

SHORT STORY

Till Human Voices Wake Us

SHAKIL RABBI

I woke up feeling wired. It had been a rough session the night before. Moti and some of his friends came over and they brought a shiload of pills with them. We stayed up most of the night chasing and watching the Matrix movies. It was a lot of fun but after they had all left to go back to their homes it was a real messed-up morning for me.

It was late noon when I finally got up. I could hear the maids walking around the house, making lunch or working on their chores. They must have heard me in my room because one of them rushed to my door and knocked.

"Bhaiya, khalamma told you to call her when you wake up," I heard Fatima say from across the door.

"Ok, Ok. Quiet down."
"Will I bring the phone to your room?"

"No, you idiot. I have a phone in my room. What are you, stupid? Go away."
I covered my eyes with a pillow. Even in my dark room the soft beams of sunlight cutting through the curtains were too much; they hit my eyes and made my head scream. The phone suddenly started ringing. I knew it was my mother; she always knew when I was awake. I swear the maids were colluding with her; they were all ganging up on me. The ring was loud and obnoxious and I rushed to pick it up, to make it stop.

"Hello."
"Hello, babu. You awake?"
"Yes, Mother. I'm awake."
"When did you wake up?" I don't know why she asked me that question. I'm sure she knew that I had just woken up.
"I woke up an hour ago."
"Oh, the maids said you just woke up."
"I was just lying around my room, didn't feel like rushing out of bed."
"Ok, have you eaten yet?" She always

asked me that too. It was annoying to be always asked whether or not you've eaten or not. And it was a question that my mother always asked, every time.

"No, Mother. I'm not hungry."
"Come on, boy, you have to eat. You didn't have dinner and you're losing so much weight. The human body needs nourishment."

"It's fine, Mother. I'm just not hungry."
"You don't understand. You're too young. You need to eat," she went on.

Ok, ok. I'll go eat lunch now. But I'm still not hungry, we'll see what happens.
"Ok, good. I'll call later or see you for lunch."

"Ok, Mother. Khodah hafez." I hung up the phone without waiting for a reply. I knew she would give me another lecture if I stayed on the line. Mothers are such a pain. I walked out of my room and planted myself in front of the TV. Fatima walked up and asked sheepishly if I wanted something to eat.

"Get me what is for lunch and shut up."
"Ok, bhaiya."
"And don't you ever tell mother about when I wake up or whether I eat or not. It's my business. If you do it again, I'll break your neck, you busybody."

I turned on the tube, but since it was the middle of the day there was nothing to watch. Only reruns, reality shows and talk shows. I turned to the BBC, thinking that it would be good to know what was going on in the world. The main story on the news was about Zimbabwe and how the ruling party was set to hijack the elections, the Zanu-something party.

The rest of the stories were sort of the same, mostly tragic things happening in all these poor countries of the world. I don't understand what these channels talk about most of the time; it's mostly crap anyway. I live in a poor country and it's never as bad as they always make it out to be. If you



believed in the things on these channels, we were living in these hopeless states where people's lives didn't matter and everyone was treated like an animal.

I turned it back to one of the reality shows; at least there, they aren't pretentious enough to pretend that it's not total crap. I picked at the food they brought to me. I wasn't at all hungry and my mouth tasted too much like chemicals to make eating appetizing. I ate some of the chicken and left the rice. I drank a glass of juice and then I was full.

When I was done, I started looking for something to do, but the problem was that I didn't feel like doing anything. My head still felt heavy and my place was pretty boring anyway. I found a copy of *The Daily Star* on the coffee table and I picked it up to look at the sports section. The headline was about the astronomical price rise in essentials and how people were rioting in front of BDR

stores for food that was in short supply. One of the captions in one of the stories read 'The quiet famine'. I couldn't make myself read it. It was just more bad news, the same as every day.

I gave up trying to watch television and went to my computer. Moti was online.

"Yo, ki obosha?" I typed.

"nm, can't sleep. I've been awake all this time."

