

SHORT STORY

ZAHIR RAHAN
(translated by Rehana Akter)

Well-Known

Trolley's father's library is stacked from wall to ceiling with books. Aslam is amazed at seeing the collection. Trolley has never mentioned anything to him about this library.

Smiling a bit, Trolley's father says, "I spend at least eight hours in this library every day. It has now become my obsession. In fact, I think I've spent my whole life reading books."

Trolley's father is a calm, gentle man with a pair of sharp eyes beneath eyebrows beginning to form a single line. Curved lines of old age grace his forehead. Aslam does not know why a deep respect for this gentleman has grown in his mind from their very first meeting.

The gentleman takes down a volume of a year's issues of the monthly 'Mahe Nou', bound in morocco leather, from the mahogany shelf. Turning over its pages, he remarks, "Aslam, I'm afraid I don't know whether you're aware of the fact that education is held in little esteem in this country."

"Is there any education in this country that ought to be valued at all?" Trolley replies, quickly taking up her father's words.

Trolley is not a new acquaintance of Aslam. He first met her on the grounds of the university a year back. During that first meeting, the conversation had somehow veered towards the mention of a minister. She had then said, "I'm his niece."

"A minister's niece! I mean, your uncle is a minister?" Aslam had been very much taken aback.

Daubing her thin lips with lipstick, Trolley had responded, "Yes. An uncle of mine is a minister and another one is an ambassador."

Aslam had thought that somebody whose uncle was a minister would also be leading the high life. He had asked, "Is your father also...?"

"No, no," replied Trolley, "my father is not chasing after some ministry. He has an import-export business."

Aslam came to know all this, and while not exactly sure about the reason to himself, he knew that he liked Trolley very much.



artwork by amina

A gentle breeze is blowing. Strolling on the green grass of the garden, Trolley's father says, "You know, Aslam, I've earned all this, everything I have with my own effort."

Aslam cannot quite understand what he's talking about. He looks at Trolley and her father with bewilderment.

Trolley chuckles. Her father smiles, too.

It is Sunday. Reclining in an easy chair, Trolley is leafing through the pages of what looks like a glossy American magazine. No sooner does Aslam stand in front of her that she demands an explanation, "What took you so long?"

"How could I come? Your uncle prevented me from doing so."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the curfew and Section 144, which has been declared and enforced these last few days."

"Oh!" Trolley raises her eyebrows.

Suddenly Aslam says, "Well, Trolley, I have to ask you this: Was it declared just so they could shoot our innocent boys?"

"Hmmm... what did you say?" She looks up, tossing aside the magazine. Sorry, what did you say just now?"

"I was talking about that shooting incident. Haven't you heard about it?"

"Yes, I have," says Trolley, nodding her head. "But what if I say that firing at those people serves them right?"

"Yes, what'll you say then?" Trolley's father's grave voice asks from the doorway, where he is standing. "In fact, the younger generation of this country has gone to the dogs; otherwise they wouldn't make such a row for a non-Islamic language." There is a pause. Then, since he's not quite finished with the topic, he goes on to add, "An Islamic language should be the state language of a Muslim country. There's no two ways about it."

"Bengali language has no real tradition of its own," Trolley says, keeping time with her father's words. "In fact, there's nothing there at all. Not even a penny's worth."

Aslam is about to reply heatedly when Trolley stops him, "Well, let's leave it at that for now. I think the devil might be in possession of you. You need to be exorcised. Come on, let's go upstairs." She pulls him by the hand to an upstairs room and sits him down on a chair. Switching on the electric fan, she stands by his side. Then, passing her fingers lightly over his hair, she says, "I never thought that

you'd be like this." She smiles wanly.

Aslam has a chat with an old retainer of Trolley's father. The man somehow reminds him of George Bernard Shaw. Aslam feels weird at making this connection, at finding a physical similarity between the long-dead Bernard Shaw and this old man.

Purely out of curiosity, Aslam asks him, "How long have you been here?"

"I've been here for a long time, shaheb. Since that time of war," replies the man with a smiling face.

"What do you mean? More than ten years?"

"Yes, shaheb. I've been here for ten years or so." He then says, "These people, they were not that well off then, at that time. They only had a ration shop on Circular Road in Kolkata." He clears his throat. Then adds, "They made their pile of money only after the partition of India..."

