

SHORT STORY

# The Man . . .

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TRANSLATION HAROONUZZAMAN

He is as bald as a coot. His oily head glows. The forehead and the head are lost into one another. In a quick glance, one can hardly identify the forehead separately.

Like a fringe some tufts of hair are dangling from three sides of the bald head. Right on top of the eyes are brilliantly white eyebrows. They look as if two strips of Shimul cotton have been pasted with glue out there. There are some deep wrinkles a little above the eyebrows; it seems he has been burdened with enormous difficult problems.

He is sickly and lanky, and he is wearing loose a punjabi and embroidered pajamas. His face bears the deep imprint of concerns and worries. The man, who is forward-leaning, is often seen everywhere and every now and then.

With his forehead being wrinkly and eyebrows closer to each other, some days I would see the glum-faced person going somewhere walking, or suddenly stopping at the roundabout while going walking. I would see his fingers coming up to his lips, followed by silence for some time. It was as if he had been thinking about something a few minutes earlier and then again trying to pick up the thread of his thought that he had lost to oblivion.

Again he could be seen going round the neighborhood. Whoever the person might be, he would clasp the person's hands hastily, and by stopping the person, he would ask him something. Some would give answers; some others would turn their faces away in disgust, freeing their hands of his clutch.

After listening to an answer from someone, the man would turn gloomy. Then again, he would become ecstatic at someone's answers. It was as if he had gotten back his lost treasure all of a sudden.

Interestingly, I haven't ever had any opportunity to interact with this man. Also, I haven't come across any person who is on speaking terms with him. We have been living in the same area for quite some years, though. I don't every day. I often see him. And that is all.

I did not ever think that this man would straightaway appear in the centre of my living room today at noon, and I was nonplussed.

It was the midday of Jaishtha, and it was scorching outside. The streets looked almost naked. It was even difficult to stay inside due to the heat, caused by the humidity. Despite this situation, I was trying to keep myself focused on my work. Pen and paper were ready on the table since morning. I was supposed to write a short story and send it to the newspaper office in two to four days. Of the four days, three days would be over by today. Tomorrow would be last day. So whatever I was supposed to do, I should do it by today. But still I could not decide what I would write about.

When I was walking restlessly in the room thinking about writing whatever I could, and when I finished arranging my papers and was about to touch the paper with my pen, right at that moment, without any permission, he almost barged into the room. Busily looking around the room for sometime, he looked at me, and then placing his fingers on his lips, he whispered: "Could you tell me what I was thinking about?"

I was surprised. Gulping nervously, like a fool I faltered in asking: "Yes?"

Coming closer, he muttered: "What I am saying is that I've lost the thread of my thought. Did you understand? Since morning I have been thinking about something. When I almost found a solution to the problem, right at that time I lost the clue. I lost what I was thinking about. Could you tell me what I would do with the solution? When the source is not there, what is going to happen to the solution?"

Pausing for a while, he again said: "Since morning I've been trying to find out the subject of my thought, but I'm not getting it. Also, I haven't found anyone in the street whom I can ask about it. That's why I have rushed to you. Okay, could you say what I was thinking about?"

Hurriedly, I stood up. Certainly, this man is a philosopher! I became busy in entertaining him.

I said: "Please sit down."

He sat down, and then within seconds he directed the question at me once again: "What I was..."

Humbly I said: "Well, perhaps you were talking about a solution or something. If that could be known, finding out the source could have been possible. It would have been better if you had spoken about the solution clearly."

Getting keyed up all of a sudden, he said excitedly: "Kinsmen, companions and all... all with their hands and mouths tied up should be put into a sack and thrown either into the river Buriganga in Dhaka or Karnaphuli in Chittagong. Then all problems will be solved."

I was stupefied. What does the man say? How come he will throw all these perfectly living people, whoever they are, into the water by tying up their hands and feet? What a dangerous solution!

Thinking about it for a while, then scratching my nose and the frontal part of my head for sometime, like an erudite person I addressed him slowly: "Is it some sort of a plot of a story? I mean..."

Barely could I finish my sentence when he began to shout. It was as if a small bomb had gone off somewhere nearby. "Story! You are talking about the plot of a story? Pooh, do people think about those things? I get speechless listening to you people. Can a story be a subject to think about?"

I got agitated at his contemptuous remarks about stories. Also I felt a little insulted. What does this man say? It seems story writing is a trifling matter. And on such a matter, I have already spent three out of four restless days thinking what to write on!