"Ha. Ki ar korar?"
"Don't joke man. This is bad. I think my parents know that I'm back into this again. They'll probably send me to rehab."

"Get off it then."
"There are still so many pills bhai. lol."

"True."
"You should come over."
"Alright. When?"
"Around six or something."
"Cool man."
"Alright. Cya then."

"Later."

"Lbr."

When I logged off I turned on my PS2 and started playing "Winning Eleven". Most of the time I'm completely hopeless with videogames; I get bored of them quickly and just give up. But I did like sports games or racing games like "Winning Eleven" or "Need for Speed". I could play them against my friends and they held my interest.

When mother got home she immediately walked into my room. She always did that, she never knocked. It was infuriating.

"You stop playing and come and eat."

"I'm not hungry. I've already eaten."

"You didn't eat anything. I saw your plate. What's wrong with you? You need to eat."

"I'm fine, Mother. I'm just not very hungry. It's too hot to eat."

I made up the last part hoping she'd buy it. Because it was true, it was just too hot.

"What do you know about the heat? You're locked up in this A/C room all day."

"I'm just not hungry then. Stop bothering me."

"Hai Allah, ever since Tahseen you've just lost your appetite. Are you depressed?" I looked at her for the first time since she walked into my room. She still had on the white coat from the hospital. She looked hot and sweaty and tired - she looked spent.

"No, Mother. I'm fine. It's just too hot to eat. Let it go."

"Fine, boy. But take care. You're old enough to know what's best for you. We're getting too old..."

"Fine, Mother, leave me alone. I'm busy." She walked out again, but the door was left ajar.

"Door," I yelled. "The door!"

Fatima rushed up and closed it. I could hear her say something under her breath, something like: "The door, the door, always the door. This boy needs to have the door slammed into his head." I should have yelled at her for saying that. But I was too into my game and I just didn't care.

I left for Moti's house without telling my mother. It was close by so I took a rickshaw and got there pretty quick. There were the same kids there as at my place and I sat down in the circle and we started. Then suddenly, in the middle of a chase, one of Moti's friends - I think his name was Shuvo - said:

"What's up, Khaled? Why have you started doing all this all of a sudden? You never chased before. I know you smoked grass before but I never knew you did yabba."

"Oh dude, he's heartbroken," Moti smirked as he answered him. "Since he broke up with his gf, he needs to get his mind off her. We'll get him some chick to give it to. What do you say, Khaled?"

"I don't care, man. As for Tahseen, she can go to hell. I don't give a shit."

I took the remote and turned on Moti's TV to try and shift the focus from the talk. As I switched channels I stopped on CNN. There were pictures of Iraq running on it. A car was on fire and soldiers with guns in heavily armoured vehicles patrolling the streets.

"Turn that off, man. I don't want to see that," Moti said. Once he said it he turned back to chasing, the tablet slid over the foil and the smoke rushed into the straw eagerly sucking it all in. I did as he said and turned it off. I sat down next to him and the circle was complete again.

Shakil Rabbi is a young Bangladeshi writer.

London Book Fair: The publishing industry and an ex-urban guerrilla (Part I)

SI Ahmed

Working in London, connected with Bangladesh via the Internet and dodgy Polish phone cards, one sits in the evenings through a deluge of e-mails, spam and digital invites to sometimes find the odd interesting message. Thus came Rodney's e-message saying that he was arriving next week, would stay for two days and would like to meet me for lunch or dinner. The fact that he had more than passing acquaintance with two family members back in Dhaka, as well as the fact that our meeting place would be the annual London Book Fair (14th to 16th April) inspired me to board London's rattling underground train on a weekday. Notwithstanding that the District Line's average speed from Richmond to Epsom Court imitates the slow drol with which OAPs (Old Age Pensioners) work through their soup stock at Age Concern.



