

SHORT STORY

The Day Kabir Collapsed

MALEKA PARVEEN

Syed Kabir rose that day at 6:15 in the morning when his alarm clock rang. He got up from his bed feeling uneasy, with a bad headache. On other mornings, while getting up from his bed, he would take his time, lying curled up on the bedsheets for four or five minutes before determinedly, in an act of will, lifting himself up and out of the bed. Then he would jump out crisply in order to avoid drifting back into another round of luxurious sleep. So today he rose, clasp the sides of the bed as he got up and then walked to the attached bathroom, feeling a numbness in his movements. He tried to think if it was due the lingering effects of a dream, or if it was because he had taken a strong sedative last night before getting into bed in order to dive deep into the nirvana of a deep, refreshing sleep, something which had been eluded him these last one-and-half months.

Taking his shower beneath the stream of cool morning water, Kabir felt fresh and revived. For the time being he forgot about the difficulties of these last few months. Of course, nobody in his family had any idea about the troubles he was facing in his office - not even his wife Sabera, despite the fact that he had always felt her to be his real, true comrade-in-arms ever since they had begun their married life eighteen years back.

But for reasons he himself was not clear about (maybe it was something unconscious, he reasoned to himself) he couldn't discuss what was going on at the office over the last month and what had been tormenting him since then. He knew that Sabera would feel terribly unhappy if she came to know about the whole sordid details; she could even begin to harbour doubts about his character - his integrity. Why had he been implicated in such a type of underhand dealing when there were so many others who could easily have been indicted on similar charges? No, she would not understand! She might think differently about him. He knew she believed in him absolutely, thought of the world of him, and he could not bear for her to be suspicious about him regarding anything. She had such faith in his moral nature that she would rather die before see any proof of a reversal of her belief in him.

"Have you finished? Your breakfast is getting cold" - Kabir started violently at Sabera's voice. He had finished fifteen minutes earlier, but stood holding the green hairbrush in his right hand he used to comb the remains of his once wavy and lush thick hair, lost in thought. Awakened from his contemplation, he found himself standing in front of their old dressing table of old teakwood, one of the many gifts from his



artwork by amina

father-in-law given to adorn and furnish the new life his only daughter was embarking on. His father-in-law Quazi Shariful Islam's sole mental satisfaction, when marrying his daughter off to Kabir, a petty administrative official in a shipping company, had been that he had discovered his prospective son-in-law to be a very honest man both in word and deed.

"What is the definition of honesty? Is honesty something tangible or something abstract which can only be talked about and be achieved at the expense of some other thing? Where is honesty when you do not know anything about a matter thrust upon you solely for your to take the whole burden so that someone else could fly away free and happy? - Kabir gripped his head with both hands, letting the comb fall down on the floor.

"What's happened to you? Are you feeling unwell? I have been calling you for the last twenty minutes and you are not even dressed for office. You will surely be late today - that boss of yours will find another reason to make you overstay at the office, something which you've been doing too much of recently" - Sabera hurled at him, standing at the doorstep of their bedroom and looking visibly annoyed.

"No, it's nothing. You go. I am coming in five minutes."

2. At the dining table Sabera looked at her

husband's somber face. It was not his usual facial expression. Kabir was a jovial man, always making fun of things at the slightest opportunity. Sometimes his jokes irritated Sabera, even made her quite angry at times. How could he act so happy when his wife had to struggle hard to maintain their family of five on such a meager income? Thank God her kind father had left her with some fixed deposits in the bank, on which she had been depending ever since their three children had started going to school.

Sometimes she wondered what had charmed her late father so much about this poor man. Her father had not been a very rich man either, but she and her brothers had been brought up in a certain kind of middle-class comfort. But the moment she had entered her new life with this poor man as her partner, she had instinctively realized that she was going to have to endure difficult times in the future. Over time, she had found that her instincts had been right.

"Are you coming today after your normal office time or you will be late at the office again?"

"I am not sure. I will try to finish my work today on time. If I cannot, I will let you know. Please take it easy. People like me frequently have to work late at their offices. The last one-and-half month, I have had to look after so many issues..."

"Ok. But you've changed. You don't smile

any more, you keep saying there's too much pressure now in your office. It's never been like this since our marriage."

