

## SHORT STORY

## The scorching pain

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FROM her childhood, the girl has been like this. She is always hungry. She does not want dresses, bangles or ribbons. She just wants rice. Chipped enamel plates and earthen bowls filled with rice, rice and more rice.

How can the widow, Motijan, provide so much rice? She says angrily, "You pig! It's good your father died after your birth. He was saved."

These words do not have any effect at all on Atarjan. She laughs aloud at her mother.

In the dark narrow room of the slum, her two younger brothers, Abul and Habul, walk at the top of their voice.

"Oh, Mother, Bubu has eaten all the rice. What will we eat? We are hungry. Oh, Mother, give us rice."

It is late afternoon. Motijan has just returned home after washing dishes, grinding spices, wiping floors, washing clothes at four houses. She never cooks lunch. The family usually shares the food she gets from the houses she works at. She cooks only once in the evening. Habul or Abul buys the things from the shop at the end of the alley. With her three children, Motijan eats to her fill at night. She covers the rest of the rice with water. In the morning, she eats the panta bhat with burnt chillies, salt and onion and then goes to work.

Atari - Atarjan - looks after Habul and Abul. Now that they have grown up, they spend their time playing gilli with a stick and a wooden puck on the streets. The moment they spot their mother returning, they come running home in the hope that they all eat lunch together.

Before Atarji used to clean the room, fill the pitcher with water, hang out the quilts and clothes. She used to tidy the room and keep it clean. But these days she doesn't bother any more.

She has become even more gluttonous than before. Her two younger brothers can never keep packets of chira and muri at home. After returning home Motijan has to listen to all their complaints. She feels that her head is going to burst.

While at work, she has to endure all manner of rebuke from her employers. She feels her body is going to collapse under the load of work. Can't she have a moment of peace even after returning home? Motijan shouts, "Why the hell do I work in so many houses? For your sake only. You are a big girl. How can you act like this?"

Atari says laughing, "When did I eat?" Habul shouts back, "No, you didn't eat. Then where did the muri go?"

Motijan says with pain and anger, "Come on, eat me up!"

Atari just laughs, "Can one eat a human being?"

Motijan feels like strangling this girl who is always hungry.

Atari doesn't care about her mother's feelings. She says laughing, "Can one eat a human being? If I could then I would have smeared you with oil, salt, and chillies and eaten you up long ago."

Maymuna, the woman who lives in the slake beside theirs, is shocked when she comes out to fetch her baby's quilt and overhears Atari's words. Staring at Atari, she puts her hand on her cheek with astonishment.

"Listen to this girl, what the hell is she saying? What man will ever marry her?"

Atari blushes and says, "Forget it. I don't need anyone to marry me."

Habul forgets his grief over the muri. His eyes shine with happiness. "Is Bubu going to get married?"

Atari rushes towards her brother. "If you talk of marriage again, I will break you jaws."

Motijan catches her daughter's hand and pulls her close. She runs her hand through the bird's nest of her daughter's hair and says, "Come, let me comb your hair. Look, how untidy your hair is."

She makes her daughter sit near her and then runs her hand lovingly through her hair. She puts a handful of oil in Atari's hair and combs it and rolls it into a tight bun.

Crazy Atari now looks very pretty. Motijan runs her oily hand over Atari's heart-shaped face. She tells her daughter affectionately, "Women should not eat so much. Do you understand?"

"Why? What happens?" Her mother says angrily, "I can't say what happens. You are always asking questions."

Atari does not pay any heed to her mother's irritation. Looking at the sky indifferently, she says, "I always feel hungry. My stomach aches when I feel very hungry. I feel like vomiting and I feel dizzy."

"What did you say, Atari? Your stomach aches."

"Yes, Mother." Motijan starts sobbing. She says in a choked voice, "Oh, my dear girl, the poor have to endure all. Hunger, stomach aches."

Looking at her daughter, Motijan realizes that her daughter has grown up. From a small girl, she is almost a woman now.

The marriage date is settled. Atari is getting married to Rahmat from the Khilgaon slum. He is a strapping young man and wears colourful shirts and jeans. Round his neck he sports a jaunty scarf. Although he pedals his rickshaw the whole day, he doesn't get tired. He earns a lot of money daily. Even after paying the owner, he has managed to save a lot of money. Atari will be happy with him.

Atari has seen Rahman from a distance, and she likes him.

Rahman has rented a shack in the Argangaon slum. After their marriage, they are going to live there.

Kaliman from the slum says, "You've got a nice son-in-law, Motijan Bu."

Abdul says laughing, "He has plenty of strength. He can come to Bailey Road and Kakrail from Argangaon playing his rickshaw. He says that it is not a rickshaw but a baby taxi."

Abul and Habul are also very excited. "Mia Bhai is very handsome."

It has been a long time since Motijan has cooked with a smiling face. After working so hard, she nearly always has a hot temper. But for some days now, her heart has been filled with boundless love.

The marriage will take place tomorrow night. Tonight Motijan fries whole eggs in onion, oil and garlic.

