

FICTION

... The Theft ...

DILRUBA Z. ARA

She was shredding some spinach for supper. While her right foot kept the flat base of the foot-knife still on the floor, her hands moved up and down with a bunch of the green in between them over the curved blade that extended out of the wooden base to face her. Every now and then, she paused to wipe away the beads of sweat that broke out on her brow. Sometimes she spread out the growing mound of shredded leaves under the knife.

Her name was Ambia. Twentyish, quiet and well-built, she exuded energy. From where I stood, I could make out the solidity of her bottom, the roundness of her knees, and the tapered waist despite the layers of the red-bordered green sari she wore. The plunging neckline of the red blouse offered a glimpse of the hollow in between her winged collarbones. Atop her head, her stiff straight hair was coiled into a bun. On her chiselled nose, she had a small flower. Of fake gold. One could easily make that out from its shade; it had begun to fade out in the middle.

Ambia had only recently joined my sister's household as a maidservant. The previous one had been dismissed, because she ate rice four times a day. Ambia was from Mirpur, an area on the fringes of Dhaka, where stateless *Biharis* settled down after the liberation war in the early seventies. Like many *Biharis*, Ambia preferred chapatti to rice.

Ready, she gathered up the spinach in a colander and ran her fingers through the lot so as to separate every single piece. I turned to look outside. Along the edge of the window ran the artificial lake of *Shere Bangla Nagar*. From our building, several lights fell onto its rippling water, making the black surface flicker with the dust of gold in it. A breeze blew and the water glistened like silk. It had just finished raining, the air was still humid. Suddenly my niece Sara twitched in my arms. "What is it, dear?" I looked at her. She was staring at something in the dark, around the corner of our bowl-shaped building, where the lake bent and floated in between the next blocks of flats. Following her eyes, I discovered two dots of light in the darkness.

"Ah! It's a cat," I whispered. "Cat's eyes." Sara tightened her arms around my neck. "A black cat, that's why you can't see it," I added.

From behind Ambia's voice called out in broken Bengali, "Black cat?" Her mother tongue was Urdu. "Where is it?"

"Over there." I pointed out the eyes to her across the water. The two fluorescent green spots of lights.

"I hate black cats," she declared, standing behind me. "They bring bad luck." Her voice soared. For a moment, the green eyes were startled, but immediately afterwards they dissolved in the darkness. I turned and faced Ambia. Her black face had become still darker—a replication of the evening outside. Her eyes stared at the spot where the cat had been. "You know, the night my husband disappeared, a black cat was prowling in our neighbourhood." She murmured, "The country has been free for more than a year now, but my husband is still missing." She walked over to the tap in the corner to give the spinach a quick rinse: "It's not only that," she continued. "The day I slipped on our staircase and lost my tooth—that day too I had seen a black cat walking back and forth in our courtyard. My husband promised me that he would make me a gold tooth. But like my tooth, he too is now gone." Ambia moved the colander under the running water in small circles, "A hole in my set of teeth, and a hole in my life." The words made their way to

me over the sound of streaming water on the leaves.

The gap in Ambia's upper row of teeth couldn't be ignored. Whenever she smiled, her tongue-tip flicked through the gap. Red. Moist. Animated, like a snake's. It was obvious that she was uncomfortable with this imperfection. But what Ambia was not aware of was that it also had come in handy for her when she had applied for the maid's position at my sister's. My mother and sister had had an elaborate discussion about the pros and cons of having a woman like Ambia in the house; Ambia's age, size and shape were something of a headache, but this imperfection of hers had ultimately eased that anxiety. Ambia had been employed.

I had never before considered the import of beauty in the life of working class people, but as I stared at her now, a new understanding began to flow into my mind. Poor woman! Had she been born into an affluent family, or had her husband been around, she could have had a new tooth made. Porcelain one, if not one of gold. For sure, everyone has the right to feel beautiful, I thought. Who can claim the right to abolish the desire to feel beautiful from a human being's mind? How can anyone ever accept a permanent imperfection in her appearance when she is still as young as Ambia?

