

FICTION

TRIBUTE

Between two worlds

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Bhojohari likes to sit out in the garden and enjoy the music coming from the Dhols they are playing at the coolie colony. The sound is so high that it is coming over surrounding gardens and jungles to reach Bhojohari's ears. The music is travelling with the wind, appearing as if it is competing with the clouds. The reason for the festival is that the coolies hunted a wild pig around noon. The festival is for this occasion. Hunting a wild pig makes it easy for any festival to cheer up. As the drum beating increases, so does the pace of the wild dance, and consumption of indigenous liquors the coolies prepare. The entire scene changes, and with that the faces also change very soon. Bhojohari thinks that he can never get such wild in a festival like this, ignoring all earthly concerns like these coolies do!

Something seems to get stuck in his chest. He becomes sad. He cannot remember when he was born in a tea garden of Assam, when his parents moved from Assam to this tea garden here at Teliapara, when they died and when his younger brother left this world because of a poisonous snake bite. All these are stories to him now. Bhojohari does not want to think about them. He only knows that he has turned over sixty. Now as the beating of the drums reaches his ears, it only does that, it does not enter his heart! Everything gets clouded out by a huge sadness. All this started the day the Babu's wife committed suicide by hanging from the ceiling. For him and for the coolies, the garden's executive clerk, the Babu, is the immediate big boss!

Bhojohari sometimes walks around. He stops at the border and looks on the other side. Sometimes he crosses the border and looks around. As he looks around, a strange and unique wonder gets into his eyes. It seems he is searching for something he has lost, part of which seems to be on the other side and part of it is on this side. Bhojohari stands on this side and looks over the small hills on the other. It seems a strange mystery attracts him from there! To him, the watch towers used by the border guards also appear to be mysterious! He stands close to the border pillars and thinks that a long time ago there were no such borders. A long time ago his parents did not have to be transported in closed railway wagons like cattle, like his parents. Many were brought here from the Indian state of Bihar. To Bhojohari, everything conceals some mystery, which makes him sadder. It appears to him that sadness hangs over the border like fog on the fields. Once he enters this mystery, his existence fades into the yellow saree in which the Babu's wife died by hanging herself. Even though she was Bhojohari's age, he had to address her with respect because the Babu or Clerk was his boss. He did not wish to address her that way. This is the woman he loves, one who attracts him, and when he comes close to her, his body trembles, whose fragrance he can enjoy with all his senses. Why should he have to address her that way? When Bhojohari became a full cook with this agony, it was the day when his Princess committed suicide.

Bhojohari asks why she had to do it. The Princess had taught him how to prepare many dishes. He learned a variety of dishes from her. He has not forgotten any recipe she taught him even now. So why did she leave him like this? The other day he was standing behind the house and was crying. He only thought: why did you have to die? Didn't you tell me that when I became a full cook, you would enjoy all the dishes I prepare for you? Bhojohari still trembles when he thinks about all these. He asks: why did you have to die? Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you ask me to run away together, because you knew I, Bhojohari, was all for you all the time?

Bhojohari stands close to the border pillars and looks in the distance. He rebukes himself. Are you crazy? Did you have the courage to tell her anything? She was a Princess. A Princess never holds the hand of a commoner. She probably never looked at your face really well. Then why?

The reason for the Princess's suicide is not yet clear to him. People say her husband flirted with coolie women by bringing them to the bungalow. That's why she committed suicide. The elite class bosses do such things. Bhojohari has been observing this since his childhood. What's wrong with it! He has seen his Princess cry many days. Even though it hurt him quite a lot, he did not have the courage to ask her about it. When he remembers her swollen red eyes, Bhojohari's own eyes brim with tears. He does not wipe off these tears. He rather lets them flow unhindered.

Bhojohari now leaves the border pillars and starts walking along the railway tracks. He will go to the station. You can see many faces at the railway station. He enjoys seeing them. He remembers his father came on such a train. His Princess also went to her father's house in Dhaka city by riding such a railway train. For several days the train does not stop at this railway station. It whisks away in a flash.

Bhojohari keeps working along the railway tracks. Tilak calls him from behind:

___ Uncle, where are you going? You are invited to our village tonight. Are you coming?
___ I'll come in the evening, not now.
___ Where are you going?
___ I don't know.

Bhojohari keeps walking. Tilak makes faces from behind. Then he runs towards his village. Bhojohari turns around and sees him. He wonders where he will go. This is a small place. There is really no new place that he has not visited. This area comprises one tea garden, some farmers' houses and coolie habitations. Gofur's farming land extends to the borders. The cows sometimes trespass into the other

side. Bhojohari has a special weakness for these cows. He recalls that in his childhood, he saw his mother cherished a strong desire to keep a cow which would give her milk. Her desire was not fulfilled. His father squandered away the earnings of both his mother and himself on indigenous liquors.

