

SHORT-STORY

SHAKIL RABBI

That house next door...

Over the weekend the crows pecked through the wire screen of a kitchen window and as they flew in the flapping of their wings stirred up the stagnant time inside. Outside, it was a bright spring day. The sun was high in a clear blue sky, shining with proud lustre, and a cool breeze was blowing, soothing everything into a becalmed state.

The scurrying of the crows in the kitchen made a raucous sound that soon reached the house next door. The noises sailed in with the breeze into Khaled's room, where he sat in front of his desk, cramming for an exam he had the next day.

The noises distracted him immediately. He wondered what the noises could be - they should not - could not - be coming from that house next door. It had been abandoned and had been standing empty from a time long before Khaled's family moved into the neighborhood.

Local lore had it that the house had been the home of a Hindu family who immigrated to *bilet* during the time when the country first started experiencing heightened religious tensions. Khaled did not know much about those times, but he could guess how frightening it might have been to be a part of the minority back then. Even now he could see that the minorities were marginalized, when it was supposed to be a more enlightened and tolerant time.

The odd thing about that house was that even though it had been abandoned for so long - and no one had ever showed up laying claim on it - the squatters and the land grabbers never moved in. Maybe it was because it had been lived in by Hindus (and so was considered taboo) or that it would be just too much trouble to work out all the legal entanglements - no one knew exactly where the owner was or even who he was. Whatever the reasons, soon everybody just completely forgot about it. Passersby would never notice it and the people of the neighborhood simply looked past it. In a way the house had managed to become something magical, something that had become invisible, disappeared while being in plain view of everybody. Everybody except for Khaled, that is.

The main reason Khaled could not forget about the house was because it was always staring him in the face. The windows of his room faced the back boundary wall of that house. And immediately in front of this wall, in the top right corner of their yard, was a guava tree. It was tall and thick, and its branches reached the roof of that house next door.



artwork by amina

Sitting there, with his textbook open in front of him, Khaled decided the noises merited further investigations. His curiosity had been piqued and he had to find out what those noises were. At the very least it would give him a reprieve from his studies, which he knew he could not possibly get back to unless he solved the mystery of the noises.

He sneaked out into the back yard knowing that he would be scolded by his parents if they caught him going over there. In fact, he knew it would go past a severe scolding - that his father would give him a real beating. But he just could not help himself; however, if he was careful he knew they would never find out. No one ever thought about that house, and anything connected to it - a thought that someone might sneak in never entered anyone's mind.

He climbed the guava tree without difficulty. He had always been a good climber and the tree's branches were strong and thick, more than capable of holding his slight frame. He shimmied across a horizontal branch, which grew over the wall, and easily reached

the roof of that house.

The floor of the roof was completely covered in moss, carpeted in a dark green that in places was black. Khaled tried to carefully drop down from the branch but the moss was too slippery, and he slipped as he touched the floor, sliding down with a loud thump.

He lay motionless for a moment, terrified that his parents might have heard it. He started to become a little afraid about continuing, and made up excuses to not go on. But the fearful thoughts soon lost their sting and he stood back up.

The door of the roof was made of sheet iron, which through the ages had become rusted over and had started to be eaten away. It made a piercing sound when Khaled pulled on it, nearly taking it off its hinges. The piercing noise lasted especially long for Khaled, whose paranoia at getting caught elongated the moment and made the noise that much louder.

The stairway leading to the first floor was pitch dark. As the sunlight stabbed in through the doorway, Khaled could see how dead and

empty that house was. The windows along the stairways were covered in thick layers of dirt and grime, thick networks of spider webs covered the passageway from wall to wall, and the steps were cracked and crumbling. But Khaled could not be turned back now. He stepped straight in, into the complete gloom.

He started slicing through the spider webs along the walls. They all swayed down to the floor, clearing a path big enough for him to walk through untangled. As he walked down those steps, the smell of age in the air became stronger; it was the scent of stagnation, of an air that had not moved in eons and carried the heavy stench of decayed time.

