

## SHORT STORY

## Tamarind Pickle

SABREENA AHMED

Ali stepped up the red stairs of the old building. It seemed like the Chhoto Zamindar's house of the village next to his. He looked at the worn out corners of the stairs. Plasters and paints of the high ceiling of the veranda were peeling off in many places. They looked like yellowish blisters on the maroon walls of the mosque-like building.

"Are you new here?" Ali turned around and saw a teenager standing in the yard. He was wearing white punjabi-pajama and a prayer cap. "Are you new here?" The boy repeated. Ali nodded. "I am Hasan." The boy came to Ali and put his hands on his shoulders and introduced himself. "Where are you from?" "Gopalganj." "Oh! It's not far from here. Did you come alone?" "Yes, I was told to meet Head Moulvi of the madrasa.

"Come with me, I'll take you to his room." Both the teenagers started to walk through the long veranda. The sunlight pierced through the bougainvillea's leaves and danced on the yellow mosaic floor of the corridor. Ali noticed that Hasan was not wearing anything warm. His lanky hand brushed against Ali's a few times. Ali stopped for a moment and placed the folded bedding that he was carrying on his shoulders on the floor. His mother had packed different types of dry pithas in large cans and tied them with the bedroll. The tin cans clanked as Ali started to drag the bedroll over the floor. Hasan grabbed the rope of the bedroll to stop Ali and warned him, "Don't you drag that! We are not allowed even to speak in a loud voice, or run through the corridor, and that thing is making a big din."

Ali was taken aback by Hasan's reaction and behaviour. He lugged the huge thing back again on his shoulder.

Head Moulvi was a middle-aged man with a long flowing beard. Ali was trying to count the grey strands in his beard while the large man examined Ali from head to toe with his keen piercing gaze.

"Hmmm, your mother informed me that your father passed away two months ago. Did you study in any madrasa or school before coming here?"

"Yes, Sir. I was studying in class VII at our village school."

"Don't use 'Sir', the Head Moulvi said in a stern voice. "Teachers here are called Huzur."

"All right, Huzur." Ali was nervous. His palms were sweating as he stood there with his head lowered.

"Mashallah, you've studied a lot. But you also have to earn some suwab by following the path of Allah and learn to read scriptures in the right way. We'll be teaching you all those."

Right at that moment another Huzur came in with a tasbeeh in his hands. He was tall, stout and had a friendly smile. All the teachers

and students were wearing punjabi-pajamas and prayer caps in this madrasa. It reminded Ali of the science fiction story he had once read. In the story, all human beings had the same appearance and dress. They were identified by a specific number written on their nameplates.

"Assalamu alaikum, Quadir shahib. This is our new student. Mobarak Mia of Gopalgonj has sent him."

"Olaikum Assalam. Alhamdulillah. What's your name my son?"

"Mohammad Ali."

Head Moulvi got angry. "Don't you know the minimum courtesy, boy? You should have greeted Quadir Shahib with salam."

"It's all right. He'll get to learn everything in time."

Quadir Shahib smiled as he patted Ali on his back, "Aren't you hungry, my dear? You have travelled a long way. Huzur, send him to the dining room and I'll tell the cook to give him something to eat. Then he can attend the class."

Ali felt comfortable at this generous man's touch. He reminded him of his father who had passed away just months ago.

After having some refreshments, Ali took a bath and wore the white punjabi-pajama given by the officials of the madrasa. He attended the last class of the day with the students of the eighth standard. The lunch was served in the big dining room where long low tables were placed in rows. Everyone sat on the floor mat to have their meals. Each student had to wash his plate and glass after lunch was over. Ali went to the cemented square shaped tank that had several water taps. It was actually the backyard of the madrasa. While waiting in the queue with the other boys, Ali's eyes roamed around the whole compound. There was a narrow, grilled iron gate at one corner of the boundary wall. An eight or nine year-old girl was standing on the other side of the gate. The moment Ali's eyes fell on her, she moved away. Ali found it amusing and went towards the gate. He peeped through the iron grills and found the girl leaning on her back on the left wall.

"What's your name, Khuki?" The girl was scared and retreated a few steps. "I won't harm you, come here. Why are you so scared? Come here." Ali unlocked the gate and stepped out. "What's your name?" The girl leaned on the wall and chewed the frilled white collar of her pink frock.