Atarjan starts her new life in the Argangaon slum. She looks beautiful these days. She cooks so many things with pleasure. Rahmat buys rice, lentils, spices, and chicken. The whole room is filled with the aroma of food. Sitting in the empty room, she breathes deeply. She remembers her poor mother and her two little brothers.

She does not have to go hungry any more. She is so happy now that she can eat to her heart's content. Mother said that she had her off so that she could eat well.

Rahmat is moody. He has to get hot steaming rice with his favourite curry the moment he returns home. If the food is not to his liking, he just flings away the whole plateful of rice. Atari has to cook again after cleaning the floor. Then she cajoles him and makes him eat.

Occasionally she feels very angry. Can he show his anger whenever he pleases, just because he is a man? Atari can be angry too. She has to pick up the grains of rice one by one from the floor. Doesn't she feel the pain? But the sweet damp smell of rice sweeps away all her grief.

Mother, Aunt Kaliman, and Grandma Monowara say, "Men are supposed to be bad-tempered."

Can men do whatever they want? Looking at the moonlit sky, Atari sighs.

Just the other day, her whole heart had burned with indignation.

It was morning. She was cleaning small fish. Rahmat was wiping the rickshaw with a torn piece of cloth in a corner of the slum. He was supposed to go out to ply the rickshaw after eating. Rahmat was singing happily while cleaning the rickshaw, "O Sakhina, you have forgotten me? Now I ply rickshaws on the streets of Dhaka."

Pushing aside the hessian curtain hanging at the door, Atari saw Sakhina, a girl from the slum, going to fetch water from the roadside tubewell with a pitcher on her hip. The teenage Sakhina was almost rolling over with laughter at Rahmat's song. "Mia Bhai can sing very well."

Atari didn't have the courage to say anything to Rahmat. She stared fixedly at the rice boiling on the stove.

She cried out in anger, "Shut up, shut up. Isn't there any other song in this world than this?"

Rahmat rushed into the room. He said angrily, "What is it to you if I sing this song?"

She didn't know from where she got the courage but she screamed aloud, "It doesn't bother me. But that whore, the way she was laughing, didn't you see?"

Rahmat was surprised. The gluttonous hag didn't pay attention to anything other than food. But she had started noticing everything.

"What the hell are you saying?" Rahmat grabbed Atari by her curly hair. "What did you say? Say it again."

Atari became limp with fear. Her throat and tongue felt parched.

Rahmat's beatings, his angry abusive words -- these are nothing new. Why, just a few days after their marriage, Rahmat went out with his rickshaw. He said that he would return at noon and they would have their meal together.

But noon advanced into afternoon, still he didn't come. Her stomach rumbled with hunger. "Eh, do you think this is my mansion? You have absolutely nothing to do all day except eat."

Rahmat doesn't eat cold rice. She had cooked the rice at noon. She thought after eating she would soak the rest of the rice in water. It was cheap, coarse rice. It would start to smell if left for sometime in the hot weather. Rahmat never eats stale rice. He only eats hot fresh rice. Anu Bu, who lived in the next shack, said, "Men are moody and hot-tempered, Atari Bhabhi."

But why so much?

Kicking the plate aside, Rahmat said, "You just waste your time the whole day, don't you?"

O, Ma, when does she waste her time? Rahmat warns her, "Never go outside the room. I have a good reputation."

Atari cannot agree with Rahmat. She wants to give him a rude answer. But an icy fear chokes her. They don't have anything except reputation.

Atari takes up the plate she has put aside and starts eating. She has to cook fresh rice for Rahmat.

In the dark of the night, she wakes up. Rahmat is pulling her to him. His hard, iron-like hands are tender. The angry tone that is always in his voice is not there. His voice is filled with fondness and love.

"My darling, my dear Atari, Atarjan, my mayna."

Atari melts like soft butter on Rahmat's chest. Her breathing becomes deeper and heavier. Rahmat whispers something in her ears just when she is about to surrender herself completely to him.

Atari asks in a voice, still heavy with desire, "What did you say?"

"I want to marry Sakhina. All you have to do is give your consent. I will keep you happy, you can eat as much as you like...."

Rice, rice, and more rice.

In the dark room, Atari can imagine the grains of rice white as jasmine blossoms dancing before her eyes. But her mouth doesn't water at all at the thought of rice. The old desire for food has disappeared completely. Her body becomes cold under the sticky sheet. All of a sudden, her twenty-year-old body loses all desire. Her heavy breathing becomes normal. In the darkness, Atari hisses, "You dog, you son of a bitch."

Rahmat shakes the body clad in a striped sari. "What's the matter?"

Atarjan, turning away, tells him, "It's very cold."

"What do you mean, cold? Are you crazy? Tonight is so full of fun."

Outside, the last rains of Sravan are pouring down. The continuous sound of the rain fills the room with a strange intoxication. Rahmat is burning with desire. He feels a shiver run through his whole body. Just when he was about to have this girl like an obedient waiting maid, Atari had turned cold as ice.

Above the sound of the rain, Atari can hear the imminent wedding music. Faced with the maddening music of Rahmat and Sakhina's union, the promise of food does not stir her any more. Between her two breasts, where the silver locket that Motijan gave her swings, she can feel wave after wave of anger swirling, just like the sea at high tide during a full moon.