The man was talking and gesticulating. "Yes, what did you say? Oh, story writing. Is that difficult work? What do you mean by one or two? I know thousands of stories. For example, take the story of a man. Getting the salary on the first day of the month and having the list of items to be bought in his hand, this man entered the market. After fifteen minutes of shopping, he discovered that he had only finished buying the seventh item on the list.

Meanwhile, his fat wallet shrank, and being sweat-soaked, he clumsily walked out of the market. And after that he did not know anything. Regaining his consciousness, he found that he was standing before his house and the richshawallah was demanding five taka as fare. Searching the two pockets of his trousers, he just could not get any money to settle the fare. Looking at the house, he thought about something and his face turned pale. Finding no other alternative, he beckoned the servant of the neighboring house, coaxed him into lending him some money, settled the fare and entered the house. Then there was silence for some time. Some peculiar sounds caused by explosive temper broke the stillness. In seconds, some potatoes and potols came crashing down on the street. What next? If you give keep a tab on the house for the remaining twenty-nine days, you will never be short of materials for stories."

He said those words at a stretch and then took a deep breath. Before I could say something, he began speaking again. "Think about the man again. After some years, this man again goes to the market on the first day of the month, with his salary in his pockets. He is in the rice

shops. Heaps of huge rice sacks are stacked vertically. Some flabby, oil-smeared glossy people are sitting around them on stools. With a shrunken face and in an inaudible voice he asks one of them to give him fifty-taka worth of rice. The rice trader glances at him, takes two or three tiny morsels of rice, pours them into his bag and then says humbly: 'Bhai Saab, I don't have a small weight to measure rice worth fifty taka. But I'm sure it won't be less. You have been buying rice from this shop since the time of my father and grandfather. How can I give you less? Actually, it's a loss if I give you three handfuls.' Ha-ha-ha. Then think of his situation at least for once. The more you think of him, the more you will be able to write. In fact, you'll not be able to complete your writing."

He paused. Taking a handkerchief out of his pocket, he wiped his bald head and face. Putting the handkerchief back in the pocket, he said: "Could you give me a glass of water? Cold water."

"Oh sure." I rushed in to fetch him some water. He gulped it down as soon as I gave it to him. And then he resumed talking. "Sometimes I remember a very interesting thing. A huge mountain is just in front. It's tall and steep. Some people on the peak of the mountain, donning colourful dresses, are sitting comfortably on a carpet. Each of them has tops in his two hands. Playing a rattle for children, some of them, looking downward, are calling others. 'Come, come, come.' They are modulating their voices as if they are singing. Dancing with the tune, innumerable number of people, without hands and feet, more like luggage, are making their way toward the people sitting at the highest point of the mountain. Labels with words like 'rice', 'lentil', 'oil', and 'salt' inscribed on pieces of white paper are stuck on the back of each person. But the most interesting thing is that in an effort to get hold of those things mentioned on the labels, we all, I mean he or she, you and I, with our last savings are desperately trying to hurry our way through to go up the ladder. Though at times, we stumble, puff and pant and even crawl to find our way through in our upward journey. A few of them are climbing up very easily keeping the pace; some of them are smoothly going up before the luggage-like people. Those who are sitting comfortably on the carpet are pulling them on to the carpet by holding their hands as soon as they come closer. Those who are dying to go up the ladder are really in a hot soup. Some of them are falling on their faces, never to rise again. While treading this slippery path, some others are dying, plunging into ditches; some others are bleeding profusely. Believe me, all in all, it is such a horrific incident. Somehow I close my eyes."

The man closed his eyes and kept quiet. I was also silent. There was silence all over. I could not say anything. All of a sudden, the man started speaking once again. "Well, why did you think of story plots? Do you write stories?"

Giving a sort of a nod, I said: "Sometimes."

"Where do you write? Do you write for newspapers and magazines?"

Nodding, I said: "Yes, sometimes."

He paused for a moment, and then looking into my eyes, he said: "Tell me one thing frankly. Could you tell me why the people who write use words as they like and almost without thinking?"

What does the man say? What are those words that we use without thinking? I just could not make out anything. After a slight hesitation, I asked him: "What are those words? Could you tell me?"