I arrived at Epsom Court, tube-lagged by the system, quite curious about the book fair. A stop at the largest book fair in UK (Frankfurt is the big daddy of them all in Europe) could be an addition to the eclectic socio-cultural scrapbook that I had been assembling during my stay on this isle. Over the last five years, I had become a self-described Troubled Tourist (TT) - catching an exhibition on Bangladesh's liberation war one day, traipsing through the Tate gallery to gawp at Nigerian cow dung paintings on another, and at other times hoicking the trusty backpack and ambling into Southall's snooker parlour with a samosa in hand. I tended to leap randomly into the city's cosmopolitan pool, and swim in the tide of luminous shows, plays and readings. At times the events failed to deliver, while at other times they did yield unexpected surprises. I treated this variation as part of the game, like the English weather... cheers, old chap, and let's carry on!

The blue-and-white banner above the concrete conference hall declared, "The London Book Fair 2008". A handy blurb outside the doors declared "The London Book Fair is a meeting place for publishing professionals from all four corners of the globe. It has assembled over 23,000 attendees from 109 countries to network with each other, do business and attend seminars to access information about the publishing industry worldwide. It is the global publishing community's leading spring forum for booksellers, publishers, librarians and book production services worldwide. Ideally timed to provide a concentrated 3-day trading and educational platform, it offers access to the world's books, real business contacts and shared knowledge." Like water struggling to fill up a leaky pool, a light began to dawn on me that this was a book fair for everybody but the reader. Though no stranger to the pursuit of balance sheets (I, after all, am an accessory to the global felony of multinational corporations), even I was surprised at the nature of the buzz around the place. It seemed to be not about books as much as publishing, a world where artistic merit played merely a supporting role to an industry's financial goals. This, I thought, should be pursued a little further...

I learned that there are over 100,000 books published each year in the UK. This should not put anybody off writing a book but should give them pause and think of the limited opportunities to catch hold of the heaves of the book brigade, whose attention span can be less than the Bush IQ. Like a futuristic Prisoner of Zenda I strolled through paper tunnels that led to

book stalls and meeting places filled with more tables and chairs than an Italian sidewalk in high summer. I realised that books did not emerge from a communion of the soul with the quill, then distributed through civic-minded sellers behind glass counters. Books in the West draw upon the organised resources of a small army of publishers who ranged from small to medium all the way through to very large publishing houses. To see them all wheeling and dealing beneath one vast, chilled, canvas roof was to feel as if some giant had kicked over the publishing ant hill of London and started a controlled scamper amongst its inmates.

I eavesdropped and discovered that behind the visible, interactive face of the publishing industry are groups of production, distribution, technical and creative professionals looking for solutions to suit their business needs, sometimes in preference to the writers' creative ones. They were the ones in suits with briefcases, much in demand, spilling sheaves of double-spaced contracts documented on A4's. Publishing processes were divided into editorial, design, production, marketing (sales and publicity), distribution, contracts and administration - all of which extract their Shylockian percentage. In addition, there are specific types of editors who decide which manuscripts they would like to publish and whether to commission particular books or projects. These are the captains of the industry's ships, steering through the confluence of commerce and creativity. Then there were the more mundane book packagers, content developers and online service providers who wait in the wings. One morbid category within these tribes was "remainder and promotional dealers" whose talent was in dealing and disposing of the unpaid, the unsold, the unpublished ergo the suicidal writers, which are, sadly enough, in the majority. My old, handy book classification (muttering with a book in hand, "So this is fiction, oh no, it's non-fiction, looks trash or good enough for a punt") was obliterated by the range of genres on display: general consumer, children's, educational, academic, reference, scientific, technical, professional, medical, and more. Much more. At the very end of the process were the copy editors and layout planners, supposedly aimed at reconciling the sometimes conflicting demands of author, artist and editor. Only then did books reach all those independent bookshops, retail chains, libraries and information professionals.

