

SHORT STORY

Love

SHAHEEDUL JAHIR
(translated by Mohammad Simon Rahman)

The moment Hafizuddi crossed the entrance to the Babupura slum, Maola saw him. "Hey, Hafizuddi, where did you get that from, eh?" Maola shouted. Maola was Hafizuddi's neighbor. Somewhat on the skinny side, with a long face, he would squat under the huge *debdaru* tree the whole day with his betel-leaf and cigarettes for sale. Hafizuddi did not bother looking at Maola, nor about answering his query.

He found Abeda near the communal tap in the slum. She had just returned from her work as a housemaid. A familiar scene was playing in front of him. Someone was washing her face, body bent towards the tap. Karam Ali's little daughter was washing something by the side. Abeda was sitting beside her side rubbing her back. Hafizuddi stood at a little distance from the tap and called out, "Abeda, come here."

With a start Abeda looked up to see Hafizuddi go inside the shack. She caught just a glimpse of him, but long enough to see the thing in his hand. She felt amazed. Has he lost his mind, she wondered, otherwise why would he come home with a flower in his hand? And why would he call for her in such a manner? Would he put it in her bun like a hero from a film? She hastily made a bun of her wet hair. She felt bad about her hair - it felt like some coarse and dry fiber. How could one tuck a flower in such kind of hair?

"Isn't there a bottle in the house?" Hafizuddi asked Abeda as soon as she entered the room.

"Hmmm... but why do you need that?" Abeda brought out a bottle from a dark corner of the room. She slowly, unobtrusively untied her bun.

"I'll keep it in the bottle. Go fill it with some water."

Abeda went out and filled the bottle from the tap. Hafizuddi cut the long stem of the flower and then put into the bottle. The yellow of the massive dahlia looked out of place in



artwork by amina

the darkness of the room.

"Isn't that beautiful?" Hafizuddi asked, looking at the flower.

Abeda looked at Hafizuddi, at his delight. She said, "Yes, it is. Where did you get it from?"

"On the college grounds. Everybody was collecting flowers for Martyr's Day tomorrow, so I got one for myself too."

"That's nice," Abeda said, surprising herself with the softness of her own voice.

"Are you going out again?" she asked.

"Ummm..." Hafizuddi said as he went towards the bucket kept near the door.

"Since you've come around now, eat something before you leave," Abeda said.

"Eat what?" Hafizuddi stopped.

"There's some rice."

"Rice? Where did you get it? Have you eaten yourself?"

"I don't have to. I've eaten at Bibi Saheb's place," Abeda lied; it was not the first time that she had lied to her husband. Hafizuddi then nodded his head, asking, "I don't see Tahura around, where's she?"

"I don't know. Maybe she's outside

somewhere playing."

"You should keep an eye on her. She might get lost."

"Where would she go?" said Abeda. "I'm leaving now. Shut the door when you leave."

There was too little rice to eat, and Hafizuddi ate it very quickly. Abeda came back to the hut with a broken silver-colored tin pot in her hand and said, "Couldn't even have a wash, there's no water anymore!"

She dropped her half-wet sari and put on a dry one. She used the wet one for rubbing her wet hair, then made a cord of the sari and whipped her hair with it. Drops of water sprayed the room, slicing through the air. Hafizuddi was annoyed.

"What're you doing, slapping the hair on my face?"

Abeda did not answer. She spread her hair over her shoulders. Eyeing the flower kept in a corner of the room she asked, "What are you going to do with that?"

"With what...?" Hafizuddi asked as he washed his hand, and then wiped his face with his wet hand.

"With this... the flower."

"What would I do with that?"

"That's what I'm asking too," Abeda sat near the bottle and gently caressed the soft petals of the flower with her hand.

"Nothing. Just let it be there," Hafizuddi wiped his face with his lungi and got up.

"It will wither," Abeda said.

Hafizuddi did not reply as he picked up the huge bucket from the door. "Keep a watch on it, otherwise someone might steal it!" he warned before going out of the door.

"As if people have nothing better to do than steal your flower," Abeda replied, smiling as she said it.

Once Hafizuddi left, she picked up the flower from the bottle and caressed it for a long time. She tied her hair again into a bun and tried to stick it in there, but the heavy flower fell every time she tried to. Eventually she held it in her hand alongside her bun and

looked at herself in the little mirror. But it did not satisfy her; she felt like going out into the broad daylight. But she knew she could not, there were too many people outside. Then Tahura suddenly entered the room, coated in dust.

"What's that, Ma, who brought that?"

"Your father. Don't even touch it, or he'll kill you!"