"Brother-in-law will be here anytime," I told her. "You'd better prepare his meal. I will listen to your story some other day." My parents had selected my brother-in-law from among numerous suitors. From her infancy, my sister had been an acknowledged beauty, and when she grew into a woman, she became a hot item in the marriage market. And my brother-in-law easily eliminated all other suitors to win her, for he had everything: a good family, a solid education, a well-paid job, and a handsome bearing. His grace was often compared with the moon, though the moon is round. Owner of two broad shoulders and a full head of black hair on the top of a trimmed and taut body, he stood six feet high. We were all very proud of him.

This was his apartment. It had two rooms opening on to a kitchen cum dining space, which turned into Ambia's bedroom during the nights. Sara and I shared the bedroom, and he had the lounge. Second time expectant, my sister had developed severe preeclampsia, and required close monitoring all through the third trimester of her pregnancy. So she was hospitalized and I was assigned by my parents to look after Sara and run the household in her absence. Every night, after tucking Sara into her bed, I helped my brother-in-law with the mosquito net over his bed. This night too, I entered the living room with the folded net in my arms. But as I proceeded towards the bed, he looked up from the book he'd been reading. "Leave that," he said. "Ambia will do that." He took up the book from his lap.

"But..." My eyes fell on the cover of the open book. Situations. Jean Paul Sartre. I would ask



my father to explain what it was all about, I thought. I couldn't help but marvel at my brother-in-law's mind.

"No buts. You are doing more than enough looking after Sara." His voice was firm. Startled, I looked up at his face over the book. The eyes were deep, sitting too close to one another, the white of the globes too prominent. The lips were fat and dark, almost purple. I wondered why this had escaped me before! A feeling of revulsion suddenly crept into my awareness. Within a fraction of a second, he turned into a person I knew nothing about. He reinstated the book in his lap and bent his head over it again, "Do as you are told!"

I left quietly and went to bed, but some time around midnight, I woke up with an odd feeling. I did not know what it was. Maybe it was an imprint of the feeling that I had experienced earlier at the sight of my brother-in-law's lips. Alternatively, it could also be that I needed to prove to myself that my thoughts were not groundless. Whatever it was, fighting my disquiet, I sat up on the bed.

After a few minutes, I lifted the mosquito net on my side and placed my feet on the floor. Though it was summer, it was cold underfoot and the coolness moved slowly up my body. I huddled within myself, my teeth hammering against one another. It took a while before I could stand up and tiptoe towards the door leading to the kitchen. The door was huge. Massive. Large with a transom window on the top of it reaching up to the ceiling. In the darkness, my eyes stumbled on it and my hands repeatedly felt the bolt. Nervous as I was, I couldn't unfasten it.

Before long, I went back to the side of the bed and brought a night table towards the door. Stretching my whole body, I stood on my toes on it. My heart pounded as I tried to look into the dining space. I must admit, I saw nothing, but my own shadow on the glass which made me start and forced me to swallow a mouthful of saliva. But, I wouldn't give in. I flattened my nose against the pane and was extra frustrated when there grew a round patch of steam dimming my vision. I wiped it away only to re-watch my own shadow over and over again. Something was going on the other side, I knew, yet I couldn't see anything. At the same time, with a part of my mind, I felt relieved that I could not be certain.

With time, a routine set in. Every night I would become a voyeur albeit an unsuccessful

one. During the day, I noticed the changes in Ambia; the anxiety that consumed her every action. Towards the evening, she would hurry to finish her chores, and sit down on the floor facing a broken mirror with some cut-price cosmetics in her lap. She powdered her face, lined her eyelids with kajal, tied a silk band around the bun on her head, oiled her ebony skin and coloured her lips with a very red stick. Every other day, she polished the fake gold flower on her nose. Now the petals of it shone like real gold. She did all these things, and murmured to herself, which I strained my ears to

listen to, but in vain. The moment my brother-in-law got home, she lapsed into total silence.

Three weeks passed. A hot afternoon. Lying next to me, Sara was fast asleep. From the corner of her mouth a thin thread of saliva crept forward to trickle down. I looked past her. A spider with an egg was walking on the wall. I wondered why it had the egg outside its body. The spider, the colour of a peanut shell, crawled on.

