

SHORT STORY

Cruel to be Kind

JULIE REZA

Zubaida bent down to cut off the head of yet another withered rose. It broke her heart to do this: having no children of her own, each flower was like a child to her. But she knew only by cutting the shrivelled blooms would another bloom appear, twice as beautiful as the last. 'I have to be cruel to be kind!' she laughingly reminded herself.

The desiccated petals of the dead flowers fell to the floor around her. Zubaida reached down to pick up one of the dead heads that had fallen but, as she did so, she was surprised to find herself staring at the bare feet of a young boy.

Looking up at his face, Zubaida was immediately captivated by an emaciated child with sun-bleached hair, dark, brown eyes and hollow cheeks. He smiled at her -- a smile that instantly won her over.

"How has this child got past the guards?" she wondered. Yet she felt no fear, for the child didn't seem threatening.

"Child--what's your name?" she asked. He just looked back at her. "Your name, child, what is it?" she repeated.

Still there was no reply; the child continued to gaze at her. Then, as if something had suddenly occurred to him, he held out a hand like a beggar and with his other hand gestured to his stomach.

On the verge of calling Bua to get some food, Zubaida paused. She recalled how she was renowned for being a soft touch. So she said "I'll give you food...but you'll have to work for it."

The child continued to look at her benignly "Child--do you understand me?"

No response, except for a series of rapid blinks.

Exasperated with his lack of reply, she barked, "Are you deaf, child?"

The child flinched. And all of a sudden it dawned on Zubaida that the child was indeed deaf.

Zubaida was moved. No wonder this urchin looked so thin. Who would give him work? He couldn't receive orders, and looked too frail to do hard labour. All that was left for him was begging. And yet how could he beg? A young boy like him, with his alert, bright eyes, would just be shooed away.

Re-assessing the situation, Zubaida softly repeated her desire that the child do some work, but this time she gestured towards the garden, miming the action of cutting off rose heads and mouthing her words carefully. He



smiled a toothy smile and held out his hand for the pruning shears, and Zubaida hesitatingly passed them over to him. He immediately set to work, instinctively seeking the roses that needed dead-heading, but leaving those that were in bloom or about to emerge from their buds.

Zubaida watched him for a little while, then went over to the guards to tell them to let him work in peace. Zubaida went back into the house. She could watch the boy from the veranda, and meanwhile arrange for some dhal-bhaat. Zubaida called Bua over and explained the situation. Bua looked aggrieved; elderly and old-fashioned, she didn't like strangers, and she particularly didn't like strangers who might want to take advantage of her mistress's kind heart. Hadn't Bua always protected her mistress from harm--ever since the mistress was a toddler back in the village home? Surely the mistress was being fooled by this strange-looking jungle boy. For all Bua knew, he could be a liar, a thief, a common thief.

Mumbling to herself, Bua set off for the kitchen. Zubaida sighed and sat back into her cane chair. The warmth of the early evening sun made her drowsy, and she nodded off. She awoke to still hear the snip-snip of the child cutting dead heads, and saw Bua walk out into the garden from the side door with the plate

piled high with rice and a little daal and salt. The child stopped working when he saw the food, and gently lay down the shears. Zubaida watched him as he ate hungrily.

Maybe she could keep the wife? Damal, the gardener, had had to go back to his village and nurse his dying mother. Who knows when he would be able to come back? In the meantime, who else would tend to her precious garden?

And so it was that the odd-looking child with the cheeky grin was kept on in the household. Every day he helped Zubaida in the garden. He also helped with other tasks. Zubaida was getting adept at using some sort of sign language to communicate with him, and was charmed that the boy would reciprocate. The only worry she had was that the boy would suddenly daydream as he went about his tasks--his body would stiffen and he would stare blankly into the distance. What was he recalling, Zubaida would wonder. What had happened to this mysterious child in his past?

Zubaida's other concern was Bua. She knew that Bua eyed the boy with some suspicion; the child's disability isolated him--he couldn't tell her of his past, his family. Inevitably this fuelled Bua's distrust.

One morning Zubaida was folding her husband's clothes when the sound of an almighty commotion in the kitchen came to her ears. Rushing over, she found the boy lying akimbo on the floor, writhing and making strange sounds as he tossed his head from side to side, arms outstretched. And then, suddenly, he stopped. He looked around--dazed, but with fear in his eyes.