"I know, but you have to be understand..." Kabir checked himself abruptly. He looked at his watch and got up quickly from his chair.

"You haven't taken your tea. You are already late, so you might as well have it." Sabera wiped her sweat-smear nose with the palm of her left hand and started moving towards the kitchen.

"No, I'll be back on time tonight. Should I bring some samosas or singara?"

"You need not bring anything. I just want you home earlier." Sabera then was surprised to suddenly feel her lately-changed husband lean forward and brush his lips against her forehead in a soothing way. She rushed to the bedroom, trying her best to hold back her tears.

3. Kabir felt relieved to be out on the open street filled with crowds. He was a lowly official, somebody whose signature did not carry any weight whatsoever. He was full of giggling worries: Was he to be scolded for making some mistakes in his drafts of letters? Why did his boss do nothing except whisper over the telephone with women, even though he had a beautiful wife and two little children?

A microbus carrying some schoolchildren screeched to a sudden stop right behind Kabir. The driver shouted at him, "Hey, old man, are you blind? Where is your walking stick?" Kabir did not reply, but instead looked up at the late morning sky, which appeared to him like a spread batik printed sari with irregular patches of white and blue.

He stood a while to draw in some long breaths and then started for the place where he had been spending his whole day for the last one-and-half months. It was a big green park with lots of trees and two lakes. He took his usual seat on a bench by the side of one of the lakes and stared vacantly in front of him.

What should he do now? How long would he be able to continue like this? Would his wife believe that he had been suspended for the last one-and-half month for an alleged involvement in embezzling some official funds? Wouldn't Sabera faint first before hearing the details of the whole matter? Would his children be ever convinced that their father was a dishonest man? Nothing had been proved. Yet, how long could a man like him endure such pressure? Shouldn't he come clean with his wife?

Something pressed at him from inside. He took two or three gulps of water from the bottle in the lunch bag his wife prepared for him every day. He could not endure any more.

"Oh! Sabera, please forgive me. I could not make you happy. I...sorry...forgive..." Kabir collapsed on the park bench.

4. After sending the children to the school and tidying the whole house, Sabera was in the kitchen washing up. She was still in a state of stupor - she could still feel the loving touch of his dry lips. She did not know what had lately changed him. He had never been like this. He never set out for his office without holding her hands in his for some time, smiling into her eyes. But, all of a sudden, a drastic change had come over him. She did not understand it, nor did she try to find out why. Sometimes she thought that she should go to his office and enquire. However, she had not done so because he would not like that. And she would certainly not do anything that would make him angry, or annoyed, in the least.

The telephone suddenly screamed and the cup from which her husband usually drank tea fell from Sabera's hand. Unhappily, she waited for the ringing to stop. Yes, at last it did. Nothing to be worried about. Just as she bent over the dining table to wipe drops of water on it, the phone began ringing again. She again wanted to ignore it, but decided to finally pick it up.

"Hello!"

"Hello! Is this Mr. Kabir's house? Who are you speaking, please?"

Sabera got annoyed. It was 11:30 or so in the morning and someone was calling at a time for a person who would obviously be at his office. With some effort she controlled her annoyance.

"Yes. But he is not at home now. You may call him at his office."

"Sorry. Are you his wife?"

"Yes."

"I'm calling to inform you that he's been admitted to a clinic. Please, take down the address...Try to come as soon as possible. Don't worry, please. He is recovering."

"What are you saying? What has happened to him?" Sabera stuttered out the words, leaning her body against the wall in order to steady herself.

The unknown kind person, who had tried to break the news gently, now said, "Please try to take it easy. He was seen lying unconscious on a park bench. There was a lunch bag found beside him."

"Yes, now I understand. Could you please once again give me the clinic's address?"

