



The Daily Star
EID SPECIAL

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FICTION

She

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FOUR years into her marriage, Lipi has her first real chance of becoming a mother. It is the village midwife Renubala who gave her the news, about a week ago, reminding her that motherhood at her age doesn't come easy. At her age? Well, let's not guess Lipi's age—it's not decent. Anyway, she couldn't be more than twenty three. What should rather concern us is the sudden pall of gloom that has descended on her. The news should have made her ecstatic; indeed, she should have been over the moon by now. Why, then, has she become so worried? Well, it is because her husband Gafur has told her that the child better be a boy. If it's a girl, he wouldn't be able to support Lipi any more. Gafur, a construction worker, had gone to the Middle East some years ago to try his luck. He had somehow landed a job in a desert strip that paid him well but didn't allow him to visit home more than once a year, and that too, for a mere three weeks. On each of his last three visits, he has tried as hard as he could to give Lipi the gift of motherhood. 'What is a married woman without a child,' he has told her, echoing his beloved mother, and his not-so-beloved father. But that gift has somehow eluded Lipi until this auspicious spring. Gafur's grandson-craving parents had of course come to believe that it was their son who was not ready to be a father—not yet. 'Why bring a child whose father would be nothing but an absence in his life?' he had told his parents, shielding Lipi from any accusation of barrenness. This time around he has not come home on a furlough but has been sent packing by his

employers forced to downsize their operation because of the global economic meltdown. Gafur is without a job now and will be staying home for at least a year. So when Renubala broke the news that he was going to be a father, he told Lipi, 'I have kept my part of the

thought of becoming a grandfather. 'All I want is a boy who will carry the torch of my family,' he has told Gafur over and over again. He somehow has never talked to Lipi. He hates her pretty face, her long hair and her shiny cheeks. He suspects her to be a 'fallen woman,' the kind who runs

for his son. When Gafur is away in the Arab desert, which is most of the year, Dulal Mia takes it on himself to keep an eye on Lipi the whole day, and a good part of the night as well, and particularly in the small hours when Lipi goes out to respond to the call of nature. He has forbidden her to go to the tattu—the loo, the bamboo fenced toilet that borders the family's backyard—without first waking him up. While Lipi is inside the tattu, Dulal Mia stands guard a little distance away with a four battery torch in hand. The tattu at night is nothing but the devil's brothel bed he has learned from his revered father. Lipi finds her visits to the tattu a real battle, on top of the ump-teen numbers of battles she has to fight every day.

What are these battles, you ask? Don't. We can't talk about them even with a fraction of the patience with which she has been fighting them. Our apologies.

Dulal Mia has partially retreated from view after Gafur's untimely return. But the nature of Gafur's return has created some additional problems. Coming back home with a pink slip is not the same thing as coming back on a sweet home leave. Dulal Mia has made the distinction quite clear. If Lipi gives birth to a daughter, he has told Gafur in no uncertain terms, mother and daughter would have to find food somewhere else. His booming voice was loud enough for Lipi to hear even if she were washing pots and pans in the pond, some distance away. Gafur sighed. 'Give me a son, Lipi darling,' he has pleaded with his wife.

Lipi took Gafur's hand into hers, and placed it on her swollen tummy. Her child was moving restlessly under her skin, giving her a

fright. What is this child doing? She wanted to know. Why is he kicking so, as if he wants to split my side and jump out into the world, much before his time? As if he were a tiny dinosaur, bursting out of an egg, determined to spread terror across the world?

The comparison with a dinosaur is of course, not Lipi's: it's ours. How can a village woman, who had only seen the inside of a school building once or twice, know about dinosaurs?

Gafur placed a gentle palm on Lipi's tummy. Wow! Smooth and cool as a watermelon. But whoa! What was that? God, that really hurt! Hadn't it been a full blown kick that had almost broke his fingers?