Zubaida leant over him and wiped his warm forehead. She eased away the plate that he had been holding tightly in his hands, and stroked his arm kindly. So, on top of his deaf-muteness, this young lad also had violent fits? "Poor child," she murmured. But Bua reacted differently. She shook her head: "I feared as much!" she declared. "I pray you send him away Zubaida Bibi. The boy is possessed by demons, by evils jinns!"

Zubaida sighed heavily with frustrated annoyance. No matter how long Bua had lived

in the town, she still retained her village fears and superstitions! Zubaida explained the boy's condition to Bua, but she could tell that Bua didn't believe her. Well, like it or not, the child was part of the family and Bua would just have to put up with the child staying with them!

So whereas his fit had made Zubaida feel a deeper affection for the boy, it had the opposite effect on Bua, who constantly watched him from the corner of her eye. Over the next few weeks Zubaida caught the end of conversations between Bua and the guards: "...he will harm the mistress and master," "...he will cut us into pieces..."

Weeks and months passed and nothing more happened. Just as Zubaida's garden flourished under her tender care, so did the boy. He grew taller and more muscular (though his cheekbones somehow never seemed to fill in), and he was able to take on more physical tasks. Things finally seemed to be settling down. But, the idyll was not to last....

It was late afternoon one Thursday. The smouldering sun was moving lower in the sky. Zubaida has asked the boy--still known as 'the boy'--to cut the grass. He'd have to do this squatting on the ground, cutting the grass handful by handful with a scythe. Zubaida stayed a little while to check that he knew what to do. Then she went indoors to do some embroidery.

She was lost in her thoughts when she heard a wild hullabaloo in the garden. Fearing that the boy was having another fit, Zubaida rushed out. "Oh dear God," she shrieked out as she saw the child on the grass, flailing as before--but this time he held the scythe in his hands and had somehow managed to cut himself. Blood covered his clothes and hands. The guards and Bua had all arrived at the scene, but no-one knew what to do. One guard tried, but was frightened by the scythe and shrieked each time it came near. He pulled out his lathi and repeatedly whipped the boy, spurred on by Bua and the other guard. The child was also making screaming sounds, which only added to everyone's distress.

Then, totally out of the blue and before Zubaida could do anything, Damal appeared. Dropping his bags, he picked up a spade that had been lying nearby. Before anyone could stop him he raised the spade over his head and struck two hard blows on the unfortunate child, hitting the boy's arm and chest. "Yes,

beat Satan out of him," a terrified Bua screeched out. Zubaida rushed forward to stop him, but he was so enraged to find that Satan had entered this house while he was away that he bought down yet another blow before she managed to hold him back. This time the blow hit the child's head, and blood started to ooze from his face. But the blow woke the child from his fit. Despite his clear terror, he was unable to lift himself from the ground. Everyone looked on horrified. Where had Satan gone?--for all that remained was a defenceless little boy.

Over the next week the boy gradually recovered under Zubaida's tender care. But he was fearful of everyone except Zubaida and Ashraf, and likewise, they were fearful of him. If he saw them he would run away; if they saw him, they would hide. Things were worse than they had ever been. Love, trust, all seemed to have left the house. An atmosphere of dread and suspicion filled the air. Zubaida knew that this couldn't go on.

So when, a few days later the boy came up to her and pointed to himself and then to the road, Zubaida knew what he meant. She took him to the kitchen to eat, and stood over him as he had his meal, bodily protecting him from the distrustful glare of Bua. After he had finished, she took the keys from the end of her sari and opened the big steel almirah in the bedroom. She took out the clothes she had already bought the boy for Eid later in the year. She rolled up a brand new katha, made of warm cotton, and filled a fabric bag with some rice, milk powder, lentils, salt and onions. Finally she pulled out her drawer and took out some money. She pressed this into his hand. With a heavy heart she helped him load everything under his arms, and then took him to the gate to bid him goodbye.

As she saw him walk away into the distance, she felt full of sorrow. The boy had entered her life, and like her roses brought her great joy. Now, bidding goodbye to him was like seeing her withered blooms drop to the floor. Yet she knew it wasn't good for him to stay. Moving on would be the safest thing for the boy. "Who knows," she thought to herself, "there may come a time, somewhere else, with someone else who would nurture him kindly, that he may bloom far more radiantly than he was able to bloom here."

Julie Reza lives and works in London.