Almost immediately he answered: "How about the word 'fire'? Do you think before using the word 'fire'? Every morning when I open the daily newspaper, I see phrases like 'fire in fish market', 'fire in rice market', 'fire in vegetables market', and 'fire in meat'. Do you use them thoughtfully? I don't think it so. Think coolly. If it really happens one day, can you imagine what disaster it may spell?"

With a shake of his body, he closed his eyes for some minutes. Then pulling his chair near me, he spoke again: "Everything has a limit. Don't you know about it?"

"Yes, I know." Again I nodded in agreement.

"There is a price limit in the market, too. For example, one keer of rice is four taka. Then the price keeps spiraling; it keeps increasing from taka four to five, then five to six and then again six to six and a half. Finally, when the price gallops to taka twenty, then to twenty-five and then to near thirty, the market is in flames. Before the arrival of the fire fighters, countrywide hat-bazars and shops selling meat, vegetables and spices are already in flames. People are rushing out to the roads and streets. They are fired up. Isn't there a limit to excitement and tolerance? Within minutes, their eyes, faces and chests seem to have been seething in excitement. The rage is spreading like wild fire: from one person to another and then from them to tens and thousands of people across the country. The whole country is now burning. Who has the ability to extinguish the fire? The crowd has become crazy, going round different places in panic. Finally, you will see that these people, clutching one another's hands, are moving along the two sides of the hill, the steep hill that I told you about. They are advancing toward the hill, and it is their aim to reach that place where some people, with rattles in their hands, are sitting comfortably on a velvety carpet. What inflammatory excitement! It seems that clumps of fire, surrounding the hill, are crawling toward those few people sitting at the top of the hill. And..."

Excitement stopped him from saying anything more. Stretching out his hand toward me, he said in a trembling voice: "See, I am having goosebumps all over my body thinking about it."

Covering his face with his hands, he kept sitting there for a long time. Truth be told, listening to his words, I also felt the rumbling of unease in my chest. It could be due to fear or excitement. Whatever it was, I lost my voice and words.

Suddenly, the man touched my knee, looked at me with shining eyes and muttered: "I have long waited for this day. Did you understand? I can see it clearly that the entire country is turning into a torch. Each person is a hot wave, and gradually these people are encircling the hill. Who is there to dampen the flame?"

No sooner had he finished saying those words, he got up. In disgust he said: "What nonsense! While blabbering with you, I was about to forget the solution to the problem just like the problem itself. It would have been a disaster. You could not tell me anything about the solution. Let me go and ask the people on the street, and let me see whether they can say anything. What do you say, eh? Ok, bye." Soon after, he stormed out of the room in exactly the same way he came in. In a flash he crossed the gate and melted away into the road.

Dazed, I sat there. I did not know how long I did that. I was taken aback when some papers on the table suddenly caught my sight. I could see that I was still holding the pen in my hand. There was no question of writing the story; I could not even make a mark on the paper.

Born in Gouripur under 24 Parganas of West Bengal on December 15, 1940, Ekhlassuddin, a journalist, burst on to the literary scene primarily as a juvenile literature. The editor of a popular children literary magazine, *Tapur Tapur*, Ekhlassuddin writes short stories that are multi-layered and aimed at critiquing social injustices in a lighter vein.

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# Sukumar Ray: Man behind intelligent nonsense



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

SUKUMAR RAY died young, too young for our liking you might say. Born in 1887, he saw his life draw to an end in 1923. But then, considering the vast repertoire of intellectual accomplishments he has left behind, you just might feel you really ought to have little cause for complaint. His all too brief life was lived in the fullness of creation. How many others can you cite, off the top of your head, who achieved as much as Sukumar Ray? Yes, there have been poets --- Keats, Chatterton, Sukanto, Abul Hasan --- who were to pass on even before they could graduate out of youth and into a higher degree of maturity. They made their own contributions to poetry, indeed to aesthetics. But Ray was of a different class altogether. Talent was all and, with that, a ferocious capacity for work.

Think back on all the humour he brought into life. If you sit back and reflect on the world of Bengali creativity, you perhaps will stumble on the thought that a sense of humour, in the way we know it, has not generally been part of the Bengali literary psyche. You might even be tempted to argue that the Bengali thought process is an extremely intellectualized version of life and the realities it is lived through. But that again would be your own considered opinion. One might not agree with you. But surely there is unanimity of thought when it

comes to assessing Sukumar Ray. Of course he was the son of Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury, a giant in the Bengali world of letters in his own right. And of course Sukumar Ray is the father of the inimitable Satyajit Ray. There is a sense in us of a cerebral dynasty at work here. And in that dynastic pattern of things, Sukumar injected his own energy, of the sort you can only detect in such undertakings as the Nonsense Club. Not many would have that kind of innovation. Not many would let you in on the truth that even within the vast sphere of nonsense, of pure silliness we wallow through on a quotidian basis, there lie scattered the gems of thought which whet the imagination for an enhanced degree of inquiry on our part. Go back to the plays Sukumar wrote for the club --- *Jhalapala* and *Lakshman Shaitishel* --- and you will know.