Bhojohari approaches the jungles. He sees wild pigs coming down the slopes. They stop when they see him. Then they wag their short tails and re-enter the jungles, Bhojohari sometimes gets very close to them. The wild beasts open their black eyes and look at him.

Bhojohari does not like to hunt. The Princess once said, "Don't cook bird's meat, Bhojohari. It hurts me to see anyone hunting birds."

Bhojohari has obeyed the Princess's instructions word for word thus far. Yet in just two years the Princess left this world completely overturned, destroying him. Now he has no place to go. When strong grief starts affecting him, he returns to the bungalow. They have lighted the *hajak* lamps on the second floor. These can be seen from far away, these



Photo: Alnon N.

lights help people to identify their routes. It seems to Bhojohari that these lights are a guide not only for outsiders, but also for him. Sometimes he gets lost trying to find him the right direction. Everything appears to him to be unfamiliar. At this time these lights provide the needed help.

Bhojohari hears this increasing beating of the drums even after returning to the bungalow. The Garden Manager has gone to Dhaka. Therefore, there is not much work here. He once thinks that he will go to the coolie colony, eat the wild pig meat, consume the indigenous liquor, and dance and sing around in ecstasy. He thinks but then backs out. His desire fizzles out. Why does it happen like this? Why do grief and sorrow dominate everything? Is this what living means, passing days waiting for the Princess? What's the use of waiting for someone who will never come back? A strong sense of grief bursts inside his chest, as in a burning funeral pyre. Bhojohari thinks he is not really waiting for the Princess to come back. He is really waiting for the Princess to send him a message from Heaven. That message would light up his heart. His heart will beat like the drum. Only then a good day will come into his life.

But in this village what is really a good day? There is not much of quietness around. Sometimes it appears that even strong winds do not blow here. Everything is known to him -- people, environment, railway tracks and as much as his eyes can see across the border. Then what new thing will happen in Teliapara village?

Bhojohari what his age might be. Definitely more than sixty years. He does not have much time left in his life. One day he will die either from the wounds inflicted on him by the wild pigs or by snake bite. Will the Princess then say, "Bhojohari, have you really come? Come, come near me." Will she recognize him at all? For how long has he to wait for another Princess?

Bhojohari yawns. He seems to become numb through fatigue. No one is at the bungalow. Everyone has gone to the festival. Darkness is everywhere. The darkness is beautiful. Someone has put in the lights there. Bhojohari's breathing increases. He sees these lights in the darkness with wide eyes. He does not feel sleepy any more. He continues to go around the bungalow in a daze which does not seem to go away. He extends his hands to hold the flowers; he looks at his own body. It seems that he has no clothes on. The flowery lights seem to have covered the nudity of his body. He starts to run. He has to reach the festival place. He has to tell the people, "Listen, you have another festival coming. Get ready. You have to take part in that one too."

Bhojohari does not know how long he has run. At this point it seems there is nothing anywhere. He seems to go high into empty space, then quickly falls down.

The next morning people working at the bungalow bring him up from the slopes of the railway tracks. Bhojohari cannot remember anything. He sleeps through the entire day, and in the evening he takes some milk and gets up. He is feeling all right now. He is feeling fresh.

The big boss, whom they address as Babu, returns in the evening and asks Bhojohari:

___ What happened to you, Bhojohari?
Bhojohari mutters:
___ Festival!
___ Did you want to go to the festival? Why didn't you go?
___ Lights.
Bhojohari's voice trembles. He sits up and

says, "Lights." He casts his glance at everybody with clouded eyes. Everybody seems unknown to him. He looks at Babu and says:

___ Sir, I saw flowers of lights blossom in this village. Thousands and thousands.....

Others present start to giggle and say:
___ Crazy whimsical thoughts of an old man!

One person says:
___ After so many years, why is this old man going crazy? He has probably seen somebody in dreams.

___ Oh no, no. I think fairies descended on him.
Bhojohari's eyes become redder. He shouts at them:

___ I am not crazy at all. I am all right. He forgets that he is sitting in front of Babu, the big boss. He is not supposed to speak in a loud voice in his presence. Since the young men continued laughing, Babu scolded them:

___ Stop. What has happened to all of you? Silence for sometime. As Babu extends his legs, the domestic servant comes forward and tries to unfasten his shoes. The Babu then

speaks out:
___ I have heard at the station that Dhaka city has turned very tumultuous now.

___ Yes. Something will happen this time.
___ Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman has asked everyone to be prepared for a war.

He has asked everyone to build a resistance fortress in every home.
___ Perhaps that will happen. We will have to go to war.