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Kali O Kolom Boishakh 1416 -- April 2009

KHOKON IMAM

Opening this issue of *Kali O Kolom* I was immediately attracted to the article on Humayun Kabir, the distinguished poet, novelist and outstanding essayist who was a member of India's Rajya Sabha, and twice its education minister - once when Jawaharlal Nehru himself called upon him to fill the considerable shoes of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. Nearly all educated Bengalis of a certain generation are aware of the general outlines of Humayun Kabir's life and career: his distinguished family lineage (a family name and tradition that lies in tatters and ruins now), his brilliance as a student, and of his later illustrious political and literary career. He was also the editor of journals at Presidency College, Calcutta, and later at Oxford. He retained a lifelong interest in philosophy, writing on Kant, and was later instrumental in forming the United Front in West Bengal. I personally remember reading a long time back one (alas, only one!) of his many books titled *The Revolt and the New Leaf in Bengali Poetry: 1930-1950*, which later was incorporated I believe into his *Studies in Bengali Poetry*. To me it is still a classic in its acknowledgement of Rabindranath as the pivot around which Bengali poetry whirled, even as it balanced that appreciation with fine critical judgements of the later poets, from Buddhadev Bose and Sudhindranath Dutta down to Bijoylal Chattopadhyay and even Shamsur Rahman. This above lengthy introduction by me is merely to demonstrate the eagerness with which I went straight to Abul Ahsan Chowdhury's piece on him, but perhaps because I already knew quite a bit about Humayun Kabir, the article, except for its general overview of the latter's political activities and writings on Indian and Bengali Muslims, was disappointingly descriptive. It is more suitable as an introduction for readers who know next to nothing about this extraordinary son of Bengal. It perhaps would have been far more interesting, and proper with a high-toned literary journal's standards, if the writer had analysed Humayun Kabir's argument that Bengal's later poets revolted not so much against Tagore (in fact they revered him) but against his brand of Romanticism, a romanticism that some of the younger, later poets charged slid dangerously close to what Goethe meant when he said that romanticism is sickness, classicism is health. The article could have explored to the extent that this charge was correct and if the poets right in saying so. I personally think that Rabindranath's romanticism sprang from such classic Indian sources that the argument is a futile one, that his poetry and songs will remain a source of eternal health for Bengalis, but it has to be acknowledged also that this criticism gave space and energy for later poets to fashion their own speech and diction (it was Rabindranath's diction that exercised quite a few of them). It is an argument and contention that could have been fruitfully and interestingly illuminated in the pages of *Kali O Kolom* in the context of the article on Humayun Kabir. But I have learnt, with advancing age, that a lot of times things are not how you want them to be, and one must be grateful for small mercies, though Dylan Thomas advised us to the contrary. Here I feel I must apologize to readers and to the editor of *Kali O Kolom* if this particular review has been imbalanced by so much commentary on one topic/article/personality, but the editor of this literature page assured me of complete freedom in my reviews and I'm afraid that once in a while one must test such promises. Freedom is meaningless without the occasional excess - as critics of Taslima Nasreen should acknowledge.



The article on Akhtaruzzaman Ilyas, in contrast, by Shohana Mahub is absorbing for its focus on the language of his short stories. Here it has to be pointed out that this is so despite Ms Mahub's own language at times drifting into being flowery and ornate - critical analysis ought to avoid such obvious pitfalls. There is a readable essay by Chanchal Kumar Bose on the '*britya bhanga naris*' in Manik Bandhopadhyay's famous novels but the style may be difficult to follow for the more general readers of *Kali O Kolom*. Which brings me to the subject of a disputatious letter about a previous article in the *Chaitra* 1415 issue on Rabindra Dasgupta from Shafi U Ahmed of London. Mr Ahmed (if I understood his letter correctly) disputes the notion, advanced by the writer of the piece Gulam Murshid, that Rabindra Dasgupta was a pundit in a most unusual way, opining that punditry must be measured by the average number of books published in the pundit's lifetime, and that by this measure Rabindra Dasgupta's status as a pundit is disputable since currently a book is published every thirty seconds. The Age of the Specialist, Mr Ahmed says, has superseded The Age of The Pundit. It is an interesting formulation of the pundit and punditry, who I guess is supposed to read every book and know everything about everything.