His eyes soon acclimatized to the poor light and he could make out the contours of the steps and the railing and the floor. But he could not make out any movement anywhere, but then again there weren't any - not even the flight of a dust-bunny. He could make out clouded shapes made by the grime upon the window-panes; it reminded him of the frescos in the medieval cathedrals he had seen in his history books.

The house seemed to him like a mausoleum. Nothing moved and nothing stirred. Even the noises that had attracted him - still bursting forth from the kitchen - became as faint as whispers in the gloom, and the only stimulant was the dim light coming in through the grime covered windows, the filtered remains of the bright day outside.

Yet he could still make out much of the house, and could see which path led which way. He decided the first call of action was to go to the noises. He couldn't breathe anymore because the dust was so thick. He became light-headed, started grabbing at the furniture, trying to keep himself from falling over and passing out. Everywhere he went, the sound of crashing could be heard, things falling off from shelves, chairs tipping over, and vases breaking. But all he could hear was the rasping of his own throat and the effort of his lungs as he tried to breathe.

The crows were cawing away and crashing into the pots and pans. The air of the kitchen was heavy with the dust that had been stirred up, and Khaled started to cough violently when he walked in. His coughing spooked the birds, and they rushed to a retreat, squeezing through the hole in the screen through which they had come in. Within a minute, they were all gone, and Khaled was still bent over, coughing vehemently, trying to stop from choking.

He couldn't take it anymore and rushed out of the kitchen, but as he ran he stirred up the dead air, and all the dust of ages rose up and it became a whirlwind as thick as a sandstorm. He couldn't breathe anymore because the dust was so thick. He became light-headed, started grabbing at the furniture, trying to keep himself from falling over and passing out. Everywhere he went, the sound of crashing could be heard, things falling off from shelves, chairs tipping over, and vases breaking. But all he could hear was the rasping of his own throat and the effort of his lungs as he tried to breathe.

The last thing he remembered was a loud boom coming from someplace ahead of him and then light breaking the gloom. As he fell and passed out, he could hear a hub-hub of voices over him, but he was not sure if they were real or harking back to the past life of that house.

When he woke up, he was in the front yard. Holding his head was his father, asking "Khaled, are you alright?" Patting him on the back a couple of times to help with the convulsions of coughing. It seemed that the noises he had made had caught the attention of his father and others in the neighborhood - and they had all realized that it had been coming from that house next door. They stormed in and broke down the door, and found Khaled rolled over and choking.

Khaled looked into his father's eyes and knew that he was in trouble.

'Oh shit!' he thought to himself.

Shakil Rabbi studies English at Dhaka University.

English Barmaids and Slaves in Calcutta

BAPPA CHAKRAVARTY

Mani Sankar Mukherji, popularly known in Kolkata as simply 'Sankar', has written many a book, fiction and nonfiction alike, with some bestsellers among them. One of the more popular of Bengali novelists, he hit it big from the very start when he started serializing a novel in *Desh* magazine in the 1950s, and has continued to write through the '60s down to the present day. While he has been dismissed by critics as a writer practiced at producing potboilers, that may be a little bit of a facile generalization. Sankar is of a generation of Bengali writers who began writing at a time when the 19th century European realist novel had a great hold on their imagination, and one can see the marks of that both in the sweep and careful characterization in their works. Not for that age the dedicated intellectualism that is our lot today - they liked Zola and Dickens. A novelist like Sankar (which is how the ordinary Bengali reader referred to him) took pride in the telling of a tale, following the dictates of plotting, characters and suspense, and in being responsive to readers' demands. Perhaps it tells something about his qualities in the above departments that two of his novels, *Seemabaddha* and *Jana Aranya*, were turned into movies by no less than Satyajit Ray, as 'Company Limited' and 'The Middleman' respectively. No doubt it was his sharp observation and intimate knowledge of Calcutta life at all levels that drew the legendary film director's attention. It was a knowledge gained first-hand by Sankar, who when he first came to Calcutta from Bongaon village (near the present Indo-Bangladesh border) before the Second World War, worked variously as a street hawker, a typewriter cleaner, a part-time school teacher and a clerk in a jute and gunny broking firm to earn a living - jobs that provided the material for the beginning pages of *Chouringhee*.

