

## SHORT STORY

SABYN JAVERI-JILLANI

It wasn't easy, steering a car through the narrow streets of old Karachi. Tiny beads of sweat formed on Bobby Uncle's forehead as he craftily navigated the big hooded vehicle. Much to the amusement of passers-by who looked on with unabashed curiosity at the strange contraption making its way through the brick-paved alleys, he continued to struggle with the giant steering wheel. Short and thin, he seemed dwarfed by the car he drove. It was the kind of motor car they had only seen in a cinema hall. Usually, a donkey cart or, if there was a special festival, a small taxi would occasionally grace their streets—but to see an actual bright and shiny motor car make its way down the narrow paths of their neighbourhood was not just cause for curiosity, but an actual thrill.

Some shouted at him to get the evil invention of the West out of their mohalla while others slapped the bonnet, screaming directions. "Here, here, take a left, back up a little, brother. Arr! Watch out for the pole!" the lads shouted advice while the children jumped up and down, trying to catch a glimpse of the interior.

Munna, Bobby Uncle's five-year-old nephew, ran out in the alley to see what the commotion was all about. He nearly fell into an open manhole in his excitement when he discovered that it was his very own uncle who was the owner of this glossy motor car. He ran back inside the house, announcing at the top of his lungs to his deaf grandmother, his baby sister, his next door neighbour and his mother who was busy preparing the afternoon meal, the arrival of the shiny contraption into their family.

"A motor car! A real motor car, I've seen Bobby Uncle drive up in one."

"Are you making up stories again, Munna?" asked Munira, his ten-year-old neighbour who spent more time in their house than she did in her own.

"I swear on your Dad's grave, he has a real live motor car!" replied Munna.

"Oye! You son of the devil!" she screamed at him. "How many times have I told you not to do that. My father is alive, thank Allah."

"What are you shouting at my son for?" Munna's mother came to his rescue.

"Look at him, Apa! He does it deliberately to upset me, sending my Pa to the grave when he is alive!"

"Oh, come now. He probably picked it up from the rogues on the streets," she consoled. "Munna, stop disturbing the women and go and play outside." She shoed him out.

Outside, Bobby Uncle was still struggling with his Chevy. Turning corners with a Chevy in the maze of narrow alleys that formed the old town was no joke. Bobby Uncle was half leaning out of the front window while well-wishers hung onto the sides, offering their expert advice. Suddenly the car lurched forward and then, with a grueling screech, it shuddered to a stop.



Bobby Mama fell forward over the steering, knocking over a roadside seller's wares. The seller cursed him, but Bobby Mama was too embarrassed by the dead engine to care about the seller's loss. To save face Bobby Uncle announced to the neighbours that he had stopped the car there because it was the best parking spot in the neighbourhood. The fact that it blocked old woman Hajjin's doorway and the turning into the next lane, seemed of little concern to him.

He tooted the car's shrill horn and Munna's Hindu neighbour, Luxmi, rushed out with a pooja thali to ward off the evil eye. Other neighbours like the deaf Jewish musician and short-sighted Parsi uncle also stepped out of their stooped doorways to look at the novelty in their neighbourhood. When Munna's Amma saw the motor car she couldn't stop gushing to anyone who'd listen, what a success her brother was. She would go on for hours and Munna's poor father regularly bore the brunt of her praise for her brother and his motor car. Especially when they had to travel by bus on the rare occasions that they left the neighbourhood.

The car was grand—to that everyone agreed. Nobody seemed to care that it never started. It coughed and groaned but never ran. The rides by the sea that Munna and his other had been looking

forward to would have turned into haunting complaints had it not been for the car's sleek new radio. Every Saturday, Munna's mother and other women from the neighbourhood would get into the car and tune in to All India Radio. They would listen to the gossip about movie stars, and sing along with Indian film songs banned by the strict Islamic regime. A stranger to the neighbourhood would find it very odd and perhaps a little spooky to see a car bulging at the seams, its windows covered with dupattas in respect of the veil, shaking from side to side with music drifting out. But while the women held a weekly gathering in the car the men met up at night. At nine p.m. sharp, the neighbourhood men would gather round the car and Bobby Uncle would tune the radio to the World Service.