There is a lovely in memoriam on Ramkumar Chattopadhyay by Professor Karunamoy Goswami, and I for one, a fan of both men - one the outstanding tappa specialist and the other an academic whose writings on Indian music is proof that real scholars are able to carry their learning lightly - wished that he had written a more extensive piece. Among the other items on the magazine menu, Mihir Sengupta's *Gha* (Sore) is a work that is notable for its narrative voice, while *Characharer Katha* of Satyaki Halder, a story of a ghat and boats, is mesmerizing for the way it flows - it is increasingly rare for writers to use such rural themes in an existentialist manner. In some of *Kali O Kolom*'s short fiction over the years, one can discern writers who are absorbing specific types of Western influences and adapting them creatively. Kanon Purokayastha's travel piece is on Charles Darwin's house, while the art reviews in this issue match their usual standard. Zahid Mustafa, himself an artist whose own show has also been reviewed in this issue, has contributed a piece on the performance art show of Wakilur Rahman and Dhali Al Mamun held recently at the Jatiyo Jadughar. The book reviews are of Hasan Azizul Haq's *Firay Ashi Firay Jai*, *Agunmukhar Meye* by Nurjahan Bose (the autobiography of a most extraordinarily fiery woman), Hamid Kaiser's *Mon Bari Nai*, poet Altaf Hossain's *Ki Phul Jhorilo Bipul Ondhokaray*, *Nirbachito Kobita*, Shahid Iqbal's *Bangladesh Kobita'r Shonket O Dhara*, and Piyash Majid's *Naach Protima'r Laash*.

The bright and attractive cover art, an oil painting, *Surja O Chandra* is by Syed Jahangir, who is a 1955 graduate from Dhaka's Charukala Institute, which back in the old days was of course simply the Art College - nothing is simple anymore, everything must glitter! Who is to tell who *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*...Syed Jahangir was an artist who was influenced in a major way by American art trends after he graduated, and perhaps traces of it still can be found in a certain fondness for American-styled Expressionism in his oils, as opposed to his highly evolved pen-and-ink sketches of rural Bengal and its rivers and boats. He was born in 1935 in Khulna, has held solo exhibitions in many countries, and in his retirement devotes himself solely to his art.

Khokon Imam works for an NGO in Dhaka. As ever, he remains indebted to the literary editor of *The Daily Star* for the English translations of his reviews.

Two Poems by Kaiser Haq

Liking It

It's the easiest thing to say
In the grey light of thinning hair:
I liked the world the way it was--
If only it had held steady
Time would be unchanging bliss!

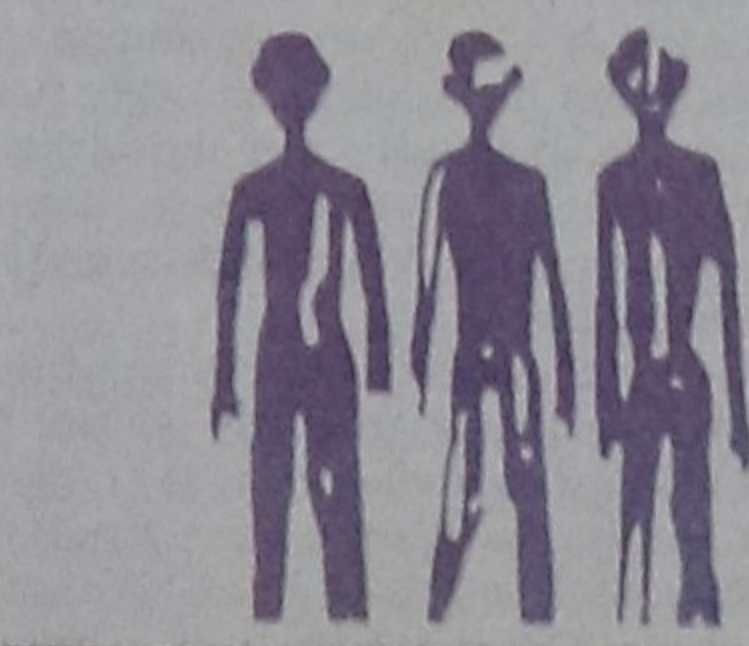
What is it you so fondly remember
Amidst the glitches in recollection?
An album of snapshots,
Some video clips at best.
The mood that binds them together
Like an invisible rubber band
Comes out of a pocket you're wearing out now.

Maybe you can see
Clearer than your fast-fading fate line
An arched gear confettied with creepers
Golden green in early morning light,
Maybe your olfactories thrill
At the musky odor of blossoms
On a long-dead mango tree.