___ War?
Everybody is startled. Babu's voice gets lost in the excitement.

___ War, war.
The cry of war percolates through the room. The young men run into the dark. Babu asks in a surprised voice:

___ Where did the young people go?
Bhojohari's voice trembles in emotion. He says:

___ They have gone to inform everybody by beating the drum. War, war. They are the people who will fight in this war.

He himself gets lost in darkness as he keeps making these statements. It no longer appears that he felt sick last night and he felt dizzy. He had lost his senses. Now he is running around the bungalow. There is no darkness for him.

This village has become absolutely quiet. The tea gardens, jungles, the bungalow, the paddy fields, the railway tracks, and the railway station have become absolutely quiet. A sense of great anxiety is impacting everyone. Nobody is talking loudly. As if it is time for waiting.

Bhojohari thinks this waiting is more difficult than waiting for the Princess. Such a day never came in his life. He feels the sadness of his heart is wearing out. He is getting pleasure in preparing himself for the ensuing war.

They pass several days almost without sleeping. Nobody understands anything. One day Babu calls all of them in and says:

___ I have heard on the radio that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman has declared war.

Everybody asks the same question:
___ What do we have to do?

___ For the time being we have to wait. Let a few days pass. Then we will know what we have to do.

Everybody goes about his or her job. Bhojohari comes out. He tells himself, Princess, is it now time for you to come after all these days! He looks at the tea garden, the jungles, the wild pigs and those special trees. Now it appears that really something has happened. The drum beating by the coolies is now entering his heart: the drum is not beating outside the heart anymore. It is not possible for him anymore to hold himself. He utters, "Princess," "Princess" and enters the kitchen. It is there he first saw his Princess. Love began there. Bhojohari feels like crying a lot and he begins crying.

After about ten days, the Babu calls them all in and says:

___ Many guests are coming. We don't have any time. Each of you should carry on his or her responsibilities properly.

Then he calls out for Bhojohari:
___ Bhojohari?

Bhojohari seems to be ready:
___ Sir, the food will be ready no matter how many people come.

___ That's great.
The Babu's voice exhibits excitement. He looks at another person and says:

___ The library room has to be kept clean, including the big table in it.

___ Everything will be ready, Sir. There will not be an iota of dirt.

___ Where is the watchman?
___ Here, Sir. There will be no deficiency in watching. Even an insect will not be able to enter.

When the conversation ends, everybody goes about his or her job. They think that they have never seen a war. Probably war is like this. Nobody talks to another in a loud voice. They talk in whispers.

At the lunch time, Kalua asks:
___ Uncle, who will fight in the war?
Bhojohari's reply is unemotional:

___ We.
___ Then why do I hear that the Army Majors will come to fight?

___ Yes, they will come. They will tell us what to do. It is our war and we will fight it.
___ Weapons? Ammunitions?

___ Something will be done about them.
The Babu confronts them all:
___ The country has been occupied by the Pakistan army. If we all do not fight together,

how are we going to win?
___ Then it is not a war for the army majors to fight alone.

___ No. It is a people's war.
Bhojohari recalls that yesterday Gafur had told him the same thing. He said that in two or three days he would cross the borders, and go to the other side. He would become a freedom fighter, fight and liberate the country.

Bhojohari comes down to the garden thinking about Gafur. He gets the fragrance of the Princess's body when he stands near any tree. The smell that made him mad in his youth, it is the same smell. This new life in this village makes him cry again. He holds a *Nageswar* tree and cries his heart out.

Someone says from behind:
___ Don't cry, Bhojo uncle. Is it now time to cry?

___ Tears come to my eyes when I feel the Princess close to me.

___ Princess?
___ You will not understand.

___ Why shall I not understand? I have. You are talking about your love when you were young.

Bhojohari looks behind. There is no one there. Was he then talking to himself? Probably yes. He runs to the kitchen. He has to prepare food so that everyone can eat.

Guests are coming one by one. Some have already arrived. They are talking in loud voices in the library room. Bhojohari realizes clearly that in an ordinary and unknown place like Teliapara, there is no need to talk in a low voice.

Whenever a new jeep roars in, Bhojohari runs to see who has come. It seems to him that the military officer he saw on the other side of the border two days ago has also come. A short-statured man but very spirited. His moustache is shining. He has put on shorts and military boots. A few more people have come with him. Bhojohari knows nobody. He only understands they are army people. Someone says that one of the guests is Brigadier Pande, an Indian army officer. He is accompanied by Colonel Osmani from the Bangladesh side.

Bhojohari tries to return to the kitchen. He whispers to himself. It is a festival here today at the bungalow! The loud voices that are coming across are sounding like the beating of the drums. He feels like dancing today. Sadness cannot overwhelm him now. He feels like a free man again today.

At one time everybody leaves. The jeeps roar away in the background. Everybody in the bungalow surrounds the Babu. They want to know what was talked about.