Beep. Beep. "This is BBC London," the announcer's voice would boom out, "You are listening to Muhammad Shafi with the latest news in Urdu." A silence would descend on the mohalla as the men concentrated on happenings around the world.

These were the days before television made its way to Karachi and radios were a luxury of the rich. But the dedication to the nightly news was due more to strict media control by the state. The country was under the grip of a Martial Law leader who edited the

news himself. If it was a dry day and the President wanted it to be a wet one, you could be sure the announcer at Radio Pakistan would read out news of rain. With parched skin and dry throats people would curse the dictator and turn to other sources of information, like independent newspapers. But not everyone could read and this is where Bobby Uncle's radio came in.

He had a passion for gatherings which he referred to as mehfls. Being an unmarried man with no family other than his sister, he would cling to company. These nightly gatherings with him in the driving seat made him feel very important.

Dressed in starched white kurtas the men would bathe, change and hurriedly eat their dinner in time to get a good listening spot around the radio. Luxmi's husband would close his shop early and bring along his son who always dressed like heroes on the big screen, with slick hair and tight trousers. Parsi Uncle would also arrive early with his own chair as he didn't like to stand. Parsi Uncle had a radio in his house but the women in the neighbourhood said it was an excuse to get away from his bossy wife, Munizah.

Munna, too, would tag along with his father. Most of the children would be shoed off as they inevitably found some cause to make a noise. But Munna, being Bobby Uncle's nephew, would park himself on his lap and listen to the entire bulletin until he fell asleep. Munna found the announcer's voice very pleasant and soothing. He was too young to care about what Nixon said or how many people died in Gaza, but Mahpara, the female presenter's voice, would make him dreamy and transport him of faraway journey to strange lands. Of course, he knew there really was no America or Ireland, at least that's what Munira had told him and Munira was older than him. Munira didn't go to school because she was a girl and had two older brothers who needed education more than her. They would make it up to her by giving her a grand wedding some day, her mother said, when Munira protested. But even without a proper education Munira was smart—she knew the names of all the prophets and most of the holy words.

Sometimes when her mother let her off kitchen duties before eight, she would sneak to the back wall and try to listen to the car radio. The next day she would show off her knowledge of the bulletin to Munna. "Do you know who stole the sewer lids off our alley?" Munna would shake his head and she would say wisely, "It was America. It comes in the dead of night and steals the lids of our sewers so disease and illness spreads and we drop off like flies."

"America is a country, not a person. Bobby Uncle told me so," Munna would say.

"Oh, you're such a child!" Munira would tease him and run off.

While Munira thought the West was behind all the evils in their neighbourhood, thanks to the Ustani who taught her the Holy Book, the men at the nightly

radio gathering seemed to think that India was behind all the trouble in their country. The Bulletin always had a few shift-the-blame stories, and most of the time the next-door enemy was the root cause of evil.

But lately the gatherings around the car radio had grown more somber. Conflict with India was escalating and there was tension in the air. Men would gather around the car at eight and stick around after the bulletin to discuss matters. Intolerance seemed to be on the rise. Luxmi no longer came to Munna's house and her son Gopal did not attend the news sessions at night. There was a rumour that some over-zealous religious fanatics had burned the temple by the sea.

Most of the uncles who didn't go to the mosque did not show up after that night. And the next day when the broadcaster with the sweet voice announced that Indian soldiers had killed Pakistani villagers along the border, Munna noticed that none of his Hindu and Christian friends came out to play.

Munna was too young to understand all this but he knew that he missed his friends and neighbours. The car radio that had brought them together seemed to have created an immeasurable distance between them. Even Munira seemed withdrawn. She had stopped blaming America for all that went wrong. Instead she blamed it on the religious minorities in the country. "It's all Luxmi's fault," she would say. "She could be an Indian spy, you know! She probably gets a commission to steal the sewer lids so there is disease and illness in the neighbourhood and we all drop off like flies."

Munna listened with his head cocked to one side. He found it hard to believe that sweet, plump Luxmi who always gave him sweets when he passed by her door, could be the enemy. But Munira was right. She did look different from the rest of the women in the mohalla. She wore a fiery red dot on her forehead and worshipped little dolls that Munna secretly longed to play with. She was different—so were the other people whom Abba and his friends referred to as 'Minorities'.