"Rumki." She mumbled. The girl was reasonably fair. Her oily, dark hair was tied up in a pony tail. Ali looked at the dusty feet which she had crossed one over the other. And her hands were kept behind her back. "Where do you live?" Rumki raised her right hand and pointed to a faraway old house beyond the big field. And right at that moment a few marbles dropped from her hands. She bent over to pick up the

marbles and Hasan came out of the gate.

"Hey you! You've come here again! Haven't we told you to stay away from the area of our madrasa? Go away right now!"

Rumki, startled, ran away leaving the last two marbles on the ground. Ali was very surprised to see Hasan's rudeness.

"Why did you scare her away?"

"Our teachers forbade us to speak to her. She steals things from everyone's house. Don't let her come near you."

Hasan went inside the boundary, to the backyard. Ali picked up the left out marbles and followed him. He wanted to know more about Rumki. She reminded him of his youngest sister Amena. Only Amena would be a year or two younger than her.

The next day went by very quickly. Ali tried to mingle with all the other boys of his class. He had become popular for his skills as a good batsman while playing a cricket match. Right before the Magrib azan, all of them picked up their bats and wickets and went inside to have odhu and perform namaz. Ali's eyes went again to the small gate of the backyard. Rumki was standing there with a two-year-old in her arms. Finding no one else around, Ali went towards the gate and beckoned Rumki to come to him. He took the marbles out of the pocket of his punjabi and gave them to Rumki.

"Is she your sister?"

Rumki nodded and smiled bashfully. Her silver nose-pin shone as she moved her head.

"What's her name?"

"Chutki." The baby responded by touching Rumki's cheeks and babbling some meaningless ecstatic sounds at hearing her own name.

"Are you only two or you have more brothers and sisters?"

"We have cousins in our house."

"I have a sister... Amena. She is of your age. And my father... died... two months back."

For the first time, Rumki looked into his eyes directly. She seemed to be interested in knowing more about his family.

"I miss him a lot. My mother thought that it would be better for me to come to this place and sent me here. I miss Amena too. She kept holding my hand when I was about to leave. It was hard to let go of her and get out of the house that day."

Rumki looked at him silently for a while. Ali was waiting for her to speak up. She gave Ali a tiny packet.

"What's this?"

"Tamarind pickles. I made it."

"Thanks. Who taught you to make it?"

"My Ma and khalas (aunts). All of them love it and we also sell it in the market."

"And what does your father do?"

Rumki looked disturbed at the question and lowered her head.

"I have to go. I've been out for long."

She walked towards the old building she had pointed out the previous day.

The next few days Ali did not find Rumki at the usual place. He was feeling guilty about asking about her father. Maybe he had died and Rumki did not want to talk about it. Ali

should not have hurt her feelings. But how he could have known about it?

After ten or fifteen days, Ali saw Rumki again on the field. He went out of the gate and beckoned to her. Rumki had Bokul flowers gathered in a gamchha.

"What will you do with these?"

"I'll make a garland. I like the smell of Bokul very much."

Ali noticed a bruised spot on her left knee and asked, "How did you get hurt?"

"I fell down from the mango tree," Rumki giggled.

"I see, you keep jumping from one place to another like a monkey."

"Hey! Don't call me a monkey."

"What else would one call someone who keeps jumping from mango tree to Bokul tree?"

"If you call me by that name, I'll stop talking to you. And I mean it." Rumki sulked.

Ali tried to cheer her up, "Your pickle was very tasty. I loved it."

Her face lit up, "Really! I'll bring you some more then."

Ali hesitated, "Rumki, I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings the other day. It seemed that you didn't like my asking about your father."

Rumki was silent; her beautiful big eyes were trying to see through the teenager standing in front of her. She had to swallow the scorn of people around her all the time. Will this person be any different from them?

"Ali, Ali!" Moulvi Sir's voice could be heard. Ali rushed towards the madrasa.

Head Moulvi was standing on the veranda with intense rage in his eyes.

"Where have you been?"

"Huzur, I went to the big field over there."

"I've heard that you've made friends with the low class thief. Is it true? Tell me, is it true?"

Before Ali could answer his questions, a big slap on his right cheek threw him to the ground.

"I don't want anyone to go beyond the boundary wall and be close to that rastar meye."

It did not make any sense to Ali why everyone abhorred this little girl. The Quran itself teaches that "All men are equal!"