Now, there is *Abol Tabol*. An atmosphere of strangeness is what you find yourself in the moment you go into reading the creative nonsense there. Not long ago (and that was when Satyajit Ray was yet living) Sukanta Chaudhuri went for a translation of Sukumar Ray. He called it *The Select Nonsense of Sukumar Ray*. The strangeness is in making the discovery that it is anything but nonsense, for you come away from the rhymes (in the Bengali original as also in the English translation) a trifle reflective, a little wiser. And that was Sukumar Ray. The dimensions of his literary nonsense could in a way remind you of Lewis Carroll, if indeed you are in the mood to compare. Truth be told, though, literature does not really work on the basis of comparisons. Originality is all. And originality Sukumar had in plenty. Whether it was *Abol Tabol* (Gibberish), *HajabakRala*, *Pagla Dashu* or the play *Chalachittachanchari*, it was always a matter of new ideas being thrown up by their author.

There was irreverence in Sukumar Ray, of the kind that challenged established notions but without provoking hostility. That was a principle behind the working of what he would call the Monday Club. It was a chance, the club, for the young to tear the conventional world into pieces and dwell on the brave new world that would supplant it. But then, there was all the difference between reality and illusion; and Sukumar Ray knew it. And yet illusion was what he brought into the lives of Bengali children,

the better to prepare them for the bizarre and the eerie that would one day insinuate their way into their lives.

Sukumar Ray, you may well come to believe all these decades after his death from *kala azar* in 1923, was energy that was forever shooting forth. Consider the education he went through. You would think literature was the field through which he would prepare to meet the world. He did not do that. He did his honours in physics and chemistry from Presidency College, Calcutta. The next move was for him to journey all the way to England, to know all there was to know about photography and printing technology. When he returned to India, he swiftly earned a reputation as the man who had pioneered photography and lithography in his country. The versatility in him, though, was constantly on display. Even as he studied in England, he acquainted Englishmen and women with the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore. And that



was quite some before the bard was to come by the Nobel Prize for literature.

Sukumar Ray would edit *Sandesh*, a children's magazine Upendrakishore inaugurated in 1913 after the latter's death. He improved on the work his father had already done through adding to the richness of the journal. To the poetry and stories were now added essays, news on current affairs, puzzles, folk tales and riddle.

But Sukumar Ray would not live long. Illness came as a damper and slowed him down. At age thirty six, he was dead. His son, Satyajit was two and a half years old at the time.

(Sukumar Ray was born on 30 October 1887 and died on 10 September 1923).

Syed Badrul Ahsan is with the Daily Star.

## POETRY



THE INTERVIEW

Shahidul Islam Chowdhury

The interview began as soon as I was left alone in that tiny room, too ordinary to notice anything except my white robe and those two bodies.

It was sunset, or that's what I thought. The first question was easy: who's your lord?

asked they in strong voices, terrifying. Who is my lord? Did someone create me, or was I self-created? I searched earth and heaven, scanned my whole life. But a creator?

How come was I earlier, and am now? I was left a blank page. Time was short, they echoed. I could not, nothing.

They shared a quick glance, and instantly glued to the next, it wasn't difficult. I had to name the path I followed. There were so many, I forgot which one I took, or any: Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Secularism, War, what? Again I concentrated on my whole life. It was a desert, or a market place. Time was running out, they echoed. But what belief? I could not answer.

They shared another quick glance, thought of my performance, and asked the last question.

There was a man in the room, I saw, I was supposed to recognize him. But how can you name one whom you have

never seen in your life, never heard of, never thought of, not even in your dream, or nightmare? My memory was alive. Adam, Cain, Nimrod, Pharaoh, Nero, George, Stalin, Hitler, Bush, or R? Your time is over, they announced. Now it is our time. And they were gone. Wait! I cry. Is it a miracle, then? I remember everything now. They win.