In the morning, she does not do her usual work. She packs all her things in a small bundle. Inside are her comb, mirror, cheap powder and lipstick.

Rahmat asks angrily, "Where are you going?"

"Khilgaon."

Rahmat laughs loudly. "Your mother works as a maid in people's houses. She can't even feed you properly once a day."

Rahmat goes to the neighbour's shack and says, "She is angry. Give me a plate of rice, Anu Bu. Her anger will go away when she sees the rice."

Garrulous Latifa enters the shack. "What is the matter, Atarjan Bhabhi? Are you very angry? What's it to you if Sakhina Bibi comes as your sotin, as your co-wife? It's okay with us if we get enough food to eat. What do you say?"

Banu says, "Oh, only food won't do. She has to have her husband as well."

Amena says, "Shut up, just shut up, don't talk so much. The husband will be cross."

Anwara Bu places a big plate of rice in front of Atari. The hot steaming rice is heaped on the plate. Around the mound of rice are spoonfuls of curries cooked in different shacks of the slum. It is as if Rahmat wants to intoxicate her with rice. There is dried fish cooked with kochu lati, thick masur dal with plenty of onion and chillies, small fish, also bharta pungent with mustard oil.

Rahmat says coolly, "Come on, Atari, eat. Anu Bu, there are chillies on the stove, roast them for her."

Grandma Amenah says, running her hand over Atari's head, "You have to listen to your husband. Otherwise, you will be committing a sin. Come on, eat."

Atari looks at everyone around her. Yes, today she will commit a sin. She will not listen to her husband. Today her mouth does not water, but there are tears in her eyes. She looks with loathing at the plate of rice. Taking the small bundle in her hand, she stands up. Stepping outside the door, she says loud and clear, "You and your rice can go to hell."

The story, abridged, is part of Jharna Das Purkayastha's collection of short stories, *The Blue House*, edited by Niaz Zaman and published by writers.ink



Soumitro Dev

River and maiden

If  
the  
river  
can roll on and on till it  
meets the sea,  
then  
when  
will you, o wild madden,  
be mine?

Silchar  
That Cloud-nymph had  
leant forward  
so near my lips, saying  
"The weather is stifling  
here in the town now  
Stay back for a day or two  
and we shall wade  
together  
in sea-less saline waters."

I gazed out at the endless  
horizon  
through that fathomless  
window.  
Not far from here  
loom the shadows of  
those blue mountains  
at whose feet nestles that  
town of poets.

The skiff of the moon  
The skiff of the moon  
floated  
on the waters of the lake,  
while with me there was  
none  
but Labonyo.

Labonyo, on top of your  
nose  
have gathered droplets of  
perspiration  
and before the last poetry  
sounds  
there is only but separation  
The suburb  
The City wed the Village  
next door.  
And the Village -- a spidery mother --  
died in childbirth.  
The newborn babe was  
named the Suburb.  
The child began to grow  
gradually....

## NON-FICTION

## The struggle for Mother Teresa

ZEENAT KHAN

A recent edition of *Time* magazine had a short featured article under Postcard: Kolkata, written by Nilanjana Bhowmick. The bi-line says "The fight for Mother Teresa's remains." Mother Teresa is synonymous to India or in the context of the slums of Calcutta. On the eve of her upcoming centenary of birth in August 2010, Albania has demanded that her body be exhumed and flown back to Albania to be buried next to her mother and sister at the Albanian capital, Tirana.



Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha made this demand to the government of India. It is predicted that Albania will most probably campaign with more intensity to claim her remains before her upcoming birthday. Since this official request was made, the entire nation of India is appalled. There have been protests and the nuns of Mother Teresa's order are wondering why Albania would raise the issue since Mother Teresa had little connection with the country, where she spent her adolescent years only. Fearing that Macedonia may also make such an unreasonable request, West Bengal's million member state forum has called for a mass protest, according to the magazine. The Indian foreign office has issued a statement saying, "Mother Teresa was an Indian citizen and she is resting in her own country, her own land." Her own Missionaries of Charity order has described such a

request as absurd. Mother Teresa was born Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu to her ethnic Albanian parents, who went to Albania from Macedonia. She was born in Skopje, Albania, which is now part of Macedonia, on August 26, 1910. She left Albania at age 18 when she felt there was a higher calling for her to go and to help others in a distant part of the world. Upon arriving in Calcutta, she joined the sisters of Loreto convent and taught there. That school was primarily for the privileged children of Calcutta. She later roamed through the streets of Calcutta and was very saddened by the plight of the "untouchables", the poor and the hungry. She decided to leave the convent to help the poor. She later founded the Missionaries of Charity.

From then on the poor and the needy in Calcutta had Mother Teresa, who relentlessly tried her best to help them. She was a symbol of grace who helped others to overcome struggle and tragedy and taught them to replace them with promise and dignity. To her each life was precious. Given an opportunity one can overcome all sorrows and difficulty and can fulfill their lives with hope. To her life