Daylight had turned to dusk, and evening was falling by the time Abeda returned home after her afternoon work at the Sahib's place. While coming back, she saw Hafizuddi having a chat with Maola sitting under the *debdaru* tree. Tahura was looking at the cars streaming by on the road from her father's lap. She sprinted to her mother when she saw her mother returning from work.

Abeda went in and began preparing for the evening meal. She was feeling quite hungry. The meal was going to consist of lentils and rutis. Outside it was dark as she put the lentils on the fire and started to make the chapattis.

When she was done, she lit a small kerosene-wick light and sent out Tahura to call Hafizuddi to eat. After Hafizuddi entered the shack, she served him dal on a tin plate. There was a separate plate for Tahura. They started eating. Abeda joined them in eating, tearing the bread into small pieces and dipping them in the dal.

Hafizuddi sat on a piece of wood and ate silently with his head bowed down. Tahura was spilling a lot of her food, and Abeda scolded her, "Such a big girl, you haven't yet learned how to eat properly!"

Hafizuddi looked at his daughter. Then he asked "Why did you put your hands on the flower?"

It took Abeda a little time to realize who he was addressing. "Who, me?" she asked back.

"Then who else? Yes!"

"Why would I touch the flower?"

Abeda began to get upset. "And what is the harm in that anyway?"

"Don't you lie to me. Didn't you put the flower in your hair?"

Now Abeda realized what he was talking about. "Who told you that, tell me," she answered.

"Nobody said anything. I found your hair on the flower myself!"

Abeda understood that it was no use of taking it any further. But she felt uneasy about admitting to anything. So she replied, smiling, "Perhaps the hair fell over it when I was drying my hair in the afternoon."

Hafizuddi failed to see the smiling expression on her face as he shouted, "You old bitch, don't you lie to me! You're making me very angry!"

Abeda controlled her own rage somehow. She felt like giving Tahura a good beating. Inwardly she raged: The little bitch! Couldn't even keep one little secret locked away inside her!

"So now you can have the flower, happy?" Hafizuddi's words broke the silence inside the room.

His offer was so sudden that Abeda did not even get the chance to be surprised by the remark. She finally asked, "What will I do with the flower?"

"Do whatever you feel like."

There was no tenderness in Hafizuddi's voice. Neither did Abeda have the time to think about his words. Yet an unknown happiness stirred deep inside her. It felt to her like the soothing drops of rain on dry earth.

After finishing his meal, Hafizuddi went out for an after-meal walk. Tahura feared her mother was going to beat her up. She did not know what spell her father had cast on her mother before he went out. Abeda put away the pots and pans in silence.

"Make your bed and go to sleep," she told Tahura. Tahura had not quite learnt how to make her bed properly. So Abeda went with her and laid her on the bed. Tahura pulled the quilt up to her throat and pleaded, "Ma, I want the flower."

Abeda went back to finish up her work. She noticed Tahura looking at her, the dim flickering light of the small flame reflecting in her eyes. Finishing her work Abeda went to Tahura, leaned down and blew the lamp out. Then she bent down towards Tahura and her lips kissed her daughter's forehead.

Mohammad Simon Rahman is a writer and translator with the literary group SLASH.

Nazrul Islam: Portrait of the Poet as a Young Man*

PRATIBHA BASU
(translated by Khademul Islam)

Of the three youths who at that time were the talk of the whole of Bengal, one was Subhas Chandra Bose, one was Nazrul Islam and the third was Dilipkumar Roy. Their names were on everybody's lips, uttered in every house...I had learnt a lot of songs from Dilip da - his own songs, Dwijendralal's songs, songs by Atulprasad, all their songs of course, but most of all Nazrul Islam's songs. Dilip da taught me many ways to control and modulate my voice. Sometimes slow, sometimes fast, sometimes something in between...From this polished, educated, complete young man I not only learnt how to sing, but through contact with him I also learnt the meaning of the word 'culture'...

Bonogram(1) then was a lower middle-class neighbourhood. There was hardly anybody with whom I could talk to - especially a girl of my age. I used to feel lonely due to lack of friends. Dilip da had come into my life like a huge wave - when he had been present(2) there was always a rush, songs at one place today and then tomorrow there would be songs at another place, going here today, there tomorrow, and the whole day would pass by in a delightful daze. My sadness at his departure now would not leave me.

I have never liked evenings. As the day comes to a close and evening falls a kind of desolation fills my soul. On just such an evening I was standing on the upstairs free-hanging verandah. A phaeton (a one-horse carriage) came to a stop at our door. How lovely, I thought, at last somebody has come to visit. Some of the afternoon's weight seemed to lift from my heart. I hastily turned around to run down the stairs and opened the door to see, in comparison to the average Bangali, a robust, good-looking figure standing there, with a huge smile on his face and arranging and re-arranging a red ochre *chador* as he barged into the house almost throwing me to one side. He looked at my face and still laughing said, "You must be Ranu(3), right? Tell me, aren't I right? Aren't you the one who's Montu's student?" 'Montu' meaning Dilip da, whose nickname it was.