He does not his sentence. On hearing Trolley calling for him, he hastens towards the inside of the house.

Aslam does not see Trolley again for a long time. Then they run into each other again on the university grounds.

"Hi Trolley, how are you?" Aslam asks.

"Not too bad. I'm going to London next month."

"Why, all on a sudden?"

"Well, you know my mejo apa lives there. I'll be staying at her house for a few days. Then I'll go visit boro apa in California."

"When will you be back?"

"I'm not sure," Trolley says, her eyebrows dancing. "Boro Apa hasn't been back ever since she immigrated there. Mejo Apa too is on the verge of doing the same. Maybe, I'll also do..."

She stops abruptly without finishing her thought, and Aslam cannot quite figure out why. There is a long pause, and then she says, "Come over to my house one of these days. There is something important I've got to talk to you about."

Another day, when Aslam goes outside for something or the other he comes across Trolley while walking along the road. She is driving a big car. As the car comes near him, she speaks, "I think you must have heard the

news." "What news?" he asks, surprised. "Why, haven't you read the newspaper today?" Trolley asks, a little surprised.

"No, not yet." "Then get into the car. I'll give you a surprise," she laughs loudly.

He does. They drive to her house. Where Aslam is surprised on seeing the rows of cars in front of her house. He asks, "What's the matter, Trolley?"

"You haven't understood anything, have you? Father is going to be the senior officer of central education ministry very soon", she says smilingly.

"Oh, is that so?"

"Yes, it is. Will you still like him?"

"Of course, we'll like him. He's such an intellectual..." But Aslam does not know why these words choke in his throat.

Trolley, with a smirk, says, "Father may need a private secretary. You should write an application to him. I'll put in a recommendation for you before going abroad."

As soon as Aslam gets out of the car, he notices Trolley's father. But the man is so busy greeting his friends and well-wishers that he does not notice Aslam.

Trolley says, "You'd better sit in the library. I've work to do. I'll be there after finishing that, okay?" She turns to go upstairs.

In the library, Aslam takes a book from the shelf and starts reading it. It is the English translation of Tagore's *Geetanjali*.

"Who's there? Oh, Aslam?" Trolley's father's startled voice makes Aslam look up from the book. Her father, in a buoyant voice, asks, "When did you come?"

"Fifteen minutes back, I think," replies Aslam, his voice a little hoarse.

"What're you reading?" her father comes closer. Then, leaning on the book, he says, "Oh, *Geetanjali*? A very nice book, indeed."

Trolley's father, the future top bureaucrat and boss of the country's education ministry, becomes eloquent in his admiration of the volume. "Ah, *Geetanjali*! A wonderful book! One of Milton's greatest novels."

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My Little Plot of Land (Dui Bigha Jomi)

RABINDRANATH TAGORE
(translated by Fakrul Alam)

Of my land only a little remained, the rest having been mortgaged away. The zamindar said one day, "Know what Upen? This too should come my way." I said, "O Lord, countless are the plots of land you already own, but consider--I only have land enough to bury me when I'm gone!" The zamindar brushed me aside saying, "Upen, I'm building a garden. Your half-acre will allow me to design for it a lovely fountain--You'll have to sell all you've got to me!" I replied, tears in my eyes. And hands on my heart, "Spare this poor man's land, or else he dies! For seven generations we've tilled this plot and it's everything to me, And selling it will be like selling my mother because of poverty!" The zamindar reddened, kept mum for a bit, and then gave a peculiar smile. In a forbidding manner, he muttered under his breath, "we'll see in a while!"

In six weeks I was forced out of my ancestral land and into the road By a court decree. Falsely, it said I had defaulted on a loan and owed The zamindar the whole lot! Alas, in this world those who have most want all And even a king won't stop until he has grabbed everything--big or small! I consoled myself: God has decided not to confine me to my plot of land; Perhaps I am fated to roam far and wide and end up in some distant strand. And so I became a mendicant's assistant and followed him everywhere Visiting shrines that were memorable and seeing sights that were fair. But no matter whether I climbed high peaks or reached a remote river bend The thing I could never forget night or day was my little plot of land! And so I traversed country fairs, fields, and roads for fifteen years or so Until homesickness made me feel to my country once more I must go.

