

## SHORT STORY

## The Time Train

ANIS CHOUDHURY  
(Translated by Kaiser Haq)

For some days now, Parvez has been aware of a powerful, invisible presence around him. It seemed to come with the sole purpose of keeping an eye on him. It kept to a strict schedule; arrived and left bang on time.

Parvez keenly felt its presence whenever it came to this hospital. But there was none he could talk to about the panic it aroused. Trying to cope with this unseen power had left him drained of energy. It kept coming still. Like an ever-punctual train it came like a flash to the hospital, carrying a lone, invisible passenger. No one else might recognize him, but Parvez knew him well: he was called Time. As soon as the imaginary train came to a stop he got off and with long steps paced up and down the corridor. Ever in a hurry, always bound to a strict timetable, that's him, Time. Thank heaven he couldn't be seen. Now, had he suddenly come to a standstill outside Cabin No. 23? On other days Parvez would wait with baited breath for the hour-long 'Visiting Hour' to end. Time's silent train would then leave, and he'd surrender once again to untrammelled uncertainty. That's what he did daily. It amused him to hear it said that 'Time' was ever-present, pervading one's entire life. For lying in the hospital bed these three months he had felt that there was nothing to fear from that all-pervasive 'Time.' The fear was inspired by the 'Time' that didn't occupy one's whole life, 'Time' that came only on a brief visit. The train would suddenly arrive at any moment just before or after the 'Visiting Hour,' carrying aboard it that transitory 'Time.' And when that transitory 'Time' left, Parvez would lose his fear. The limitless has no end, simple as that. Limitless time, limitless sky, limitless ocean, they are there forever. They are forever brandishing the flail of time and scaring people like a Chingiz Khan. That's why there's nothing to fear in them. Still, Parvez has lately been infected by a strange idea. He keeps thinking that as far as the sky, earth and ocean are concerned, their emperor for all time is 'Time.' The same 'Time' who is concerned no end with the infirm body of his now lying in Cabin No. 23.

Nowadays it seems to Parvez that 'Time' has to be categorized under Fauna: the fact just awaits discovery by a scientist. He's a heartless monarch, 'Time.' And why shouldn't he be? It's only to be expected in the ruler of a vast kingdom, one who holds sway over unbounded space. Who knows how many souls this heartless emperor, having alighted from his express train, has resolved to sunder from their bodies? Strange, how Parvez seemed to sense the train's arrival at the precise moment. There was a susurrus of suppressed bustle in the air. At times one or two souls would be released from their bodies, no doubt on the cruel emperor's instructions. Then the tear-moistened air would reverberate with muted lamentation. Surely, such a fate awaited him as well.

Amazing, how no one else seemed to be aware of Time's might the way he was, as he lay inert in Cabin



artwork by anis

No. 23. Those who came to see him were in fact utterly unaware of it. Or else they would have felt no little fear. For three months now, all sorts of specialists had failed to do anything about the ups and downs of his physical condition. Maybe they had surrendered him to fate. No doubt they had also secretly prayed to draw 'Time's' attention towards him. But this thing called 'Time' just couldn't make time -- ignored him every time. Perhaps it would ignore him today as well.

The visitors troop in, one by one. Strange, how this seems to feature in their daily routine as a source of exquisite entertainment. Parvez can detect in their expression an extraordinary ability to use words to deceive and prevaricate.

Fragments of their earnest, excited torrent of conversation: "You look quite well today."

Not Parvez that the girl had come to see. Hardly anybody would ever come to see him outside the visiting hour, especially with a blazing sun overhead. The girl stared blankly, took a pink slip of paper out of her handbag and stared at it. A telegram perhaps. So, she had come too late. Her train had lost out to the Time Train. Such speculation was irrelevant now, so Parvez didn't ask to find out. He didn't say anything either. After that there was nothing for the young lady to do. She should leave -- just what she did then.

But she was back the following day. She sat down, momentarily lost in thought, then leant forward and asked "Did he say anything?"

"When?"

"I mean, did he say anything about me?"

Parvez didn't answer. The man had been in a coma

"Not the way you were yesterday."

Then lighting a match, raising it to the cigarette dangling from a corner of the mouth and exhaling a mouthful of smoke, the visitor would ask a weird question: "Well, you aren't in any discomfort, are you?" And then, "Just straighten your pillow. You know what! Nowadays they can't get the diagnosis right. Or else, you wouldn't have to lie around so long."

These people come almost every day. They glance frequently at their watches. Most of them know it's proper to put on a woeful countenance before coming here. They do it well. The patients too find it gratifying.