Now this classic novel Sankar is known by among Bengalis of a certain generation has been made available for a newer set of readers of English language fiction by Penguin India, as well as for those readers to whom the Bengali original remains inaccessible. *Chouringhee* was a huge hit when it first came out in 1962, followed by translations in all the major Indian languages. Set in 1950s Calcutta, it is a sprawling saga of the lives of managers, employees and guests at a huge Calcutta hotel, the Shahjahan. Sankar, its newest employee and the book's narrator, "the wide-eyed adolescent from the small neighbourhood of Kashundia who had years ago, crossed the Ganga on the steamer *Amba* to gape at the high court," proves to be the perfect foil to the big bad city. His voice is that particular blend of naivete and guile that is necessary to spin this story to its conclusion. Here is the full story of an older Calcutta, its seamier underbelly of unfulfilled desires

and broken dreams exposed, with its bars and nor'westers and liaisons both licit and illicit, the "Keshto Cafe, situated next to Ripon College," and Samar Sen's poetry.

The city thus itself emerges as a central character in the human drama, and what unfolds is not just a story of individual lives but also the chronicle of a metropolis now vanished, as can be glimpsed at by the excerpt reproduced here, where Hobbs the old Englishman tells of a time when Calcutta had Englishwomen as barmaids and a thriving, if not well-publicized, slave trade. Sankar's tale weaves together the stories of several people whose lives come together in the suites, restaurants, bar and backrooms of the hotel - the enigmatic manager Marco Polo, the debonair receptionist Sata Bose (who can quote Omar Khayyám on hotel management, "It's difficult for a country to get a good prime minister, but it's even more difficult to get a good hotel manager"), the tragic hostess Karabi Guha, and Hobbs the Englishman who knows everything about the city that was worth knowing. And Phokla Chatterjee!

A large number of the characters in the book were modeled on real-life people and semi-celebrities, and this was an extra special allure of the book for readers, who while reading could also speculate richly on who was the model for whom. The book gives us a close look of the reading tastes of a previous generation of Bengalis, especially women, who tended to be inside their homes and have few pastimes, of which novel reading and the occasional film were the dominant ones. I, in fact, remember,

Excerpt

"Our story is intimately connected with the Suez Canal," said Hobbs. "Before it was built, those reckless adventurers went round the Cape of Good Hope to come to Calcutta. In the absence of hotels they spent the nights in barges at Chandpal Ghat. No blue-eyed beauty came running across the ocean to entertain them, so if the craving got really bad, they had to quench their thirst with the strictly Indian variety."

"Then, in 1762, William Parker decided to open a bar for the entertainment of Calcutta's gentlemen. Only alcohol was on the agenda, barmaids were not part of the scheme of things. The board, too, granted a licence, on the condition that the house couldn't be kept open in the daytime, for if it was, the younger lot would start playing truant."

"Many more bars came up after that, but it was barmen, or khidmatgars as they were called, all the way. Even Le Galle, who had taken the contract for wining and dining the barrister and his cronies during the trial of Nanda Kumar, didn't have barmaids in his tavern. He charged two-and-a-quarter rupees for every lunch and dinner. Mohan Prasad ordered that the meals be sent to the court - sixteen lunches and sixteen dinners every day. We know of Nanda Kumar's hanging, but haven't kept track of Le Galle. After the verdict was delivered, Nanda Kumar became immortal by going to the gallows but there was no trace of Mohan Prasad. Eventually, Le Galle had to go to court to recover his dues for the lunches and dinners he had served - he had to sue to get his six hundred and twenty-nine rupees."

Hobbs handed cups of coffee to us. We were about to protest, but he said, "I'm not anti-India, but those who are under the impression you don't get coffee anywhere in the world except at the India Coffee House should pay me a visit."

Without sparing a glance at our bewildered faces, Hobbs continued, "It was after the Suez Canal was opened that eighteen-year-old Englishwomen, with nectar in their breasts and

both my mother and my grandmother being avid readers of Bengali novels, and though I cannot recall if I ever saw this book in their hands during the long hot afternoons when they picked up their thick paperback novels after finishing with their household work, I am absolutely sure they could not have easily put down this page-turner once they had begun it. Perhaps a later generation will like it too, for its sturdy, old-fashioned values, in an English translation by Arunava Sinha that reads easily. Mr. Sinha is a journalist who was born in Kolkata and read English literature at Jadavpur University. His previous translations of modern and contemporary Bengali writers have been for Calcutta Skyline, a city newspaper. He now resides in New Delhi.