Something in my heart thundered. I thought to myself: 'Can it be him?'

I had never seen Nazrul Islam before. I had heard a lot about him but nobody had ever described his face to me. Yet, astonishingly, I knew that this had to be Nazrul Islam. Awestruck, I could only manage to stammer out, "You are... you are..."

"I am Nazrul Islam." Then followed a full-throated laugh. Nazrul Islam then was thirty-two or thirty-three years old, maybe slightly older. Youthfulness flowed in his eyes and face, laughter like a river's current would sweep through his whole body, race onward. Only those who have seen him at that age will understand the riotous overflowing joy with which the two riverbanks of his character brimmed. Very large black doe eyes, unruly dense *babri* hair, a sharp nose, skin the colour of burnished copper, easy unpretentious ways, a huge laugh, a tremendous exuberance - all of these combined to make him a character indeed! And that old dusty red ochre *chador* whose ends trailed after him!

His coming to Dacca was characteristic of him. In Calcutta he had gone to see a football match at *Gor'er Maath* (Kolkata's famous maidan). While arguing heatedly about East Bengal versus Mohunbagan with a friend he suddenly found himself at Shealdah railway station. There he saw the Dacca-bound Mail standing on the tracks, waiting to leave. And immediately it occurred to him that while the train was there and waiting, why not board it and go on a visit to Dacca? Barely had the thought formed that action followed. He immediately bought a ticket and got on board. Some time back Dilip da had visited Calcutta and had regaled people with stories about Dhaka, and it had made Nazrul curious. So why let go of such a golden opportunity?

There was a good reason why on seeing Nazrul

Islam I knew it was him. Stories were floating around that Nazrul Islam had come to Dacca, but nobody could tell for certain. At that time the whole country was mad for Nazrul Islam's songs. Even those who could not hold a tune would go around with their heads nodding singing fulsomely '*Kay bideshi bon udashi*.' On top of that he had returned from a war. His rebel speeches echoed throughout the land, boys were being herded into jails with his '*Durgam giri kantar moru duster parabar hay*' on their lips, and in the meantime I too by singing his love songs was gaining more than my share of fame.(4)

Nazrul was a man who dispensed with conventional courtesies. There was a small cot in the drawing room and without further ado he strode straight there and seated himself on it. By that time my mother and father were standing in the doorway, and on seeing them he called out invitingly, "Come in, come in. I have heard all about you from Montu, and I feel like I know you all intimately. I came day before yesterday, do you know? I have a friend here at whose home I'm staying. Kazi Motahar Hossain, he knows all of you very well. He has come here often with Montu. From the moment I came here I've been telling him, let's go, let's go and listen to that girl singing, since Montu has been telling around that she sings my songs so very well that I'm becoming famous because of her" - and here he burst out laughing. His laughter filled the house. When the laughter stopped he went on, "You see, the thing that happens with these educated



fellows, now he has to go to his friend's college, then it's time for some student to come by, then again there's some book that has to be finished, he can't leave before it's done - so I've left my friend to his own devices and somehow found my way to your home."

My mother and father were star-struck at this man's appearance. They didn't know what to do. They bade him leave the living room and took him upstairs. In a short while a harmonium appeared. After that there were songs and songs and songs. All the songs that I had learned from Dilip da were sung for Nazrul. He swayed his head in time to the music and kept saying "Unforgettable, unforgettable."

Nazrul Islam's singing voice was somewhat broken. That brokenness was his singing's distinguishing characteristic. How sweet was that note, how enchanting! And part of the enchantment of listening to him was also seeing him sing. The music and the tunes seemed to flow through his whole body. His eyes would sparkle, his love for songs would almost physically manifest itself as a dusky glow. It was as if his songs transformed themselves into a real-life tide of happiness that flooded through the house. Both my father and mother were mad for songs, and just like Nazrul who would lose track of time if there were songs and singing going on, so too would they. That first day after introductions were over Nazrul made them forget what time of the day it was and became one of us, and how and when the clock's hands tremblingly crept from 6 o'clock in the evening to

10:00 at night nobody had the slightest idea.

Nazrul Islam in my memory is somebody with a harmonium in his hands, a potful of paan by the side, and amazing songs in that voice of his. His laughter and songs were as one, and it was unstoppable. That day, even after he left, for a long time the house was full of a sweet breeze blowing through it.