Some visitors have a trick of worriedly narrowing their eyes and blowing a gale of sympathy over the patient.

"It's certainly most serious."

"No, no, it's all talk and no do with these people. What's needed is a thorough check-up."

The hospital bell rings at some point. Time for the Time Train to depart. Perhaps it'll go to some other place, to another hospital. The visitors too get up, smoothening the embarrassing creases that their clothes have acquired. Some of them caressingly touch his face, draw the sheet up to the chin. Or shake the medicine bottle for no reason at all and put it back in its place. In a word, it appears to Parvez that departing visitors give him to understand that they are ever with him, sharing his joys and sorrows, agony and ecstasy, tears and laughter -- "Just don't worry."

There was another patient sharing this cabin, which is meant for two. Two days back he had been granted his release by the Time Train. None had come to replace him, but it couldn't be long before someone did.

No doubt it was the departed one and not Parvez that the girl had come to see. Hardly anybody would ever come to see him outside the visiting hour, especially with a blazing sun overhead. The girl stared blankly, took a pink slip of paper out of her handbag and stared at it. A telegram perhaps. So, she had come too late. Her train had lost out to the Time Train. Such speculation was irrelevant now, so Parvez didn't ask to find out. He didn't say anything either. After that there was nothing for the young lady to do. She should leave -- just what she did then.

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"When?"

"I mean, did he say anything about me?"

Parvez didn't answer. The man had been in a coma

for seven days, what could he say to anyone about anything?

Still, the girl didn't leave.

"How do you feel?" she asked. 'Do you have fever?' "Yes."

She reached forward and took his hand, the way a nurse does, out of a profound sense of duty.

"You don't seem to have a fever today. I've heard the doctor say you're having an operation tomorrow."

Had the doctors decided without even consulting him? Did they want to poke and probe one last time?

It meant they were conspiring to lay him out on a cold bed, in a cold room, in front of a dozen pair of cold eyes. The illness that had so far eluded classification would be dealt with once and for all.

Has the girl turned up today out of pure compassion? Overcoming her grief for the one she had come to see, she flashed a brilliant smile as she sat down. He should ask her who she was. But it was more important that she shouldn't keep sitting there.

From where he lay Parvez could see the girl from different angles, note the folds and curves in her well-nourished body. Had she dismissed any possibility of arousing his decrepit body?

He felt angry. He'd like to tell her, "Here's a venomous snake that's been defanged and can't even raise its hood, so you think it's safe."

She rearranged herself in the chair. One moment she was self-possessed, at another relaxed and languid.

It wasn't visiting hour yet. But rules were relaxed in the case of patients in private rooms. The young lady knew that; hence her untimely visit.

But why wasn't she asking after the person she had actually come to see? Is it that she didn't consider it necessary?

She yawned. Instead of sitting in the normal posture she straightened her legs and lightly raising her torso stretched out her body like a rolled-up carpet.

Once again, from his bed, Parvez eyed her from different angles. He felt embarrassed, focused his gaze on her body, then turned his face away.

Yes, it's true. The girl had missed a death. It was a cause of great sorrow. Maybe that's why she had decided to witness another one. There was the anguish of the heartless vengeance-seeker in this.

Parvez got up, involuntarily it seemed, touching the wall to steady himself. Standing in front of his anonymous visitor, he reached out with his hands. He didn't know why he did that. The girl's eyes were shut, overwhelmed by weariness perhaps. Maybe she lived in another town. What a waste of time! Parvez stared at her for a moment. Surprising -- the girl's vengefulness. Before his inert body was laid out on the operating table tomorrow, should he, one last time, test his strength on her?

A chain glittered around her neck. The creases on her throat were fine lines filled with talcum powder. There would be no one around at this time. Parvez's hands had encircled her throat. By channelling all his remaining strength into his wrists he could still bring

about a catastrophe. It wouldn't make much difference either. On the one hand an antiseptic death on that table covered in white, and on the other the neck thrust into a sturdy noose on a judge's orders.

But the slight touch startled the girl into consciousness. She stood up abruptly. Parvez lost control over his tottering body and leaned on the girl like a lifeless load.

The girl said nothing. She just let his tremulous body lean against her for a few moments. Then she guided him back to the bed.

And recomposed herself, re-arranging her sari edge, brushing away the strands of hair on her face, wiping her forehead with her sari edge.

The Time Train seemed to come in just then. There came too the swift and light footfalls of the usual visitors, entering one room after another. The girl could easily sit around undisturbed for much longer. Why was she making for the door instead?