TORONTO Journal

SAYEEDA JAIGIRDAR

There are writers who create fiction by viewing the post-colonial world in the perception of their own experiences, and then there are the scholars who study the perspective of these writers and create Post Colonial Literary theory.

Arun Prabha Mukherjee is a Canadian scholar, well known for her work in Post-Colonial and Diaspora theory. She was born in Lahore and came to Canada from India in 1971 as a Commonwealth Scholar at the University of Regina. An Associate Professor of English at York University in Toronto, she is the author of *The Gospel of Wealth in the American Novel: The Rhetoric of Dreiser and His Contemporaries* (1987), *Towards an Aesthetic of Opposition: Essays on Literature, Criticism and Cultural Imperialism* (1988), and numerous articles on postcolonial literatures, women's writing and critical theory. Her works also include *Oppositional Aesthetics: Readings from a Hyphenated Space* (TSAR: 1995), and *Postcolonialism: My Living* (TSAR: 1998). She has edited and written the Introduction of *Sharing Our Experience* (Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women: 1993), an anthology of autobiographical writings by aboriginal women and women of colour. She is a member of York Stories Editorial Collective which edited *York Stories: Women in Higher Education* (TSAR: 2000). Her translation of Dalit writer Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (Samya: Kolkata & Columbia U Press: 2003) won the New India Foundation Prize for "the finest book published in India during 2002-2003." Her translation of Dalit writer Sharan Kumar Limbale's novel, *Hindu*, will be published by Samya in 2008.

Arun *did* is an old acquaintance of my husband from Regina, Saskatchewan, a North Western province of Canada where both of them had attended Regina University in the mid-seventies. Regina is one of the coldest places in Canada where the temperature falls to 40 degrees Centigrade in the winter. In those days, there were hardly any Bengalis in this part of the world, so everyone knew each other. My husband ran into her again after twenty years in downtown Toronto, came home and spoke glowingly of her, saying, "I met an old friend from Regina - she is Bengali, you know - you must invite her over. I just know that you will really enjoy her company!" So after playing e-mail and phone tag with Arun *did* for a couple of months, we found time to meet her at her house in Toronto. Her house was quite artistically done and I noticed an armful of books in every corner. The wall of the staircase shone with light reflected from the cozy family photographs. A neighbour's cat curled up in the corner of an armchair opened its eyes haughtily at us as we entered and then decided to continue with the mid-afternoon nap. I also noticed a *hookah* (to my great delight) in the corner. *Didi* gave us a welcome cup of tea (it was freezing outside) and some Indian snacks and we settled down to talk. I had asked her beforehand if I could do an informal interview and this followed...the Postcolonial journey of Arun Prabha Mukherjee in, more or less, her own words.

SJ: Could you tell me a little of your early life in India and the various influences?

APM: Well, I was born in Lahore, Pakistan (before

The Post Colonial Journey of Arun Prabha Mukherjee

Partition) and later we moved to Madhya Pradesh where I had my schooling and then went to the University of Saugar, India. The small town Kamgarh where I was growing up was a rather backwater place where the education of a woman was not considered an important priority. I suppose, my early influences were my parents. My father was a lawyer and my mother was a high school principal and they always encouraged me to seek a higher education. They believed that I should have a university education and I was motivated to do well by their attitude.

SJ: On reaching Canada, what was your first reaction to snow?

APM: Well, I had seen snow in Simla in India, so I was not very surprised. As I was on a Commonwealth scholarship, I was well prepared and well received and found accommodations very comfortable. No, I believe that I was quite set and did not find the snow daunting in any way.

SJ: What was the topic of your PhD?

APM: It was titled 'The Gospel of Wealth in the American Novel'.

SJ: How would you comment on the Canadian multiculturalism and the notion of the Canadian mosaic? And how does this differ from the concept of the American melting pot?

APM: Well, the Canadian mosaic model is very different from the concept of the American melting pot. In Canada, we are encouraged to keep our different ethnic identities, the message being that in diversity lays our strength. On the other hand, in America, new immigrants are encouraged to lose their individual identities and become one national melting pot. Does this work? As ethnic minorities and identities are on the rise in North America, both these concepts are being stretched. Of course, as a result, Diaspora literature and studies is flourishing!

SJ: We have noticed an increase in the Canadian Arts Councils grants to artists and writers of non-white backgrounds. Is this about time?