I thought as I went: lovely motherland Bengal--I bow to you lovingly! Your exquisite riverbanks and gentle winds will surely revive me. I'll thrill at skies kissing dust swirling up from wide open fields; I'll seek in the sylvan shade of a tiny village an abode of perfect bliss. I'll revel in its mango trees and cowboys playing on lush green meadows Bengal's calm and shaded ponds will be cool and comforting to see And surely I'll delight at sweet village belles carrying water home daily. Such thoughts of my motherland made me sad and tears welled up in me. Two days later--at noon--I entered my village--oh so eagerly! Past the potter's shop and left of the field where festivals are held I sped Leaving the fairground--site of all delight--and the temple ground I hurried to my homestead--thirsty, eager and completely exhausted!

Shame, shame, oh shame on you, my shameless little plot of land! How is it that you yielded so easily to the seducer's blandishment? Do you remember how you once nurtured me with what little you had? How you provided me with fruits, flowers and produce from your bed? Who are you trying to seduce now in fancy and dazzling dresses? Why deck yourself in alluring colors and flower-studded tresses? It was for you I came back worn out by years of wandering But you, wanton, are only bent on being coy and enchanting! Riches enticed you and the landlord's wealth made all the difference And nothing remains of what you once were--a maiden in essence! So bountiful and giving once, so caring, sweet and pleasant, Seduce him all you can--once a goddess, now you're a mere servant!

With a grieving heart I looked around and what then did I see? Still erect where it always stood was my favorite mango tree! I sat down and wept till tears doused the pain that was in me One by one, images of childhood resurfaced in my memory. I recollected how after summer storms I wouldn't sleep at all, Knowing I had to gather by dawn the mangoes sure to fall I thought of still fun-filled afternoons when we played hooky And I felt: what a pity that such days I will never again see! Suddenly a gusting wind shook the branches of the mango tree And two ripe mangoes fell on the spot where I happened to be. Surely, I thought, my mother has finally seen her long lost son, And so I gathered the mangoes she gave me on this occasion!

Suddenly, as if an angel of death, an Oriya gardener was in the scene Hair in knot, this man swore and threatened in a way that was obscene. I told him, "I gave up all years ago without protesting the court decree Why fuss if I pick up two mangoes from what was my property?" Unimpressed, the gardener seized me, directing his stick at my head. Dragging me to his landlord, he complained to him about what I said. The zamindar, egged on by his cronies, thundered, "You're as good as dead. But his abuse was nothing compared to what his cronies had to say. All I could say in defense was, 'my lord, those mangoes fell my way.' The zamindar said, 'This scoundrel acts innocent but is a big thief!' I was in tears but smiled ruefully at being made the source of all mischief. I thought: he acts the saint now but I have to play the role of the thief!

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On Second Thoughts: Penguin India Sampler

Khademul Islam

Penguin India does publish somewhat indiscriminately - there are some books it has brought out that makes one wonder a bit about editorial and publishing criteria. But one supposes that is the price for becoming a publishing behemoth. As genres and authors, manuscripts, and writing multiplies, as market calculations come to the fore, as accountants negotiate with editors, a shift begins to take place - and every fool knows that in this day and age it is the self-help bestseller (or titles like Ten Best Erotic Massage Techniques, or Fusion Cooking in the Wild!) that makes possible a line of poetry volumes.

Even then, even then, I groaned out loud when I saw this book: Penguin India's *The Best Books Ever Written: Free Sample Chapters*. Was Penguin bent on joining the Guinness Book of Records for the dumbest publication in South Asia? And that title, *The Best Books Ever Written*, who was kidding who?

But, ah, there is a thing called Second Thoughts. As I thumbed through it, I began to revise my initial impression. There is logic to this thing. If you are a publisher of books, and you face a waning readership and a younger generation, seduced by television, the internet and video games and indifferent to the printed page, how do you fight back? And nowadays - never mind the younger generation - even the older traditional reading generation is fast disappearing in the age of Blackberries and downloaded movies. The time and effort necessary for a book to cast its slow-weaving spell over a reader is disappearing into some black hole. Then again, there are so many choices in the book market for the would-be customer, who can at times simply be bewildered by the sheer number of hardbacks and paperbacks and things in-between in a bookstore (all of them suitably backlit with neon quotes from the same critic mill!), that the rational choice can seem to be to wander the shelves and actually not buy anything...