Having fallen victim to his own irrationality, Parvez found himself in a quandary. Lying on his stomach with face buried in the pillow, he asked, "Are you leaving?"

"Yes."

Then she added with a cold smile, "I've missed the person I came to see. Still, I've seen you."

Parvez wanted to say, "Why don't you come tomorrow. Wouldn't you like to see if I'm still there under the white sheet after being probed with scalpel and scissors?"

Could the girl read his thoughts? "If it were possible I'd stay till the operation," she said. "I don't have the time."

There was no anger, no hurt feelings, no resentment. Still, the lady had caught the doleful look in his eyes.

Half opening the door to step out, she turned her head around and said again, "I'd stay if it were possible. Just don't have any time." Parvez didn't believe her. It seemed to him that the express train that transported Time from one hospital to another also carried this girl as a passenger. Full of allure, she spread enchantment, went around gifting a brilliant smile to people. A terrible truth -- like death, like the torment of death -- flashed through Parvez's consciousness. Startled, he tried to sit up on the bed. He gazed at the door. Had the girl come today because she knew there wouldn't be another opportunity to see him? Or did she come in the past as well and go from one hospital room to another on the pretext of comforting those headed for eternity? Maybe those who were here before him had also seen this girl. A girl called 'Time' - or 'Time' with a girl's name.

Anis Chowdhury was a well-known Bengali writer of the 60s and early 70s. His collected short stories and novels have been published by Mowla Brothers, Dhaka.

Kaiser Haq is Professor of English at Dhaka University. His Published in the Streets of Dhaka: Collected Poems 1966-2006 is available in Dhaka bookstores.

## Listening to our ancestors

ISOBEL SHIRLAW

Since its first publication in 2004, *Wolf Totem* -- Yiang Rong's semi-autobiographical and highly personal account of the Cultural Revolution -- has attracted relentless attention. It has already sold over four million copies in China alone and has recently won the first ever Man Asian literary prize, a fact that is guaranteed to send sales (and publishers' pulses) even further through the roof.

Which is odd, given that at first glance, *Wolf Totem* -- a study of life among nomadic herdsmen in Inner Mongolia in the 1960s -- might appear to be of limited appeal. But a few pages in, it is impossible to resist being carried away with the author's all-encompassing adoration of his subject matter.

When Chairman Mao encouraged his disciples, during the Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976, to leave the cities and go out into the countryside to "modernise" and educate the backward inhabitants of China's rural hinterlands, Yiang Rong was one of the fifteen or so million officers of the Red Guard to eagerly accept the challenge. And thirty years later, he defrosts the perfectly preserved memories and experiences of that extraordinary decade through the narrative of his protagonist, Chen Zhen.

Over the years that Chen spends among the herdsmen of the Olonbulag -- a fictional grassland setting in Ujumchilin, Inner Mongolia -- Chen's understanding of his beloved China and of modernity are overthrown and replaced with an awesome acceptance of the majesty and complexity of Mongolian grassland life, symbolised in the wolf totem.

He begins to learn the greater significance of the wolf -- both feared for the devastation it can wreak on the herd, and revered for its guardianship of the grassland from the sheep and gazelles, maintaining the ecological balance and thus protecting the "greater life". He begins to realise that the twelfth-century military tactics that had enabled Genghis Khan to defeat the Han Chinese had been copied from the wolves' hunting pack formations. And when the Chinese agricultural settlers begin to trickle in to the area, he

finds that he has abandoned all links with his previous existence as a scholar in Beijing; "what he wanted was to enter the wolf totem realm of the grassland people".

The combination of the raw, hostile, landscape of the Gobi desert and the Xian'an mountain range, with the warm safety of the Nomadic tribesmen's friendship is a powerful concoction, and however close Rong may let us get to the wolves, they never lose their fearsome mystery -- quite a feat given that the narrative only narrowly escapes getting a bit wolf-heavy after the first four-hundred pages....

*Wolf Totem* (translated by Howard Goldblatt; 2008; published by Hamish Hamilton, an imprint of Penguin Books) is a simple story -- a story that demonstrates the importance of listening to our ancestors and of listening to the land. It is heartfelt and unsettling and Rong is the perfect host, inviting us to accompany Chen through every new experience as we, too, see our "worldview crumble in the logic and the culture of the grassland", following in his footprints on his journey from uncivilised ignorance to spiritual wisdom.

Isobel Shirlaw is a freelance writer who lives in Dhaka, Bangladesh.