APM: Of course! This move is a redress to past grievances, to see ethnic writers as "the Other". There are also new publishing houses in Canada such as TSAR publishing (established by the writer MG Vassanji) which takes an interest in promoting ethnic writers. Things are definitely in the favor of the ethnic writer!

SJ: Could you comment on the effects of globalization on the state of the celebrity South Asian writer?

APM: Well, this is a huge phenomenon. The South Asian writer has a target potential of 20 million readers worldwide. The strength of the Diaspora community is immense and they want to read something that belongs to them. They want a writer who is reflective of their ways, their thoughts.

SJ: Didi, one last question, do you see yourself writing a memoir someday?

APM (with a little laugh): Perhaps, after retirement. I am very busy now with so many projects and my graduate students.

Sayeeda Jaigirdar lives, writes and teaches in Toronto

Poems

My Mother

MASUD KHAN
(Translated by Fakrul Alam)

In the dust-smeared evening
Far away, almost at the margins of the horizon,
The one who is resting all by herself
In a bed laid out under the open sky
Is my mother.
Her bed smells of grass and the antiseptic Dettol.
A tube in her nose supplies her with oxygen,
A saline bottle is attached to her arm,
And she is tied to a catheter too--
It is as if she is getting entangled inextricably
In a jungle of plastic and polythene reeds.

A smoky surreal unreal canopy encircles her bed.

Seemingly after ages, dusk descends on the world,
Birds and insects form a chorus,
Wailing throatily obscure and dissonant tunes
In amateurish over-excited zeal,
Seeking refuge timorously in hedges and bushes,
At the margin of the horizon,
In the shadow of primeval motherhood.

Masud Khan is a poet and translator living in Toronto. Fakrul Alam is professor of English at Dhaka University.

What I'd Like To Be

F MOWLA

What I'd like to be is a
Rich bitch
The 500-watt daughter
Of an ex-minister
Duck-waddling into a room
Wailing "Oh, the corruption!"

What I'd like to be is a
Factory-wallah
Snug in my SUV
Talking about fair wages
On talk-show TV.

What I'd like to be is a
First-born
Of a political family
And handed the keys
To the state treasury.

What I'd like to be is a
Bank defaulter
Shimmering in a silk kurta
Sending my boys to USA
On my own 'ha-ha wink wink' money.

Then I'd have it easy
I'd sail on the river of life
I'd smoke a hukkah
Sing a tuneful song
Dance in my happy hell
Wave to the people
Sa re ga maaaa...

F Mowla is a graduate student in New York.

Monday

BUDDHADEV DASGUPTA
(Translated by Salim Ahmed)

Jadhunath is lying beside Damini
From Damini's breast
from her navel

from her pubis
an astonishing darkness comes
and covers Jadhunath's body and
covers

Jadhunath's shame, his loss
his amounting to nothing at all,
his fatigue, Jadhunath's week-long
stored-up rage.

Night lengthens and
humiliation, tiredness, anger
calm down to fly away to the stars--
as from inside the bed climbs down
after a thousand years
creakily stealthily Sunday!

In the morning from the bazaar bag
peeps out spinach, peeps out
kaila fish wrap, peeps out
Jadhunath's childhood days,
Sitting on Damini's breast
Jadhunath scribbles A B C D.

The night grows old
from the stars float down
humiliation, pain and anger
to lay a hand on Jadu's forehead.

On Monday Jadhunath from a bamboo beam
hangs down like a bat.

Buddhadev Dasgupta is a noted Kolkata poet. Salim Ahmed is a schoolteacher and translator.

Let It Rain

BADRAY MUNIR
(translated by Khademul Islam)

Let it rain all night long -- all day and all night.

Who wants the sun's face -- insolent, irreverent?
These insane birds yearning for light,
Employees of sunshine -- who are they?

Let it rain all night long -- all day and all night.

Huge mounds of waste, ill-bred faces
Have piled up high in my mind;
The copper pot scarred with green gashes --
Let the rain scrub it clean!
Let the rain wash Time's bedcover clean.

Let it rain all night long -- all day and all night.

Who wants sunlight's colour, the proclamation of hues?
Why the sun, what's this insistence
That pierces Night's stubborn re-birth?
Let it be the rainy months of *Ashar, Srabon*;
Till the end the rain's numbing fall --
The rain's willing downpour
Let it tumble-upend rince out all bluster.

Let it rain all day and all night
Let it rain whole life long.

Badray Munir is a Bangladeshi poet. Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.