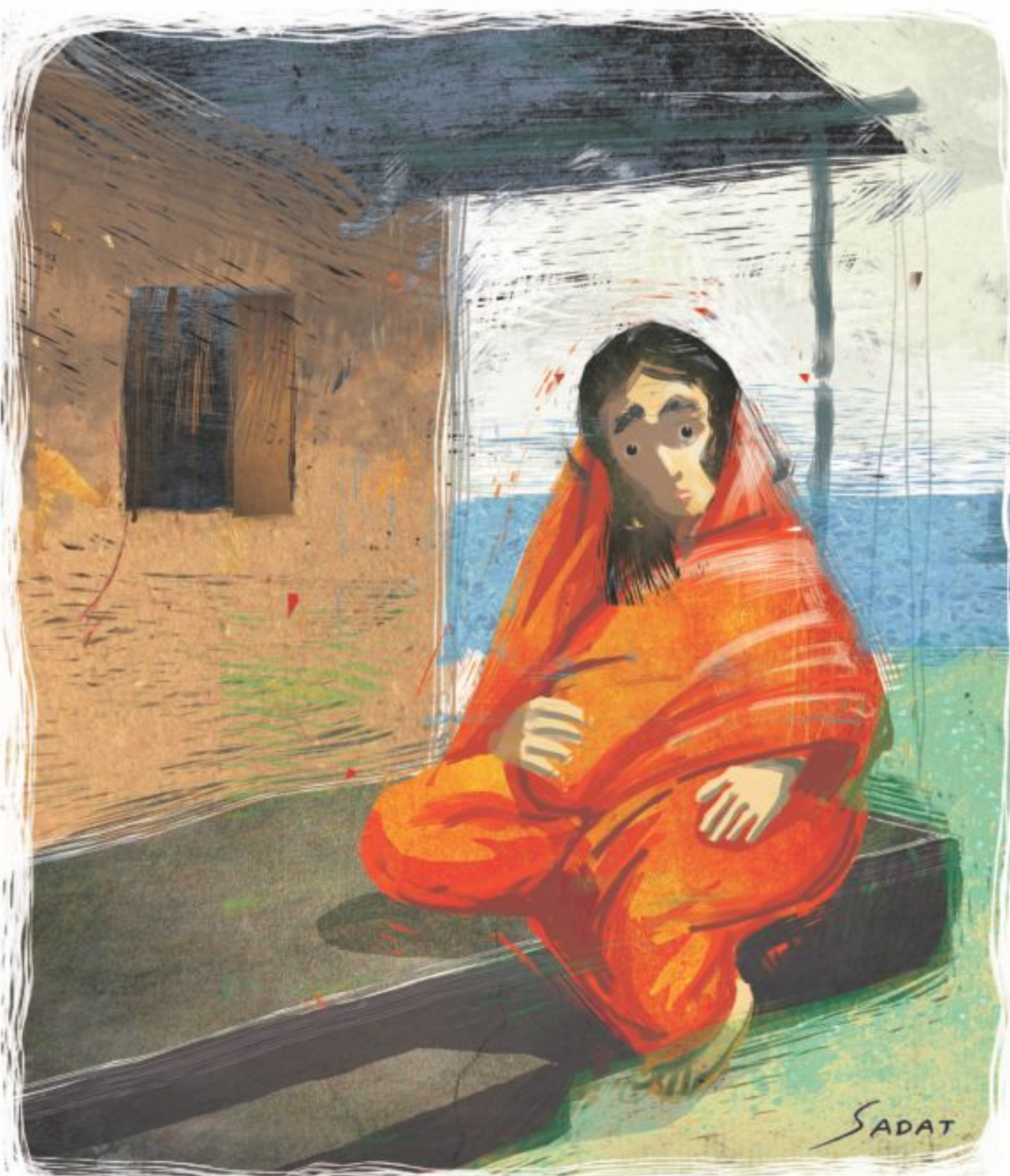
Gafur was ecstatic. 'My dear Lipi,' he moaned, muttered, and then screamed. 'It's boy. Who else but a boy kicks with such power? It's most certainly a boy.'

Gafur's ecstasy smoothed all the wrinkles of worry on Lipi's forehead. 'O Allah,' she exclaimed, lifting her head heavenwards, 'you've heard my prayers.' For a moment, she thought she could see the face of the child. A smaller, but much cuter version of Gafur, with no resemblance to that monster Dulal Mia.

Gafur, meanwhile, gave a huge shout of joy and began jumping up and down. The noise drew Dulal Mia to the scene. 'What's up, my son?' he asked, directing his beady eyes at Lipi.

'A boy,' Gafur said, his voice almost choked by emotion.

Dulal stole a glance at the exposed belly of Lipi which he thought was of the shape of Pradip Dhali's drum only much smoother. On an impulse he placed a hand on



bargain. Now it's all up to you.' Meaning, I gave you a child, now you must see to it that it's a son. If you can't, well, I can't guarantee what will happen next.

Lipi agreed. She knew all too well. Ever since his son's marriage, Dulal Mia, has been obsessed with the

away with the first man who happens to come along when the in-laws aren't watching. He also holds Lipi responsible for sending Gafur away from home, conveniently forgetting the fact that Gafur had been working in the desert strip well before Dulal Mia was sorting out potential brides

EDITOR'S NOTE

THE idea of a literary supplement on the occasion of Eid emanated from a conspicuous leap that Bangladeshi writing in English has recently taken. Alongside our seasoned authors, a comparatively younger breed has burst on to the literary scene. With critically acclaimed works of fiction and translation, this younger group as well as introducing Bangla literature to foreign readers has made their mark in international arena. In what was an enthusiastic manifestation of literary passion in Bangladesh, last year's Hay Festival Dhaka saw a spontaneous convergence of hundreds of authors, artists, literary circles, aspiring young authors and readers from different languages and cultures. The tremendous success of Hay has given us enough reason to believe that Bangladeshi writing in English is put on a stronger footing. It is with this conviction that we bring out this special literary supplement to give a spur to our young authorship. Works of seasoned authors reflect maturity, depth and consistency while those of the younger ones are marked at times by an excessive display of imagination. Even so, the younger authors have sparks of solid promise. Their originality and fascinating experimentation with form and language only reinforce our belief in them. We hope this supplement will