## The 'Asian Booker' Longlist 2008

The Man Asian Literary Prize (nicknamed the 'Asian Booker') will be awarded in November 2008. The first Prize was awarded to the Chinese writer Jiang Rong for his novel *Wolf Totem* last year (see accompanying review). The Prize is open for unpublished works in English, as well as for translations. It is jointly administered by representatives of the Man Hong Kong International Literary Festival, the University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and is sponsored by Man Group plc, a leading global financial services firm based in London.

The 2008 Prize Longlist was announced recently, with first place going to Indians in terms of numbers, followed by writers from the Philippines.

Tulsi Badrinath (India), *Melting Love*  
Hans Billimoria (India), *Ugly Tree*  
Ian Rosales Casocot (Philippines), *Sugar Land*  
Han Dong (China), *Banished!*  
Anjum Hasan (India), *Neti, Neti*  
Daisy Hasan (India), *The To-Let House*  
Abdullah Hussein (Pakistan), *The Afghan Girl*  
Tsutomu Igarashi (Japan), *To the Temple*  
Rupa Krishnan (India), *Something Wicked This Way Comes*  
Murong Xuecun (China), *Leave Me Alone, Chengdu*  
Kavery Nambisan (India), *The Story that Must Not Be Told*  
Sumana Roy (India), *Love in the Chicken's Neck*

Vaibhav Saini (India), *On the Edge of Pandemonium*  
Salma (India), *Midnight Tales*  
Siddharth Dhanvant Shanghvi (India), *Lost Flamingoes of Bombay*  
Lakambini A. Sitoy (Philippines), *Sweet Haven*  
Sarayu Srivatsa (India), *The Last Pretence*  
Miguel Syjuco (Philippines), *Illustrado*  
Amit Varma (India), *My Friend, Sancho*  
Yu Hua (China), *Brothers*  
Alfred A. Yuson (Philippines), *The Music Child*

The shortlist will be announced on October 2008, and the winner in mid-November at an awards ceremony in Hong Kong. The judging panel for the 2008 Man Asian Literary Prize is: Adrienne Clarkson, (Chair) a refugee/immigrant to Canada during the '40s who rose to become its Governor General and is a leading cultural figure; Nicholas Jose, author of several acclaimed novels, including *Paper Nautilus*, *The Rose Crossing*, *The Custodians*, *The Red Thread*, and *Original Face*, as well as a memoir, *Black Sheep: Journey to Borroloola*; and Pankaj Mishra is the author of New York Times' Notable Books *Temptations of the West: How to be Modern in India, Pakistan and Beyond* and *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World*, and a novel, *The Romantics*. Peter Gordon, Executive Director of the Man Asian Literary Prize said: "The long list... demonstrates once again the depth and diversity of Asian contemporary writing. We were pleased that many of the works on last year's long list were published or are scheduled for publication, and we hope that highlighting Asian writers will have a similar effect this year and in the years to come." Additional information on the website: [www.manasianliteraryprize.org](http://www.manasianliteraryprize.org)

## The Bangla Novel lives on

SHABNAM NADIYA

An old man walks along a winding brick road seeking the bewildering odor of dust. This smell of dust has pervaded the nostrils of his forefathers, from the reign of the Mughals, the heyday of the people traversing the pages of *Boyon* -- weavers. The odor of dust harbingers death for Sobed Ali. He smelled dust before the deaths of his father and daughter. But dust also denotes the dry season -- when the busy hands of the jolas are stilled, for the dry air is detrimental to the fineness of the fabric that they weave.

In her second novel *Boyon* (Publishers, Dhaka), Papri Rahman presents a tale of love in its various forms and guises. Set in a community of jamaadani weavers, *Boyon* gives readers the unforgettable tales of Sobed Ali, his first wife Poiron Bibi and their descendants, Atimuni his second wife, the mystic madman Mulukchan and his much younger wife Kamala Sundari. But the love that comes through above all, is the love of the craft -- the obsession with colour, fabric and design which holds the weavers in thrall despite the minuscule returns from the business.

The human relationships depicted astound in their beauty as well as their unconventionality -- both characteristics emphatic in the women of Boyon. There's the prideful Atimuni, who slapped and left Sobed Ali because he had hidden from her his marriage to Poiron Bibi. Yet even as Atimuni lives out her life as the wife of the bad-tempered Alauddin Mia, she yearns for the ember-black Sobed Ali. There's Kamala Sundari -- abandoned for being *banja*, barren, she knots her fate with Mulukchan. Who in turn is plagued by mysterious flocks of nighttime birds and is constantly haunted by his dead first wife. There's the adolescent Jhumpari -- who falls in love with, gets pregnant and is betrayed by the cowardly Akaila, apprentice to a rival weaving house. Yet Jhumpari is given the strength to stand straight once more by marriage to Faizu Mia who tells her, "People only remember one's deeds... The real thing is to have affection for people. If you don't have affection, who do you think'll remember you?"