For several days Ali was kept under strict observation. Though he tried to concentrate on his studies, all these prohibitions could not stop him from thinking about her. What had enticed him to take the next big step his humanity or his indomitable curiosity of puberty? One evening when he was sent to the small shop by Quadir Sahib to buy a ream of paper, he sneaked out and went to Rumki's old house on the other side of the big field. It was farther than he actually thought it would be.

A large middle-aged woman showed up when he knocked at the door. The juice of betel leaf made her lips red; she was licking the lime on her forefinger with her red tongue.

"Yes...?" she asked in a reluctant, lethargic tone.

"Does Rumki live here?"

"Yes, who is asking?" The woman intoned in an unfriendly, husky voice.

"I'm Ali, I live at that madrasa. Rumki and I are friends. I've come to hear whether anything is the wrong with her."

"Wait here." The woman shut the door and went inside.

"Why did you come here?" A familiar voice made Ali turn around. Rumki was standing behind him with a thick branch of a mehendi tree in her hands.

"I came to see how you're doing."

"Everyone hates me... why do you care so much for me?" Rumki asked with annoyance. Ali kept silent.

"Don't you know that people don't socialize with a fatherless child here?" she continued.

"Has he passed away?"

"No, my mother says that he is alive."

"Really? Where does he live?" Ali was excited to hear it.

"I don't know. Mother says that he also used to wear white punjabi-pajama and a cap like all of you. After a moment's silence she added, "I always keep searching for him everywhere."

Their conversation stopped as suddenly the door of the house was flung open.

"You slut! Why did you go there and bring him here?" A thin lady came out of the house and threw Rumki to the ground by dragging her pony tail.

"Wasn't it enough that you came into this world?" The lady snatched the branch of mehendi from Rumki's hand and started to thrash her.

"Ma, I didn't tell him to come here. Believe me!"

Five or six women had come out of the house. All of them were giggling. They all wore colourful red, green and yellow saris. Their gaudy make-up and heavy ornaments were flashing brightly. One of them had held Chutki in her arms.

The large woman piped up, "Look! The little girl is picking up pretty soon. She also got herself a punjabi-wala like her mother."

The loud laughter of the women pierced Ali's ears. Rumki was bruised all over while her mother kept beating her like a mad woman. Ali moved forward to stop Rumki's mother. This added fuel to the woman's anger and she whipped the girl with yet greater gusto.

Rumki pleaded, "Please leave me alone. Go away, or they will beat me to death."

Ali looked at the little girl lying on the dust, bearing the pain in silence. He could hear the loud, sarcastic laughter of the women that kept echoing behind him till he reached the madrasa. It merged with the Esha azan that was summoning all the Mu'min to the mosque. Ali's sad eyes fell on a tamarind tree on the right side of the path. Rumki was pretty good at making others taste her sweet and sour tamarind pickle. She really was!

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## NOTES

## Literary Encounters in Dhaka, Chittagong

ASFA HUSSAIN, TANVEERUL HAQUE

*Literary Encounters* is a new program initiated by the Goethe Institut, implemented by its partners and in particular by The Reading Circle (TRC) to introduce contemporary translated German literature to audiences in Dhaka and Chittagong.

"The Reader", a well known novel by the German author Bernhard Schlink was presented, read and discussed on 9 March 2011 at the Goethe Institut Dhaka by the members of the TRC. Syed Badrul Ahsan, Tanveerul Haque, Asfa Hussain, Jackie Kabir, Shahruk Rahman and Saeeda Khan. Earlier, on 17 January 2011 a project contract was entered into between TRC and the Goethe Institut to hold joint literary programs on a continual basis. Eighteen copies of "The Reader" were presented on the occasion to TRC by Angela Grunert, the Director of the Institut. TRC was to distribute the books amongst some of its readers and distribute some copies to universities and non-profit literary organizations and partners.

On the invitation of the Goethe Institut, TRC presented "The Reader" in Chittagong in collaboration with its partners there. The book presentation was made first at the Asian University for Women (AUW) on 23 March at 4 p.m. It was an enjoyable and educative experience for us to be at the exceptionally well equipped and well located temporary campus of the university. The diverse international student body was appreciative and attentive and enthusiastically applauded when it was mentioned that TRC members had read and discussed 60 books in the last five years.