At that moment, I felt Ambia's hands. Soft on my heels. I moved my head a little and looked into her eyes. She was sitting on the floor. Her face was unmade up, the sari a mess, the blouse wrinkled. She can't play her tricks any more; my sister is coming home this evening, I thought, but asked with restrained resentment, "What's the matter?" She twisted a corner of her sari's end around her little finger. Her full lips shuddered. I could sense that words were gathering behind her lips, but she didn't know how to sort them out. Another few moments passed. The spider had almost reached the ceiling. Then she spoke, dispersing the haze that had been blocking my vision on the glass pane each night. My first reaction was one of repulsion and recoil. The second was to breathe deeply and gather my thoughts. I whispered:

"Then, why? Why, have you been making yourself up like this every day?"

"I am a servant...have no family..." she stammered. "Getting a job is difficult." She looked at Sara for a while, and a strange expression replaced her sad mien, "He keeps a gun, you know. He would have me arrested for theft if I left... Nobody has ever given me anything for free..." Ambia's words hammered in my brain; I both wanted to silence her and ask her more questions. But, instead I murmured, "Hmm..." Her hands were now on the edge of the bed and I noticed that they had crescent darkness under the nails. She continued, "But madam is coming home..."

Ambia had merely confirmed what I had been imagining, but facing the truth was more difficult than I thought it would ever be. My heart pounded: I inhaled a deep breath to collect myself, sat up, got to my feet, walked over to the closet and gathered all the money that I had to run the household, "Here. Take it! Go to a doctor or a midwife whatever... Go! Go! Leave this place at once."

I ran into the kitchen, and pulled out her

suitcase from inside the broom closet and stopped short for a moment. The old red suitcase suddenly brought me some forgotten memories. It used to be my sister's. It had carried her bridal outfit on her wedding night. Now it replaced Ambia's bundle - her only belonging she had with when she joined the household - because of a defective clasp. I shook my head as I shoved the case towards Ambia and flung open the door onto the front yard, "Go!" I screamed, startling myself.

I threw a length of rope, "Here, tie it up and go."

Ambia stood there fingering the frail rope, staring at the suitcase.

"Come on. Hurry up!" I cried. She looked at me for an instant. Then she went down on her knees. A film of perspiration broke out on her forehead as she bounded up the case and slowly straightened herself with it in her hand. Just at that moment, the curtain on my side lifted, and a stream of light coming through the window fell on her. She turned her head; I caught a glimpse of the nose flower. Something about it made me look at it again. The sheen seemed different, honey yellow; unalloyed! But even before I could gather my thoughts, she was out into the hot afternoon. She did not look back. Standing in the doorway, I stared at her, shading my eyes with my hand, squinting in the sun.

I collected myself when I saw my brother-in-law, emerging on the left periphery of my vision, marching in the expanse of green that appeared infertile under the blazing sun.

"Get ready!" he walked past me to enter the flat. "We are going to get your sister and the baby." He added, "By the way, why is Ambia rambling about with that suitcase in her hand?" His footsteps began to retreat into the flat. Obviously he didn't want an answer.

Shortly I heard him whistling. The next instant I felt a furry thing trying to enter the room, brushing past my legs. I kicked out in reflex. The animal darted out into the yard: the black cat. My gaze followed it. It ran some distance behind Ambia. But Ambia seemed to be lugging with the case. She had only walked a few metres; I wondered what she had in it. It was not that large. I tried to remember whether it had felt heavy when I pulled it out from the closet. But my memory was blank.

"Yes, the suitcase!" I said aloud.

"What about the suitcase?" He stopped whistling.

"It seems...No... Nothing," I paused for a second. "I fired her," I blurted out.

"What? Why on earth did you do that for? Do you know how difficult it will be for your sister without her around?"

I was quiet.

"What did she do?" He demanded, "Did you catch her stealing, or what?"

"Sort of..."

"What do you mean - sort of?"

"It depends on how you look at it."

For a while there was no response. It seemed my brother-in-law was trying to interpret my thoughts, weighing if he should continue the interrogation or not. I didn't turn to read his body language. My eyes were still on Ambia. She had suddenly stopped walking, her shadow frozen on the field. The cat too had come to a standstill. Slowly I grasped what was happening: the suitcase had come untied, hanging from her hand, its empty interior on show, contents scattered by her feet, her free hand open wide.