He came the next morning. We hadn't dared to hope for it. He was very restless as he walked in - he had written a new song last night and he just *had* to teach me how to sing it. "Come, come, be quick, bring the harmonium." We were then barely having our breakfast tea, and my face still bore the marks of sleep. He sat down. "Please, quick, a cup of tea. I fed before the day could begin. Those boys there, once they get hold of me then God only knows where I'd end up, they're always dragging me along somewhere. I wrote a song last night, I need to set the tune to it, otherwise there'll be mistakes."

The morning began to dazzle. Again there was the harmonium, the pot full of paan, the endless cups of tea. The song was '*Amar kone kul ai bhirlo aaj tori, ai kone sonar gail! Bhati'r taan ai abar keno ujaan jete chai*.' I saw that the song's wording was not complete, that its tune was off-key. He corrected it as he sang it, as he taught it to me.

Professor Kazi Motahar Hossain(5) then lived in Burdwan House. He was a very decent person. He had accompanied Dilip da on the latter's visits to our house. He loved to play chess. After Dilip da left he would come by himself, and had forged a special relationship with my father and mother. Nazrul had put up at his house. It was from there that very early in the morning he would walk over to our home. He would say, "My morning walk has taken on a life of its own. I walk along composing a song in my mind, and never know when that walk comes to an end." This man who had gone to war, had served time in jail, had been confined to a solitary cell, went on hunger strikes, wrapped an ochre red shawl about himself, wore on his head a Gandhi cap and *khadi* clothes - that very man's poems and songs were making a whole nation go out of its head. Who among us wouldn't be enchanted with him? He came for a few days (to Dacca) to satisfy his curiosity but stayed far longer. Our relationship with him deepened, the bonds grew close, he became a dear member of our household...

Suddenly Nazrul began to write and compose a lot of kirtans. Though there was a reason behind it. Our friends on seeing Nazrul had said, "O Ma, this man is dark Krishna himself indeed!" On hearing that my *pishima* would jokingly call him '*Kalo Krishna*.' He too would tease her by calling her snub-nosed. *Pishima* would reply, "Well, whatever you say, snub-nosed or not, at least my skin is fairer than yours." She would extend her arm and say, "Here take a look, compare the two..." So one day Nazrul said, "This can't go on, I have to prove the virtues of being dark-skinned." That very night he composed a song in the kirtan form:

*Kayno pran othay kadiya, kadiya, kadiya go
Joto bhuli bhuli kori toto aakraiya dhori
Toto mori shadhiya shadhiya go...*

Notes

1. The area of Dhaka where Pratibha Basu's family then resided before moving to Wari some years later.
2. Dilipkumar Roy had then left Dhaka for Pondicherry's ashram.
3. Ranu was Pratibha's nickname.
4. Pratibha Basu at an early had begun to record songs for the Gramophone Company of India.
5. Dr Kazi Motahar Hossain was a famous educationist and teacher.

*From Pratibha Basu's book *Jibonayr Jolchobi* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers; Falgun 1405; Fourth Printing). Khademul Islam is Literary Editor, The Daily Star.

The Palm Reader
Farhana Mazhar Ali

Over the steaming pilaf
Eyes like old raisins
He tells me
"I read palms"

I an American laugh
And try to explain to him
What we mean when we say
There's a bridge I can sell

Afternoons I write
Hot words stamp their feet
Sumptuous blue nail polish
He trails me with raccoon eyes

The heat jazes me
Stoking forgotten fires
I open the door
My inner thighs salty

What the hell I think
In New York I'd have bedded
Him between the cocktails
And tchotchke-shopping

Marriage is a frayed song
When lyrics fall
I stand on carpet
Lustrous as a old ghazal

He fumbles with words
The garden wanders
Into the room
With its pigeon coos

But no, not here
Amid listening corridors
Ardor dampens
In the sequined splendor

"I'm fine" I say, "thank you"
The day cools
Sunlight wanes, then sighs
An India trip wraps to a close.

Farhana Mazhar Ali is based in Chicago and is currently in Hyderabad.



On the Bus
Nausheen Eusuf

One looks at his watch,
shifting uneasily in his seat;
one reads, one mops his brow
and curses the summer heat.

In some corner of the city,
someone anxiously awaits
their arrival, or perhaps
wonders why they're late.

If so, their faces reveal nothing,
their gaze fixed, quietly intent
on the weekday traffic, each
in his own world, content

to be alone and undisturbed.
No one knows where they've been,
where they're going, what marvels
they may have known or seen.

Here, they are merely
strangers on a city bus,
each belonging elsewhere,
unknowable, anonymous.

Nausheen Eusuf teaches at BRAC University.

Errata

In the June 27th issue of The Daily Star literature page Khokon Imam's review of *Kali O Kolam* mistakenly referred to two writers in the journal as Milia Ibrahim and Anupam Saha. The correct names are Milia Ali and Anupam Sen. We deeply regret the inadvertent error.

-The Literary Editor