Sex is present in all its earthy and love-filled glory. The tender urgency of the first sexual encounter between Jhumpari and Akaila takes place in the presence of Poiron Bibi, Jhumpari's blind grandmother, the sounds of their lovemaking drowned out by pouring rain. The sensual dark beauty of Kamala Sundari is enhanced by the old man Mulukchan's yearning for her, his enraptured recall of the deep brown of her breasts and aroused nipples. Beauty departs from the usual Bangali fascination with the fair as *kaalo* skin is celebrated in the "cloud-black" yet "touched by water" beauty of Atimuni, the "smooth, shiny aura" like a rooster's feather of Akaila's skin, the black stone features of Kamala.

Love and death are the two constants in *Boyon*. Mulukchan, incessantly tormented by his struck-by-lightning dead wife, himself dies in the same way. The novel starts off with the dust-smell, foreshadowing the death of Shadhu, the ethereal child of Sobed Ali's later years. Through Shadhu is introduced the myth of the Chiluni Koinna, the Hawk Maiden, the ritualistic storytelling of the jamaadani weavers that is so essentially part of their craft.

Yet in the deaths of both Shadhu and Mulukchan lay the seeds of regeneration. After Mulukchan's death, Kamala feels something move inside her womb, "That damn old man can't leave me alone even after death! Now he's taken root right inside my belly!" Yet that accusation is also love; she knows that the old man has done this to absolve her of the shame of her barrenness. Echoing the Chiluni Koinna's flight, Shadhu takes a nose-dive out of a shupari tree straight to death. Only to return as Jhumpari's baby -- born of Akaila's loins, but to the generous heart of Faizu Mia.

There are a number of story-threads running parallel throughout the novel that only serve to enhance the complexity, and are satisfactorily linked and resolved by the end. The detailing of the weaving itself, the presentation of the historical context of the craft, the relationships between the rival master-weavers,

their families are well-crafted and credible. The changing times within the *jola* community are also documented. The beautiful young Chand Bibi (who Akaila ends up marrying instead of Jhumpari) has been given secret colour recipes by her *nani*. These recipes, as well as the techniques of design, were not usually given to females of the family, since they would eventually be married off to other houses. The final lines of *Boyon*, indicate that Tara Bibi, younger sister of Chand, succeeds where Chand Bibi failed even with all her prowess in design and weaving, where the gifted Mulukchan had failed, where Akaila had failed. She creates an original design and thus seems set to become a master herself, a position hitherto gained only by men.

I have only two critiques of *Boyon*. The first is the lack of build-up of the character Faizu Mia. He emerges in the final chapters as the saviour of the unwed and pregnant Jhumpari with his homespun wisdom and faith in the rightness of human effort as well as his role in organizing the weavers. Yet the only significance that he has been accorded hitherto is his capacity to down four ladles of *polao* unaccompanied by any gravy or meat -- a skill that does not endear him to Jhumpari's father.

The second issue is the language of *Boyon*, which draws heavily on dialect; certain words, expressions are thus slightly inaccessible to readers. Coupled with certain terminologies of the weavers, this makes the first couple of chapters of the book somewhat heavy going. The text is also interspersed with the songs of the weavers; again, the unfamiliarity of the rhythms proves to be a stumbling block, only to be assuaged by occasional sheer poetry. However, once the initial resistance to the unfamiliarity of this language is overcome, *Boyon* becomes a delight to the linguistic sensibilities.

*Boyon* easily ranks among the best of fiction published this year, testament to the fact that the form of the novel still lives in Bangla. In the face of the dearth of fine fiction in Bangladesh, *Boyon* is a must read.

Shabnam Nadiya is a writer and translator.

## NOTICE : EID SPECIAL ISSUE

The Daily Star invites submissions to its forthcoming Eid special issue of both fiction and nonfiction pieces. High-grade translations in both categories will also be considered. Translations should be accompanied by the original Bengali copy. The submissions ideally should not exceed 3500 words. The last date for submission is September 10. The date will not be extended. Submissions should be addressed to:

The Literary Editor  
The Daily Star, 19 Karwan Bazar, Dhaka 1215  
They may also be sent by email as Word attachment to [starliterature@thedailystar.net](mailto:starliterature@thedailystar.net) with 'Eid Issue Submission' in the Subject line.