's a complete wreck. How can anyone sleep so soundly? What was the use of your staying under the thatch here?"

Halku began making excuses. "I nearly died, and you are worried about the field. I had such a terrible stomach ache—only I know how horrible it was."

They walked to the edge of the field. The whole field lay trampled into mud, and Jabra lay flat beneath the thatch, as if lifeless.

They surveyed the field. Munki's face was marked by sorrow, but Halku looked happy.

Munki said anxiously, "Now you'll have to work as a labourer to pay the revenue." Halku said, cheerfully, "At least, I won't have to sleep here in the cold at night."

*From Premchand: The Co-Wife and Other Stories, (Penguin India, 2008) reviewed below.

Letter from BROOKLYN



ASHEKA TROBERG

A shoot, biryani and betel leaf spitting

never really bothered to go and watch the extravaganza either, but today was an exception. A fellow who was the owner of the catering company, who had a huge table of food, sandwiches, fruits, salads, had said he was going to introduce us to the show runner.

So today as planned we went again. He kept his promise. The writer Jeffrey Bell, who is also the show runner, executive producer, wrote for Buffy the Vampire, X-Files and several other television shows, came out of the heavy black-curtained house. The show is about a quirky detective balancing her job as a Manhattan crime-solver with that of being a single, suburban mom. We talked, took some pictures, got his email address. We spoke with some crew members and found out that the company was doing another shoot at a location in Manhattan with Julia Roberts. Then they go to another location tomorrow for a shoot with Meryl Streep!

I have been craving biryani and lamb. This evening went to Shugondha restaurant. It's a 10-minute drive from our place to Kensington, the square where all Brooklyn Bangalis meet. The people at the restaurant know us and we know them. We ordered one plate of biryani and one lamb. One-half plate of biryani was more than my usual lunch, with NTV broadcasting on the television sets fixed on two walls of the restaurant.

I admittedly have mixed feelings about this area. I am pleased that Bangali trade and commerce around this Brooklyn version of Brick Lane is booming. There are at least 30 to 40 Bangladeshi shops in this square. Gold jewellery stores, banks, bakeries, restaurants, bagel shops, hair dressing salons, tax/accounting and doctors' offices, real estate, grocery and meat shops, video stores, tutorial centers, you name it, they have it in this Banglatown. You will find anything here, from Nabisco biscuit to Bombay chanchur or Jui hair oil or a frozen pack of big shrimps imported from Bangladesh. And last but not certainly the least is that most essential thing for many Bangalis: the small paan dokans in front of the restaurants. It surely is no mean achievement for Bangladeshis living in Brooklyn. They have done it and done it big, an example of American dream come true.

But what you also can't ignore is the betel leaf spit stains on the sidewalks. Maybe this is a new kind of gang graffiti, the unique territorial markings of an urban tribe called Brooklyn Bangali on their chosen land? Graffiti or not, I must say this is something I can live without. This community is booming financially, and I don't doubt that soon the Bangladeshi business community will start an awareness campaign for cleanliness in the area as well, become aware of the need for more style and dignity. I was informed by the good people at Shugondha that a big program of the Chittagong association was taking place at the public school premise next to the Kensington station (post office). They were catering for a thousand people for the occasion. I could have gone and joined them, done some interviews and taken pictures for my website. But instead I decided an aimless stroll around the square was more interesting than an organized mezbana. Maybe the food would tempt me and I would end up eating again. So I checked myself. Maybe, I told myself, next time!

Ashika Troberg lives in Brooklyn and is a member of the editorial team of www.brooklynvoice.com.

Penguin Modern Classics : translations of Premchand's stories



SADEEQ AHMED

One of the oft-told stories about Premchand, considered the greatest fiction writer in Hindi, is of a literary seminar organised in Patna. Premchand was to preside over it. He was to arrive a day before the seminar. A number of people came to the railway station to meet his train, but as it happened, none of them had met the author before. They only had a photograph to go by.

An express train arrived. They looked for him, but he wasn't there. The Punjab Mail arrived. They looked for him, but he wasn't there. With the seminar to be held the following day, there now remained only one more train. Which was now their last hope.

The train arrived, and having stopped, departed. Hundreds of people got on and off, but not Premchand. The organisers of the seminar were in a panic at the prospect of a Premchand-less seminar, which would have been a huge embarrassment. Disappointed and agitated, they now approached the waiting rooms. On the steps there, they saw a graying, middle-aged gentleman, looking a little lost and fed up with the discomfiture of travel, as the porter, carrying a trunk on his head and a bed-roll on his arm, asked him, "Which way, Sir?"

They had seen this passenger alight from the Punjab Mail the previous night, but had not recognized Premchand, a most unpretentious man. Five foot four inches, lean but broad-boned, with a quiet demeanour and simple habits.

The stories are like the author himself, unpretentious and simple on the surface. Beneath, of course, a social passion raged. In Premchand's stories, unlike the Urdu and Hindi stories and poems before him and which he had devoured as a child and in youth, there is no dalliance, no light fancies and arias, no sighs or dazzling word play. In a 1920 letter to his friend Imtiaz Ali 'Taj' (a well known Urdu writer in his own right) he had conveyed his literary ethos in easy terms: "I wish to see literature masculine, for I do not care for femininity in any of its manifestations. That is why I do not like the songs of Tagore. This must be some congenital fault, about which I can do little. The only verses which appeal to me are those which have an original insight. I am quite devoted to the flavour of Ghalib."

The above sentiment may have to do with the fact that he was born Dhanpat in a village near Benaras, grew up poor, and became an orphan early who at age fifteen had to shoulder the burden of supporting his family. He eventually became an inspector of schools, and in the fight against the British, became a pronounced Gandhian. And under the pen name of Premchand, wrote stories, as everybody knows, where social realism and social protest are dominant, especially against the oppression of women and those of lower castes, stories that exposed the horrors of rural poverty. Perhaps this is what he meant by a 'masculine style.' It is interesting to note that, as translator Ruth Vanita

points out in her introduction here, that recently some Dalit critics have denounced Premchand "as casteist, largely because he depicts two Dalit men in (his famous story) 'The Shroud' as wastrels who oppress women." But they, she went on to note, "make the mistake of viewing only men as Dalits, thus rendering Dalit women invisible. This, of course, repeats the underlying assumption in male oppression of women, namely, that men are human and women a less important subgroup of humanity. The woman in 'The Shroud' is a hardworking victim, oppressed by the men of her family, and she too is a Dalit."

The above illustrates how easy it is to simply misread, or read too quickly, Premchand's stories, which are simple on the surface. It is a measure of his enduring popularity that, despite some writing of indifferent quality in a vast output with an astonishing range of plots, themes and genres, he continues to be read widely by succeeding generations of readers. Penguin India's Modern Classic series therefore continues to do its good work by bringing out the masters in the Indian vernacular languages in English translation, thereby making them available to the widest possible reading public. All the volumes in this series are attractively packaged, and the translations done with care and sensitivity.

Sadeeq Ahmed is a researcher and private consultant.

Twilight Hour

SAMAR SEN
(translated by Farhad Ahmed)

Darkness descends
In a limitless, soundless stream:
A hushed-blood, tired western sky,
Above the parched tuberose
Evening's stunned laughter.

A breeze somewhere from today's sky
My whole body shudders
Flower fragrances drift in the wind
The long night full of a swift, silent desolate something

In the lonely night
The fleeting moments bring in who knows what
Every instant I seem to remember something
I listen and I listen
Weary, I listen and listen—
To the footsteps of some distant sorrow.

Farhad Ahmed is a freelance writer and translator.



art work by ariyana