Asfa Hussain, Tanveerul Haque and Shahruk Rahman were the three members of TRC who visited Chittagong courtesy of the Goethe Institut. Unfortunately our dear founder member Dr. Niaz Zaman could not make the trip but was regularly updated on our progress in Chittagong. Angela Grunert,

the outgoing Director of the Goethe Institut, her successor Judith Mirschberger and Miriam Styrnol, who was based in Chittagong, were part of the team. Later in the evening, the team was treated to a sumptuous dinner at the home of Asfa's niece Neera and Rafay Nizam. TRC was introduced by the Director of the Goethe Institut to their two partners in Chittagong, the other being Bishaud Bangla, where the presentation was made on 24 March at 6 p.m.

Bishaud Bangla, founded by Alam Khorshed

*Shatranjis* were rolled out for the discussants and the evenings proceedings were conducted in a typical Bangalee tradition on the floor. The trip itself was educational for all of us. We traveled by bus on 22 March and returned by train on 25 March. For Asfa it was a rare experience she had last made a journey by train 46 years earlier, that too to Kolkata, in 1965! The change she experienced related not only to the train itself but the passengers as well. She wished that all the passengers would be educated



and his wife Mahia Abrar, radiates the charm and literary energy of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century European intellectual salons; and, closer to home, the book shops and coffee houses of Kolkata. It houses a rare collection of pre and post liberation posters, photographs, writings, books and journals mingled with the delicious aroma of brewing tea. It's a place charged with Bangladeshi historical and cultural literature, music, paintings, ethnic and tribal clothing and curios, indigenous pickles, rare varieties of rice and such.

to use our national assets and property with care and responsibility, to be competitive with the other South Asian nations. "The Reader" is a phenomenally successful novel and has been translated into 36 languages. It has been made into an Academy Award winning movie starring Kate Winslett, who won the Oscar for Best Actress in 2006. The story begins with the accidental meeting of a 15 year old boy, Michael Berg, with the 36 year old woman Hanna, who then becomes his lover. Suddenly Hanna disappears from the boy's

life. As a student of law and a grown man, Michael Berg comes across Hanna years later again accidentally in a courtroom where she is the principal defendant in a heinous war crime committed during the Second World War. She stands accused as a prison guard who failed to unlock the doors of the church in which the prisoners are trapped as the church burnt down, killing almost all the captives except a woman and her very young daughter, due to bombardment by the Allied Air Force. As the trial progresses, Michael Berg realizes that Hanna is willing to go to jail rather than reveal to the world the "shame" of her illiteracy. Michael watches helplessly as Hanna rescinds her right to defend herself and is given a life sentence. In prison Michael sends tapes of his own readings of various books to satiate Hanna's appetite for reading which she is unable to do by herself. Over the years of her imprisonment, Hanna painstakingly teaches herself to read and write and sends a few short handwritten notes to Michael to which he does not respond. The adolescent Michael's affair with Hanna scars him for life. He marries and has a daughter but the marriage ends in divorce. He has ephemeral relationships with many women but Hanna continues to overshadow his psyche. One day the prison warden writes to inform Michael that shortly Hanna is to be released and Michael being Hanna's only acquaintance, the warden wishes Michael to take Hanna into his care. Michael visits Hanna prior to her release and makes preparations for her rehabilitation. On the day of her release Michael arrives at the prison only to be told that Hanna committed suicide the night before leaving a note that her personal savings be handed over to the little girl who had survived the church fire.

Asfa Hussain is an advocate and Tanveerul Haque is a businessman. Both are members of The Reading Circle.

## POETRY

## Story of my life

IMREZ CHOWDHURY

I am/

such a wasteful commotion in time/  
plagiarized poetry of fumbling rhymes/  
telling the tale of the most ancient crime:/  
love has lasted the test of time.

Morning stinks in her misty mouth/  
as her body moves from north to south/  
spiraling bed-spread lay lustful mime/  
days to rejoice my melancholic hymn.

Up and Go/

I cruise through the town/  
celebrate my loyalty like a circus clown/  
and return to darkness ravaged, run down/  
my everyday story is a merry -go-round.

I dine/

with my fiancé and fright/  
between darkness and delight/  
in candle night/  
sipping some savory saga of wine.

I waste my breath/

day in and day out/  
among estranged faces/  
and strange places/  
where silence is heard/  
loud, aloud.

I am lost/

in the nick of time/  
telling the tale of the most ancient crime:/  
love has lasted the test of time.

Imrez Chowdhury is a poet.