Still, Munna found it hard to hate them. It was easier to hate the men in parrot green turbans who went around burning temples and churches and shouting slogans against white-skinned foreigners but then Munna was only a little boy. He was too young to pick and choose whom to hate and whom to admire, but deep in his heart he knew one thing for sure—in the days to come when people had been divided into categories of Mohajirs, Masihis and Sindhis by invisible lines and uncrossable borders, he would miss his old mohalla in the city by the sea, where difference did not mean distance.

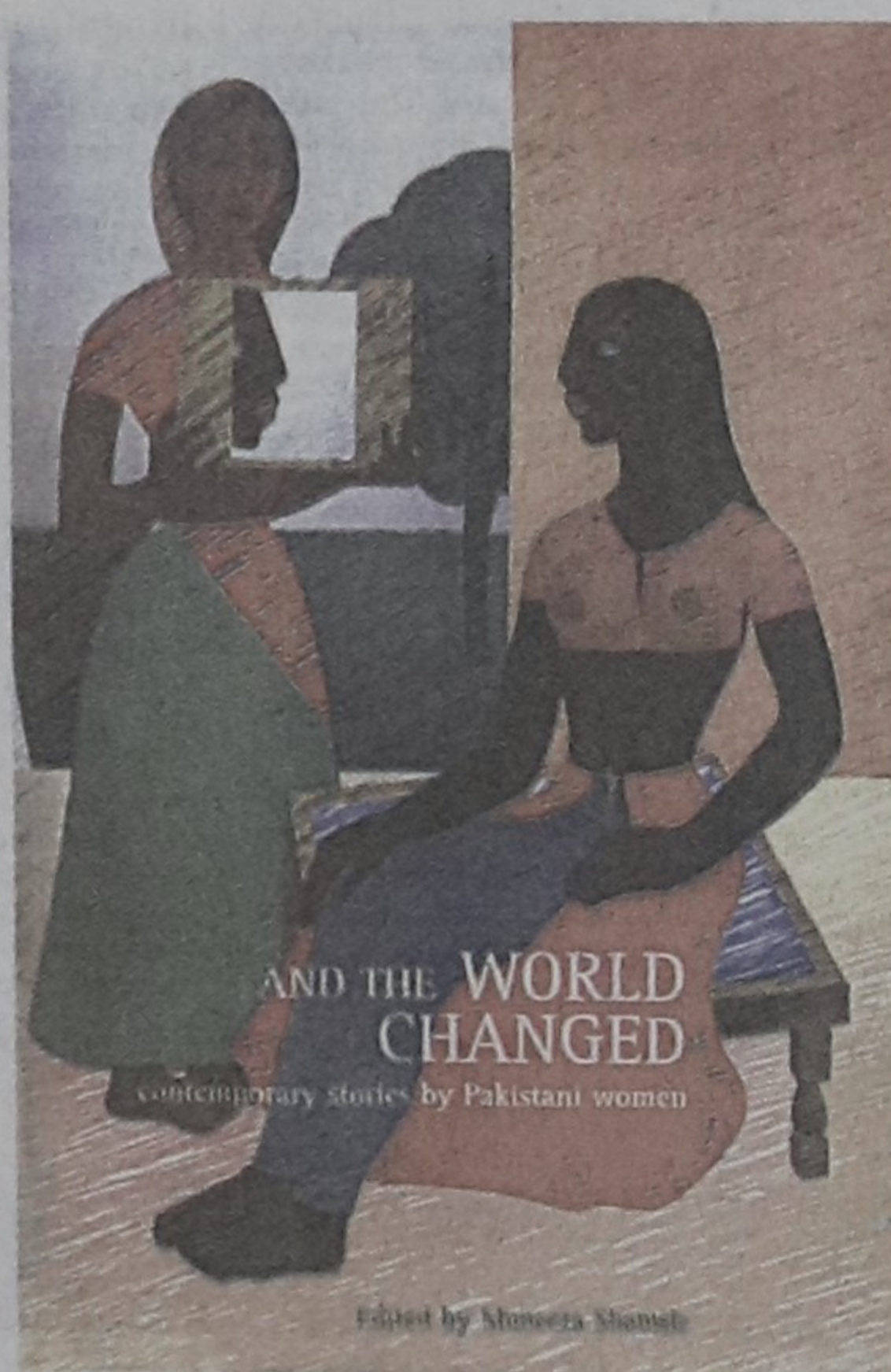
\*Reproduced from *And The World Changed: contemporary stories by Pakistani women* reviewed below. Sabyn Javeri-Jillani was born in Karachi and lives in London. She writes for various Pakistani and British publications.