Penguin India's answer to the dilemma is a sampler, a collection of excerpts from classics

in the various Indian languages, ranging from ancient texts to modern times. Read a chapter from one of them, see if it whets your appetite for the real deal, and then buy, or give it a pass. Of course, Penguin should have named this book *The Best Books Ever Written by South Asians*, which would have been more accurate. It would also have been more truthful to add that the selections are only from Penguin's own classics.

Still, the formula works. It contains excerpts from 16 classic texts from Indian literature in English translation, beginning with *The Ramayana* (the superb effort by Dr Arshia Sattar, who studied under A K Ramanujan at Chicago University) to the Pali *Jatakas*, the Tamil *Cilapatikaram: The Tale of an Anklet*, Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, Ramanujan's own translations from Kannada of bhakti poems, Kalidas, Kabir, down to Rabindranath, Sharatchandra (a perennial favourite in translations in the other 'regional' languages of India) Premchand, and some Hindi, Malayalam and Urdu texts. The translations are first-rate, and Penguin has gone to some trouble to lay out the samples in modernized contexts. The extract from Kautilya's *Arthashastra*'s, for example, is titled 'Consumer Protection' and the brief introduction to it spells out why. While this ancient text is widely known to be a treatise on statecraft, few will be familiar with the fact that it deals in equally measured tones with *artha* (wealth), and the responsibility and role of the state in regulating markets, and thereby ensuring consumer protection. With Brahmanical rigour it lists through 'Methods of Stealing', and in the subheading, 'Merchants' (what we call 'the business community' today), and comments pithily on how consumers were shortchanged almost 2000 years back, and how, in astonishingly the same way, things seem unchanged today: "Fraud in weights and measures," "Fraud in articles sold by counting," "False description in selling or pledging for credit," "Charging at a higher price," "Higher profit margins," "Adulteration," "Cartelisation," "Brokers and middlemen," "Employees of merchants," and "Visiting merchants." This last category is explicated as "host merchants shall report if a visitor sells goods at an unauthorized time or place or sells articles of which they are not full owners."

One has to doubt whether the learned economists of the Center for Policy Dialogue can, after a gap of nearly two thousand years, do any better on why Bangladesh's consumers are perpetually in the grip of middlemen, business cartels, state-business collusion and inefficiency, and artificial price hikes.



My mind is made up. My bookshelves need Arshia Sattar's *Ramayana*, *The Arthashastra* (translated by L N Rangarajan), Kalidasa's *Loom of Time* (the one translated by Chandra Rajan) - I do have A K Ramanujan's *Speaking of Siva* - and the noted Indo-Anglian poet Vinay Dharwadkar's translation of Kabir's *The Weaver's Songs* (one of which is reproduced below).

Sapling and Seed

When learned priests forget their stuff, they read the good old Vedas-- without their books, they don't have a clue to the secret of things.

When they see someone's suffering they pounce on it with words like karma, they apply their theories of the four *ashramas*.

They've taught the four ages the *gayatri* mantra-- go ask them whom it has set free.

Whenever they touch someone they bathe to purify themselves-- tell them who's really the inferior one.

They take great pride in their many good qualities, but so much vanity doesn't make them any good.

Only the One who's the Destroyer of Pride can deal with their arrogance.

Give up the thought of being proud of your birth, look for the text of nirvana.

You'll find the eternal bodiless resting place only when the sapling has spoiled the seed.

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.

Three poems by Mahamuda Rahman Shuchi

Bed Cover

I hate stains on my bedcover most. Not the black marks on time, Not the loose strings of a careless history, Not a messy heap of stupid bloody images, Who cares about them?

There may be thousands Or hundred thousands stains on my bed. But on my bedcover? I don't let any survive.



Canon

Is it universally fixed that Ram will be always Ram And Raban will always be Raban? No way!

Liabile Options

This is an afternoon To either compose a poem Or peel a half-boiled potato. One would certainly like the smell of bot The poem and the potato.

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