Stalls were arranged in geometric, white, alphabetic rows and numbers filled with background posters, throwaway gifts, and dummy books. This was the most irritating aspect - most of the books were for show, not for purchase or a proper read since that had supposedly happened during the draft stage and was not (or never, I thought darkly) the focus. Paper cups were littered on tables; earnest words filled the neon air like locusts. Everywhere the atmosphere breathed contracts and rights, as parties would move from initial agreement between publisher and author, to translation, book club and serial rights. Poker players formed around circular tables, exchanging budgets, cost and profit estimates as all sides haggled over royalties, or else folded. Where, I thought, amidst this literary jostling was Rodney?

He snuck up on me, mobile in hand, speaking into it behind the Penguin India stall, like the urban guerrilla he had once been in his well-spent youth as a member of Germany's revolutionary Baader-Meinhof Group. We sat down for a lunch of casseroles off plastic trays. I listened to his stories of the days when he had been a RAF (the German name for the group was *Rote Armee Fraktion*) party member in the late 1970s. Rodney had been arrested and then released after a stint in Stuttgart prison. The RAF group, formed in the early '70s, with some of its guns given by East Germany's old secret service Stasi and its intellectual arsenal provided by Gramsci and Marcuse, had existed underground for thirty years. They had fought against "class imperialism" until they announced their disbandment in April 1998 with a terse fax to Reuters news agency. Most of the leaders had been arrested or died, and their role model - the Soviet Union - had imploded. Rodney remembered, word for word, that fateful fax, signed "RAF" with its machine-gun red star, declaring the war was over: ("Heute beenden wir dieses Projekt. Die Stadtguerilla in Form der RAF ist nun Geschichte"; "Almost 28 years ago, on May 14, 1970, the RAF arose in a campaign of liberation. Today we end and the urban guerrilla in the shape of the RAF is now history.") Rodney subsequently joined the publishing industry, moving up the echelons, connected and yet removed from the very books that had once inspired him, like some disenchanted explorer seeking the river's earthly source after soaking in the ethereal mist at its mouth.

We finished our lunch and I requested him to write down the RAF fax message for me. Then it was time for goodbyes. Rodney did mention, as we parted, that each book fair had a theme, and that this year's was "Arab publishing, Arab writing". This immediately got my attention and now I was off to find a morsel for my mind, for the glitter of some gold amid the dross...

SI Ahmed in a British-Bangladeshi who lives and works in London. The concluding of this article *Replacing the Saracen sword with the pen* will be published next week.

Talking with Kamila Shamsie

(An exclusive interview with Kamila Shamsie, author of *In the City by the Sea, Salt and Saffron, Kartography* and *Broken Verses* by The Daily Star's Ahmed Hussain.)

AH: How important is it for you to know your audience?

KS: Not at all. By that, I mean I don't know my audience. My novels are not only published in several countries, they're also published in several languages, so in some cases I have no way of even knowing what version of my book is coming across to readers (because all translations are, of course, different 'versions' of the original text.) I suppose my attitude towards 'audience' is shaped by the fact that I grew up reading books for which I couldn't have been the 'intended audience.' I mean, I don't suppose any of the writers I read and loved thought of an Anglophone Pakistani as their 'audience.' And yet, I was still able to appreciate and love books which showed no sign of having a Pakistani readership in mind - even though I would often run into cultural references I didn't understand. I learnt to read around those moments of confusion, or to understand them via context - and as a writer, I always assume that my readers will be able to do the same.

But of course, I'm answering this question as though 'audience' is defined by nationhood, though the question doesn't specify it. (Although each time I'm asked the question in a public forum, it's phrased in a 'do you write for Pakistanis or for the West' sort of the way.) And my 'not at all' response is an answer to that question of nation-based audience. I do, however, have a language-based audience in mind. Notwithstanding the fact that books get translated I assume that my audience (which includes my translators) is an Anglophone one - so while I might use occasional words of Urdu in a text, I'll do it in such a way that ensures a non-Urdu speaker will not miss anything crucial by a failure to understand those words. But really, I don't do a lot of planning before I start writing a book - I let the stories and characters develop according to their own logic, without much thought about what readers might or might not like. I think you have to simply trust your own storytelling abilities. Once the book is finished, and publication approaches, then the marketing departments take over and decide how to 'pitch' the novel to particular audiences. But that's their job, not mine.