___ We planned for the warthe Liberation War.

___ We'll do it here in our village?
___ Yes, yes. From now on this is a Liberation war village. A camp will be set up at

Agartala across the border. Those who will fight will get their training there.

___ If we go?
___ You'll get training. You'll learn how to operate weapons.

___ When will they give training?
___ After two or three days. I have heard a government-in-exile has been formed.

___ I shall go tomorrow.
Babu says in a permissive voice:

___ All of you are on leave with effect from today you don't have to work!
___ Leave? What a relief!

Some of those present make ecstatic sounds and come out.

The roaring sounds of jeeps come across over the wind even now, green colored jeeps.

Bhojohari comes to the open field. He sees Gafur and many others rushing towards him. A group of people. Bhojohari feels as if the entire village has come in front of him. He sees everybody carrying a rifle. Gafur takes a deep breath and says:

___ What has happened, Bhojohari? Why are so many jeeps around?
___ People wish to have consultations among them.

___ Consultation about what?
___ Consultation about the Liberation War.
___ Here in our village? Here in this rustic place?

___ Yes, of course. From now on this is a village involved in the Liberation War. We shall fight.

___ We'll do too. Let me go and make the necessary arrangements.

They rush back the same way they had rushed in. The quick steps of their feet move Bhojohari. He says, "Princess, I was never worthy of you. I know you never wanted me. Yet I felt pain for you. But now I am a worthy person of this village. This village is no longer an unknown neglected place. This has now turned into a place worth its name, a place involved in the War of Liberation."

"Princess, I am going to war. I do not have any worries anymore."

SELINA HUSSAIN IS A PRE-EMINENT BANGLADESHI LITERATEUR. KHASHRUZZAMAN CHOUDHURY IS A CRITIC AND TRANSLATOR.

NAUSHABA KHATOON

The Painted Veil

Those living call it life. Life, a bouquet of enigmatic questions. Life, the veil of red, yellow and blue, churning out hues galore. Questions, questions and questions. Come to think of it. When did the days of oneness, closeness, trust and trivial disagreements end? Where to hide the shock of humiliation, of rejection and the pain of a parting which only death was to provide? How to answer the children and the family, how to confront society, the questioning ensemble of lifted fingers? Where did things go wrong and start going downhill? Was it fate? Was it single-handedly so strong that could, in a flash, destroy a nest so neatly prepared and rip the non-biological tie of matrimony?

I do not know you. I have never seen you, but imagination says you have grace and sense of proportion. I will not write your name. There was only one pen which once sealed the books with genuine feelings. This name will go down in posterity along with his writings. Humayun Ahmed can never be parted from you even if he wants to. I do not in any way want to hurt you. I know nothing of your personal attitude. This tribute to you is based on thoughts and feelings conjured in my mind, plus some facts gathered from friends.

In this era of loose talk you have common sense. You know when to be away and not mess up matters, you also know when to enter and make your presence felt. It seems you also know how to be dignified and silent. As far as my knowledge goes, Syed Badrul Ahsan was the first person to mention you in his article, 'Pain and the remnants of love'. Even though you are a brave woman, your smouldering grief and anguish needed more sharing. Many people admire you, only that they are too shy to come forward say it to you.

There was a time when I had stopped reading Humayun Ahmed's new books or watch his new films. Maybe my expectations were too high for him, a mortal, to meet. There is a lot of his reading I have to catch up with now. May his soul rest in peace.

The children are the fruit of your patience and labour, a very mature set of siblings still needing your guidance.

Talk of a Cancer Hospital is in the air. Your whole hearted support is needed. Don't keep away. It will give you the much needed solace and also the chance to serve humanity.

Greatness cannot be confined to words, works and deeds alone. It has many manifestations. Mind as well as matter plays similar roles in achieving it. The choice of a definition is an absolutely individualized matter, so each to his own.

NAUSHABA KHATOON IS A WRITER AND LITERARY CRITIC.

POETRY

A Tree for Peace

ATIKA CHERRY

Don't expect love poem today
I can't I'll be busy
To catch and take care of
Every sick butterfly, every sick birdy.

Don't think that I don't love you
I love you, but I got all my time
For my feathered love- the winged beauty-

Each one is a Fairy! Fairy!
Look at them!

The world is in trouble
They are into it.
We are the cause-

"I" am the cause to make them homeless.

Homeless! Homeless!!
Do you know how fearsome?

Don't expect me for a date tomorrow
I'll be busy, I'll be busy with baby trees-
We will be applying formula, so that
The babies can grow faster with the speed of light.

All the homeless birds, butterflies
And some monkeys will be saved then.

Don't expect me at the seminars
That tags "Save the World"
I'm the sinner I can't just sit and talk

I saw burning pain in their homeless eyes
I'm going to them
I'll lie down, down to the soil
If the earth needs to be fertilized.

ATIKA CHERRY IS A POET.