## English writing by Pakistani women

KHADEMUL ISLAM

Pakistani writing in English is something we in Bangladesh are not generally aware of. There are several possible reasons for it. One is the troubled history between Bangladesh and Pakistan, which has over the decades seemingly hardened, tragically enough, a cultural divide that was the basis for the 1971 split, and has institutionalized a natural disinclination to enquire too closely at what Pakistani Anglophone writers are up to. Another reason is far more material: the simple unavailability of the works of Pakistani writers and authors—here one is talking about those Pakistani authors that are published in Pakistan itself. The odd work published outside Pakistan, in the UK and the USA, does make its appearance in our local markets, but even these have been available on so limited a basis that it has proved impossible to make an informed judgment or opinion on the quality of their English language output. Or even to acquire a general familiarity with them. The biggest reason of all undoubtedly may simply have been the overall domination of the Indians in the field of South Asian writing, whose forward momentum ever since the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* has dwarfed and overshadowed, aside from some Sri Lankan authors, the output of writers from the other countries of the South Asian subcontinent.

Things are now changing with regard to Pakistani Anglophone writing. One recent reason has been the spectacular success of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, which stayed on *The New York Times* bestseller list for weeks and had been long-listed for the 2007 Booker Prize. Its success brought renewed attention to Pakistani writing in English and to authors who have been quietly toiling away in its vineyards during the last decade: the relatively prolific Kamila Shamsie, Uzma Aslam Khan, Aamer Hussein, Nadeem Aslam, Moni Mohsin, Imad Rehman—and now the latest sensation, Mohammed Hanif, the author of *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*. Another reason for the recent surge of recognition is the increasing interest taken by Indian publishers, and readers, in the works of writers across the border, a development which has made for easier access to Pakistani writers. The volume under review—*And The World Changed: contemporary stories by Pakistani women*, brought out by Women Unlimited, Delhi, in 2005—is an early product of such an Indian interest in Pakistani writing. It has been edited by Muneeza Shamsie, whose signal contribution to Pakistani English writing was her 1997 collection titled *A Dragonfly in the Sun: An Anthology of Pakistani Writing in English* (Oxford University Press, both UK and Pakistan). That particular anthology has become an enduring guide to anyone interested in the broad contours of Pakistani English writing, of both prose and poems. The editor's Introduction in the opinion of many critics and reviewers is a classic tour d'horizon of Pakistani Anglophone writing, covering deftly the intertwined, thorny topics of the troubled heritage of English language in the subcontinent, Muslim writers in pre-Partition India (the Pakistanis claim both the poet and art critic Shahid Suhrawardy as well as Ahmed Ali, the author of *Twilight in Delhi*, as their own, but questions can be raised about the fullness of such claims), the history of English writing in Pakistan and the question of what exactly constitutes a 'Pakistani' writer (the connections with Pakistan of a Hanif Kureishi, or even a Zulfikar Ghosh, for example, can charitably be considered to be tenuous at best), and the state of



contemporary English writing in Pakistan. Muneeza Shamsie in 2001 also brought out a second anthology of Pakistani English writing, *Leaving Home: Towards A New Millennium: A Collection of English Prose by Pakistani Writers*.