AH: Many will argue that novel itself is a western form of expression. We had epic. Is it not so that the history of novel is also the history of the so-called modern man, his crises?

KS: Many can argue that. I find the argument irrelevant. Are novel writers from the non-Western world able to use the novel to look at their own particular nation and its concerns? That's the only important question. The greatness of the novel form lies in the very thing many people find objectionable about it: the looseness of its structure. You can have epic novels. The epic and the novel don't have to be seen as walking different paths. Is *Wuthering Heights* really about the crisis of modern man? As I see it, the story of Heathcliff and Cathy has more resonances with Sufi concepts of love - losing yourself in the Beloved - than with modernity. But of course in saying that I'm bringing in my reading of non-Western Sufi texts into my reading of *Wuthering Heights*. And the best novels will always accommodate different ways of reading.

The more pertinent question for me is not about the novel form, but about the fact that I grew up on a diet of novels written by English and American writers, rather than writers from different parts of the world. This must mean that my sensibility is influenced by those writers, which then works its way into my own writing. But the history of artistic expression has always been one of a melding of cultural influences - and as writers from Asia and Africa are becoming more and more prominent in Anglophone publishing the balance is now tilting - so it's no longer a



case of South Asian writers being influenced by the West but failing to influence in return. The English language - despite all the problems associated with it - is taking on more and more influences from 'the margins'.

AH: How necessary is it for a writer to have his own voice? What does it really mean, to have one's own voice?

KS: Interesting question - I think this matter of 'voice' is over-rated. We don't want novelists to keep writing in the same style, the same manner, surely. And just as surely, novelists want to experiment and wander in new directions... Perhaps by 'voice' we mean 'sensibility.' As readers, we sometimes come upon a particular sensibility within a novel which appeals to us - and it may seem a betrayal to find that sensibility overturned. I'd guess that because

writing is so personal and so intimate something of the writers' sensibility works its way through much of their work, acting as a thread you can follow from one book to the next. But is that a measure of good writing? I don't see why it should be.

Writers should have his or her own voice inasmuch as they shouldn't sound as though they're trying to imitate some other writer (because the word 'imitate' implies a reduction in quality, a lack of originality.) But that doesn't mean a particular writer's voice should stay the same across a body of work - that consistency of voice doesn't seem like grounds on which to judge a writer's body of work.

AH: Does a writer need to be a 'socially responsible' being, conscious of his place in the world as an interpreter of reality? A modern day prophet?

KS: No. A writer's duty is to write the best novels he or she is capable of writing. There is no general consensus on what makes a novel 'great.' For some, social responsibility is a crucial component. For others, escapism is more vital. My own particular interest, sensibility, etc. has generally led me to writing novels which engage with history and politics, but I would never claim that a novel which chooses a different course is a failure. And I don't think we need any modern day prophets. Which is to say, we don't need one or two individuals who we look to for truth and guidance - we need to be able to read a range of novels, each one playing a small part (some smaller than others) in helping us construct our own interpretations of reality.

AH: Now, to italicise or not to italicise, is it really an issue? KS: For me it's an issue, but not a big one. I think my earlier novels used italics in a rather unthinking way - simply picking up on the inherited notion that words which weren't in English should be italicized. But the problem with the italicised words is that they stand out and assert their foreignness - whereas in the worlds I'm writing about, characters move between English and Urdu quite seamlessly. So there was a disjunction between the way the characters thought of language, and the way language was presented on the page. It just didn't make sense.

And the more you think about what should and shouldn't be italicized, the more absurd it gets given how the English language absorbs words from other languages. So if a word is generally recognized by English-speakers it doesn't have to be italicized? So 'kabab' and 'vindaloo' needn't be italicized, but 'aloo gosht' should? Simpler, and more sensible, to just remove italics altogether.

Ahmed Hussain's novella 'Blues for Allah' has been published in Colloquy, Monash University's journal.