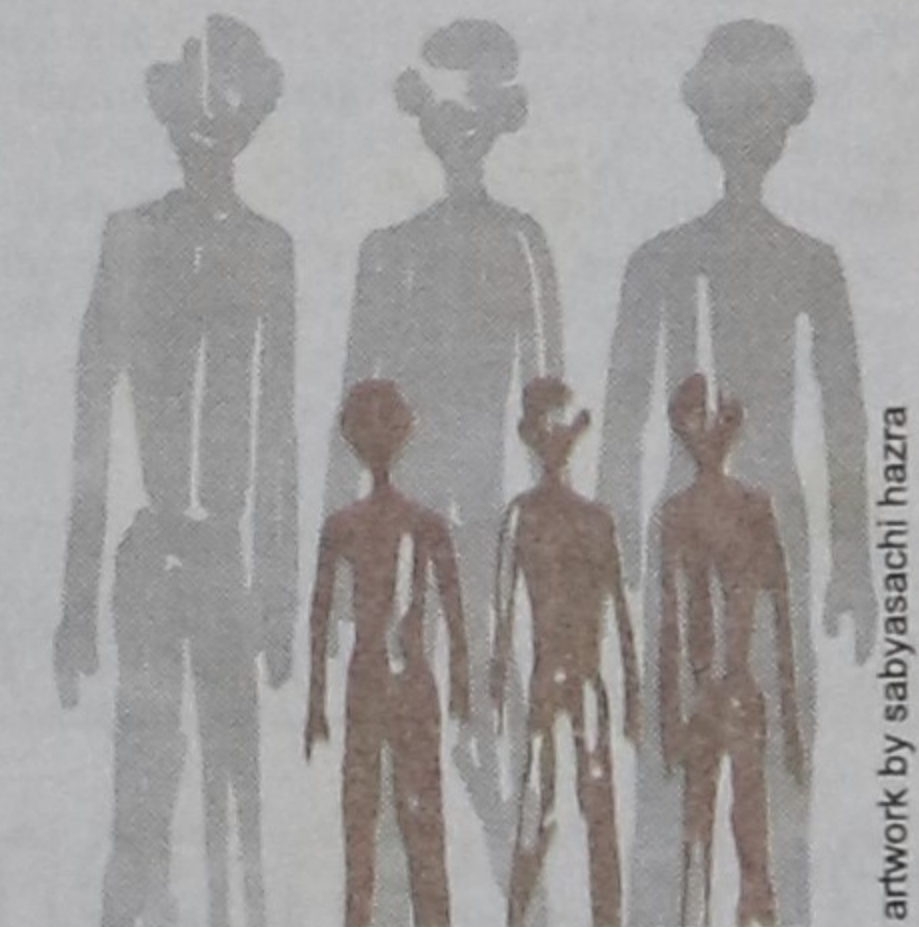
Or a remembered tale may set you
Dream-walking down village tracks
After a hurricane lantern swinging
Beneath a bullock cart's creaking chassis
Like a luminous pineapple...or scrotum.

But don't forget:
Calm cannot be retroactive.
The willed insouciance of youth
Crumpled before manic urgencies.
Why look back on such routine tussles?
Besides,
From the bottom of the well
One can only look up.

Not that a benign gaze answers:
The twinkling could be tinsel
And lights no superior tomorrow.
Better just carve a squiggle
On softening grey timber
At amber-grey dusk
And hum under your breath:
I like it the way it is.



Kaiser Haq is professor of English at Dhaka University. His *Published in the Streets of Dhaka, Collected Poems 1966-2006* is available in city bookstores.



artwork by sabyasachi hazra

Poor Man Eating

Were I a painter
I am sure
My signature theme would be
The title of this poem.

The sun races to the zenith,
Imperious as an oriental autocrat.
The poor man crouches
In imitation Tommy Hilfinger rags
In the dwindling shade
Of a denuded tree.

His hands cradle
A bowl of fired earth--
It could be an Ouija board
To conjure up goodies,
Courtesy of the weak of conscience.

And when they come,
How he falls to it!
Eyes focused in mystic concentration,
Left arm protectively around
The pile of comestibles,
As right hand shovels them
Into an eager mouth.

I would paint the scene
Over and over
In luscious oil:
The painted proliferation
Might work magic,
Converting seeming impossibility
Into palpable reality:

All the world's poor
Men and women
Gathered as if on the mythic day
Of final reckoning,
On this lowly earth,
Devouring earthly fare:
O the gods would come down
To bless and share!