On the front cover of the book is a quote from a Vikram Seth review, and I can't resist reproducing it. "I read *Chouringhee* many years back in Hindi translation and lost myself in it for days. It was a wonderful experience - both gripping and moving. I...hope (this English translation) gets the wide readership it deserves." Reading Vikram's words, one has to wonder whether Sankar's novel, in some way, was the seed that later sprouted as the gigantic tree of *A Suitable Boy*. There are striking similarities between the two books in terms of plot devices and characterization, but most of all in the desire of both authors to write a sprawling human saga that encompassed a whole generation and its culture.

Bappa Chakravarty is a journalist and sometime critic based in Bangalore.

wine glasses in their hands, started coming to Calcutta. Which is why restaurants and hotels in Charnock's city began to flourish after the canal was opened in 1869."

As he spoke, Hobbs slowly went back to the past when barmaids used to stand at the bar and serve drinks - not local women, but authentic Englishwomen. Newspaper advertisements would announce: "Our new barmaids will be arriving in Calcutta by such-and-such ship from London." Some would come on six-month contracts and others on two-year ones. The British representatives of Shahjahan and Hotel de Europe would write, "Have located a beautiful girl, do you want her?" The reply would be sent immediately: "We have great faith in your taste - we hope you won't let us down before Calcutta's customers!" Back would come the answer: "I've been sending barmaids not just to Calcutta but major ports round the world for many years, and I've never heard a word of criticism. Girls I've chosen have turned around the fortunes of hotels - they've doubled sales at the bar. To tell you the truth, my only concern is that hotels in Calcutta can't hold on to the girls. Before their contracts run out, the girls ensconce themselves elsewhere. That harms me - they promise to send me a part of their salaries, but I don't get it if they change jobs."

"Have you seen any of these barmaids?" I couldn't resist asking.

Hobbs laughed. "Do you think I'm a spring chicken? And do you suppose I came to Calcutta just the other day? If I'd come a little earlier I might have even seen a slave or two."

'Slaves!'

"You youngsters know nothing. Even halfway through the last century, human beings used to be sold in Calcutta. English ladies and gentlemen and even the local gentry would buy boys and girls from Murgitola and bring them home. If they ran away, they would place advertisements in the papers, promising rewards."

Love and Marriage

FARZANA MAZHAR ALI

Don't go like horse and carriage
I know, I've on one and in the other

I loved him then, he told me a tale --
After a cranberry sunset, a billion stars --

About a conference in Tokyo,
Polite accents among ikebana

I had laughed, traced the line of a brow
Said peel me, shuck me like banana skin

Picnic hamper plundered by our side
Sandals tossed into laughing wind

Rats had stopped gnawing my insides
Waves had crooned love and marriage...

Ten years later we lie -- marriage bed,
Hah, I say! -- side by tickety side

Like campfire embers dying
Exchange slow chit-chat: Martha's

An ass, sorry dear; Fred's mother-in-law
Took a shine to me, damp old thing --

An empty wind blows through the house
I arch and yawn, then reach for a smoke...

Farzana Mazhar Ali is based in Chicago.

Women at Forty

NAUSHEEN EUSUF

Women at forty wake at dawn,
rising in the morning's dark
to pray, and bathe, and plait their hair
before beginning the day's work.

They open windows, water plants,
and watch the traffic on the street.
They move among the quiet rooms,
keeping the house and kitchen neat.

Women at forty watch soaps and talk shows.
They read advice columns in magazines.
They get facials done, and manicures,
to feel briefly like a queen.

Come afternoon, they sit outside
school gates and await the final bell.
They heal cuts and scrapes with kisses,
knowing their maternal offices well.

At night, they sit with needle and thread
to patch up holes or seams rent apart
in youthful games, mending all
except the rift deep within their heart.

Nausheen Eusuf teaches at BRAC University.