*And The World Changed: contemporary stories by Pakistani women* makes available the short stories of 24 women authors (including that of the editor, who is also a creative writer and literary journalist based in Karachi). Again, Muneeza Shamsie's expert and authoritative Introduction catches the reader's attention. Historically, English writing by Pakistani women began with Mumtaz Shahnawaz's (1912-1948) *A Heart Divided*, a narrative that "was permeated by a strong consciousness of herself as an educated Muslim woman and political activist", who died tragically and prematurely in an air crash. It was followed by *The Young Bride and Other Stories* by Zaib-un-Nissa Hamidullah (1918-2000), who was also Pakistan's first woman columnist, who later started her own magazine *The Mirror*, which along with two other magazines *Woman's World* and *She*, provided a platform for Pakistani women's writing in the 1950s and 1960s.

The modern period of English fiction by Pakistani women writers, however, undeniably began with Bapsi Sidhwa's 1979 *The Crow Eaters*, published by Jonathan Cape in the UK. The book's earthy humour, providing an unmistakable critique in tone and style of the Martial Law era of Ziaul Haq, written by a woman belonging to the minority Parsi community, guaranteed it widespread attention. Politics was the explicit spur in the next phase of Pakistani women's writing, when the Hudood Ordinance during the same period (which did not differentiate between rape and adultery) forced a spate of protest articles from Ruksana Ahmad, a Pakistani expatriate in England. She also went on to translate Urdu feminist poetry and

co-founded the Asian Women's Collective, a forum for British Asian women writers. From then on, the early 1980s, Pakistani women, mostly based in the US, began to write in a variety of genres, from Sara Suleri's academic and nonfiction writings to Hima Raza's and Fawzia Afzal Khan's blending of poetry and prose to the mining of myths and lore by Shahrukh Husain, whose *Women Who Wear the Breeches* included 'Rubies for a Dog' a story based on 'The tale of Azad Bakht' from the great Urdu classic *Bagh-O-Bahar* by Mir Amman Delvi (1803) to Talat Abbasi's intensely feminist preoccupations.

All of the above writers are present in this fascinating collection of stories, published as a deliberate counterweight to the fact that "despite individual successes, English language writing by Pakistani women as a body of work is not widely known". Two strong patterns are discernable from this collection of "creative work in original English", with the first being the persistent impact of the East-West encounter, of Western idioms and thought pressing upon Muslim identities and thought, and of an equally intense pressure back, stories which spring from the spaces that are carved out by such a clash within individual, female consciousness and minds. Traditional concepts of personal freedom, social roles, the divide between public and private spheres are implicitly worked out anew, where these by now familiar themes of women's writing are given fresh life by the expressive, strange and rare eloquence of fiction writing. One spectacular example of the latter is Soniah Kamal's 'Runaway Truck Ramp', whose alert, acrid and very funny short story probes diametrically opposed notions of freedom and 'maleness' through the sheer physicality of a one-night stand between an American woman and a Pakistani man: "Essence said I could walk into a room, take a survey, hone in, chat up, take the boy and dispose of him afterwards like well-chewed gum, we the women of the millennium, and that's what I did: Take Charge. That's the type I fell under in a *Marie Claire* quiz. No mooning around and pining for a guy for me, and so here was Sully, I found him attractive, and so why not, except I just couldn't do my routine—pull him over, fondle him or just say, 'Wanna fuck?'"

The other general pattern to be noted is that politics, both within Pakistan and outside of it (the problematic of an Islamic identity in a post 9/11 world, that 800-pound gorilla in the room), its conflicting dialectics, a rage against a political dispensation based on religious tenets that specifically discriminates against women, still acts as a vital spur to Pakistani women writing in English. Thus we get a tie between incipient communalism and military rule in the title story by Sabyn Javeri-Jillani, while Humera Afridi confronts a suddenly hostile atmosphere in New York City on 9/11. It is a continuous battle, and one gets the impression that the very choice of the language is in itself a part of the contention.

Whether one is interested in the particular development of Pakistani writing in English, or in the overall picture of South Asian writing, which by definition must include all the writers of all the countries of the subcontinent, where not just Indian but also Bangladeshi and Pakistani and Nepalese writing must be considered within the overall frame, Muneeza Shamsie's continuing efforts in giving us these anthologies and collections of writings are most noteworthy and valuable. The book, fittingly enough, is dedicated to Muneeza's mother, Begum Jahanara Habibullah (1915-2003) "who wrote her first book in her eighties and was 84 when it was first published."

Khademul Islam is literary editor, *The Daily Star*.