I have the answers. Please, let me explain. Money. Money was my lord, my creator. Fame. Fame was my path, my belief. Power. I know. I was his worshipper. They depart. Blind, deaf, armed, two more come. Don't you hear? Can't you see? I scream. Futile.

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## LITERARY NOTES

## Politics and the female body

KETU Katrak, Professor of Humanities at the University of California, Irvine (UCI), is affiliated with the Departments of English and Comparative Literature. Katrak was the Founding Chair of the Department of Asian American Studies at UCI (1996-2004). Author of *Politics Of The Female Body: Postcolonial Women Writers, Wole Soyinka And Modern Tragedy: A Study Of Dramatic Theory And Practice*, among other co-edited books and essays published in journals such as *Modern Fiction Studies*, *South Asian Popular Culture*, *Amerasia*, Ms. Katrak was guest speaker recently at a talk organized by the English Department of Independent University Bangladesh (IUB).

In the course of the talk, Ms. Katrak drew attention to certain salient features in her literary work. She articulates an innovative feminist agenda in *Politics of the Female Body: Postcolonial Women Writers of the Third World* by comparing the works of different authors from regions that were colonies of Britain. What seems at first glance like a review of feminist literatures of resistance is actually a dazzlingly new assessment of women's texts both written and oral. She examines the portrayal of female subjects through tropes of "exile, including self-exile and self-censorship, outsiderhood, and unbelonging to itself within indigenous patriarchy... strengthened by British racialized colonial practices in the regions of India, Africa, and the Caribbean". To generate such a theory, Katrak deploys critical measures that gesture toward transnational imaginaries. Thus, the book extends a line of intellectual inquiry taken up by feminists to position resistance to patriarchy with and against historicized colonialism and postcolonialism, but it also makes important contributions by threading together key cultural practices (like dowry and bride-price, for example) to explain how the embodied subject functions according to complementary, contradictory, and competing traditions in each respective society.

Using different sociocultural registers to read female bodies imbricated in various postcolonial predicaments is a venture that has been undertaken by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (1990), Uma Narayan in *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminisms* (1997), and Lata Mani in *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (1998), for instance. Katrak builds upon this body of scholarship to refine her own feminist schema by incorporating newer arguments made by Eve Sedgwick in *Touching, Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003), Chandra Talpade Mohanty in *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (2005), and Ibi Amadiume in *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in African Society* (1987). This list is merely a glimpse of the theoretical breadth of the book, which is balanced neatly with oral story-telling traditions, different praxis of scholar activists such as Vibhuti Patel, and with principles espoused by feminist groups such as Saheli in India and Sistren in Jamaica. This multiple-pronged inquiry enables Katrak to intervene in current, feminist analytical models and illuminate nuggets of social moves that are embedded within the narratives. One of her aims is to show how texts "forge creative alliances among writers and critics working toward a common goal of a better future for postcolonial societies". To actualize this vision of ethical engagement, the book brings into play works of writers such as Kamala Das, Anita Desai, Tsitsi Dangaremba, Bessie Head, Ama Aidoo, Erna Brodber, Merle Hodge, and Buchi Emecheta.

Using novels, plays, pamphlets, and even poems (sometimes in concert and sometimes by themselves), Katrak carefully explains the effects of two of the most pernicious legacies of colonialization: English education and constructions of normative femininity to demonstrate how they serve as the base for postcolonial forms of patriarchal control. Each chapter underscores how such control becomes palpable through social attitudes and cultural mores to result in what she reads as different forms and degrees of "exile". That is, the restraints placed upon female subjectivity cause a dislocation of the self so profoundly traumatic that it leads to silence, violence, and/or self-annihilation. Katrak employs different narrative genres combined with cultural practices to illustrate this point. Out of a carefully selected slate of hegemonic control mechanisms wielded by traditions, here are just a few. She draws on Heads' autobiographical novel, *A Question of Power* (2002), and Lauretta Ngcobo's essay on "African Motherhood" (2000) to discuss the epistemology and injurious custom of bride-price that systemically locates girls as outsiders; she uses Anita Desai's novels and *Manushi: A Journal of Women and Society* from India to explain other forms of oppression exerted through bride-burning, dowry system, and exclusion of lesbian subjects. Katrak concludes by noting that protagonists in each instance create daring moves to overcome such oppression that become noticeable in a comparative study, which, in turn, reveals a growing sense of feminist agency around the world.



Ketu Katrak