RIFAT MUNIM DIP

Sunil Gangapadhyay, in a lecture given in a function arranged by the little magazine *Kobita Shankranti* said that our fiction writers have not yet fully explored the richness of rural Bangladesh. He mentioned William Faulkner, who never wrote about anything outside the purview of his town and its two-mile expanse. Prasanta Mridha's fictions make a strong case in point. He has already made his presence in the literary scene by collections like *Kuhakvivram*, *Poithar Taan*, and *Tero O Oboshisto Choi*. Most of the stories in the previous collections deal with the social and natural setting of rural Bagerhat ranging invariably across two or three villages and treating the emotions, inter-relations and sufferings of its inhabitants as its subject-matter. *Koruna Porijan*, the seventh of his short story collections, is no exception.

Set in a typical village of the eastern region of Bagerhat, the stories illuminate the crises of a poverty-stricken family as well as the beauty of outstretching fields, thatched huts with thickly grown trees, and the soothing pond across the yard. Nature is shown to leave its indelible mark on the mental set-up of the characters. Anyone familiar with the author's works also knows about his fondness for the local form of spoken language. In this collection he has exceeded them all in the mastery of describing one of Bagerhat's dialects with unerring exactness. He is at his best when he glides past one natural location to another offering us an all-encompassing portrayal of village life, a trend which has become rare these days in the face of modern Bangla literature focusing solely on the psychological complexities of urban life.

What is completely new is the structure whereby one can consider each story as a separate entity in its own right, and yet link them all to weave a new whole. A collection of five stories, with each revolving around a particular member of the same family: Koruna, her school-going daughters (Nilima and Purnima), only son (Nanda) and her mother (Bimala). As the reader passes from one story to the next, these different stories read like chapters in a novel.

*Veja Dupur*, the first of the series, is about Koruna's concern for her son's short height. Compounding this is his susceptibility to illness which runs like an undercurrent throughout the stories, constituting one of Koruna's persistent worries. The second story, *Bimala Sundarir Passport*, stands apart in that it goes beyond the village as far as the border putting Bimala and Nilima in the larger social context where they are to be identified as the Other, as someone who essentially belongs to a minority group. The story is about the forged identity of Nilima as Bimala's daughter on the passport, where the story creates, extends and then resolves the tension superbly in the end. The narrative shifts to the past in the third story, *Koruna Dhaleer Biroho Milon*, where it is seen that Bimala with her two sons and a daughter experienced abandonment. Acting as

## Tales of Bagerhat Village Life

the nucleus, this story proceeds through Koruna's reminiscences, letting us know how she got married and was deserted by her husband, much like her mother had been. As the story wraps up, we get the melancholic picture of Koruna sitting on the verandah with her obsessive gaze, as if fixed under a magic spell, in the direction of her in-laws' house.

The fourth story, *Josnai Nilima*, picks up Nilima again attending to her psychic dimensions played out against the background of a clear cloudless sky. Besides being hard of hearing, she is also forgetful and dim-witted, a fact that foreshadows in Koruna's eye the grim fate, much like her own, that awaits her elder daughter. The last story, *Choirashangkrantir Agee*, sharply differs as it alone ends on an optimistic note. Focusing on Purnima, the only normal child, it deals with her post-adolescent fantasies about another teen, Subash. As a result of his wooing, they meet furtively at a village fair, and at the end are seen walking down a village road when everybody else is busy at the bustling Boishakhi Mela. This outrageous walk, however unrealistic it might seem, sets her apart as a character who dares to make her own choices.

Reading the stories at a stretch and taking notice of their interconnectedness, one may conclude that the characters, with all their similarities and contrasts, are intertwined in the wider context of a novel. Apart from this, what gets our attention is the serenity of the charming landscape, the crop-bursting fields and midnight mysteries of the rain-swollen marshes, the silently flowing river and the rains. Seen from the perspective of Sunil Gangapadhyay's remarks, this collection emerges as a notable rendering of village life as immersed in Nature, which is precisely what makes for a commendable read.

Rifat Munim Dip is a student of English Discipline, Khulna University.

## 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 with 'Eid Issue Submission' in the Subject line.