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ESSAY

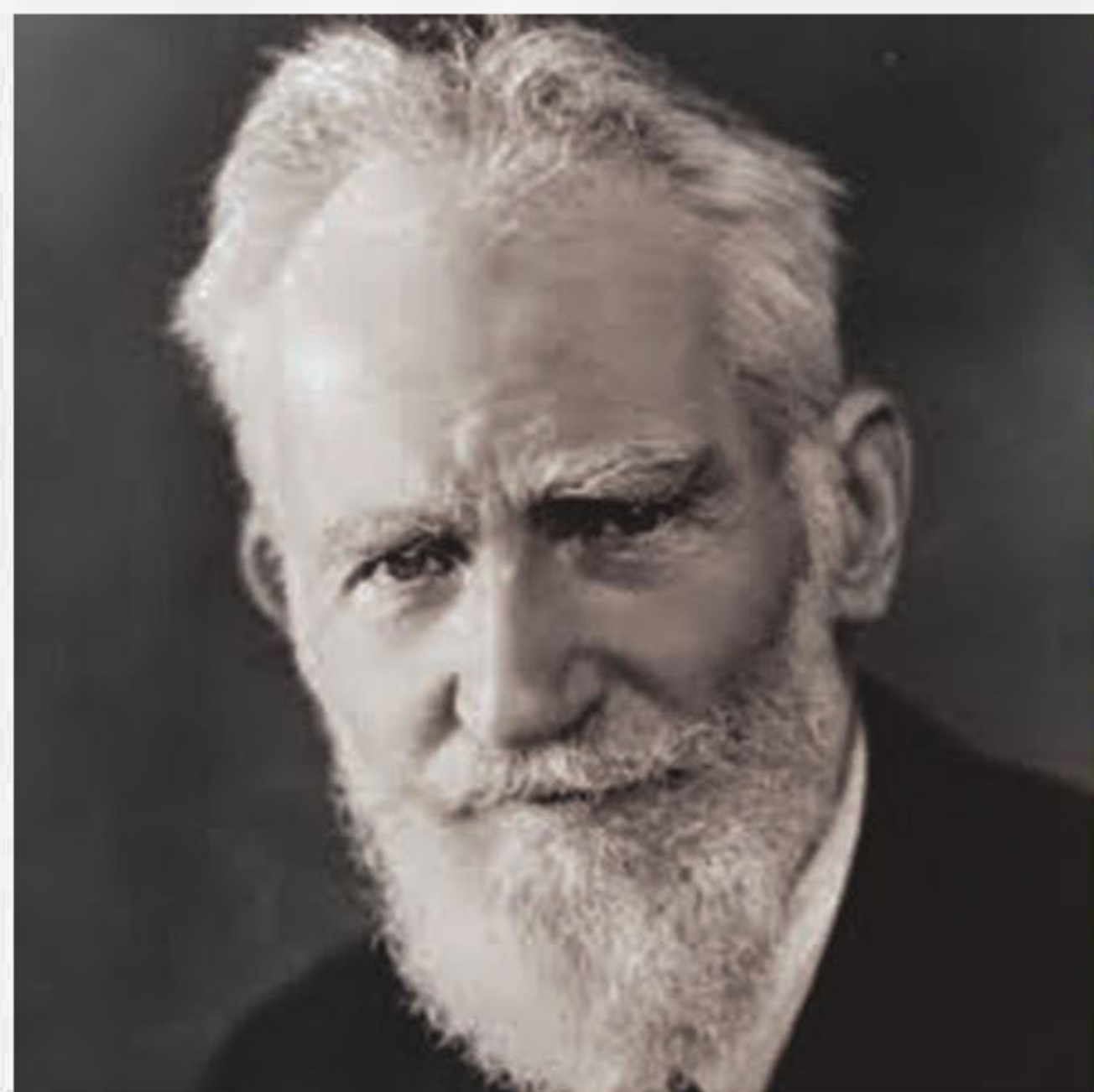
Teaching literature, learning Shaw

SAMIHA MATIN

As a subject, English Literature has never been a popular choice for candidates sitting for their O-Level examinations, let alone their advanced levels. Even though nearly all of us have been taught from childhood to read story books, few of us later still hold the earnest passion to scurry into the library at every free period and burrow their noses into a book. However, that is precisely what we need English Literature classes for, don't we?

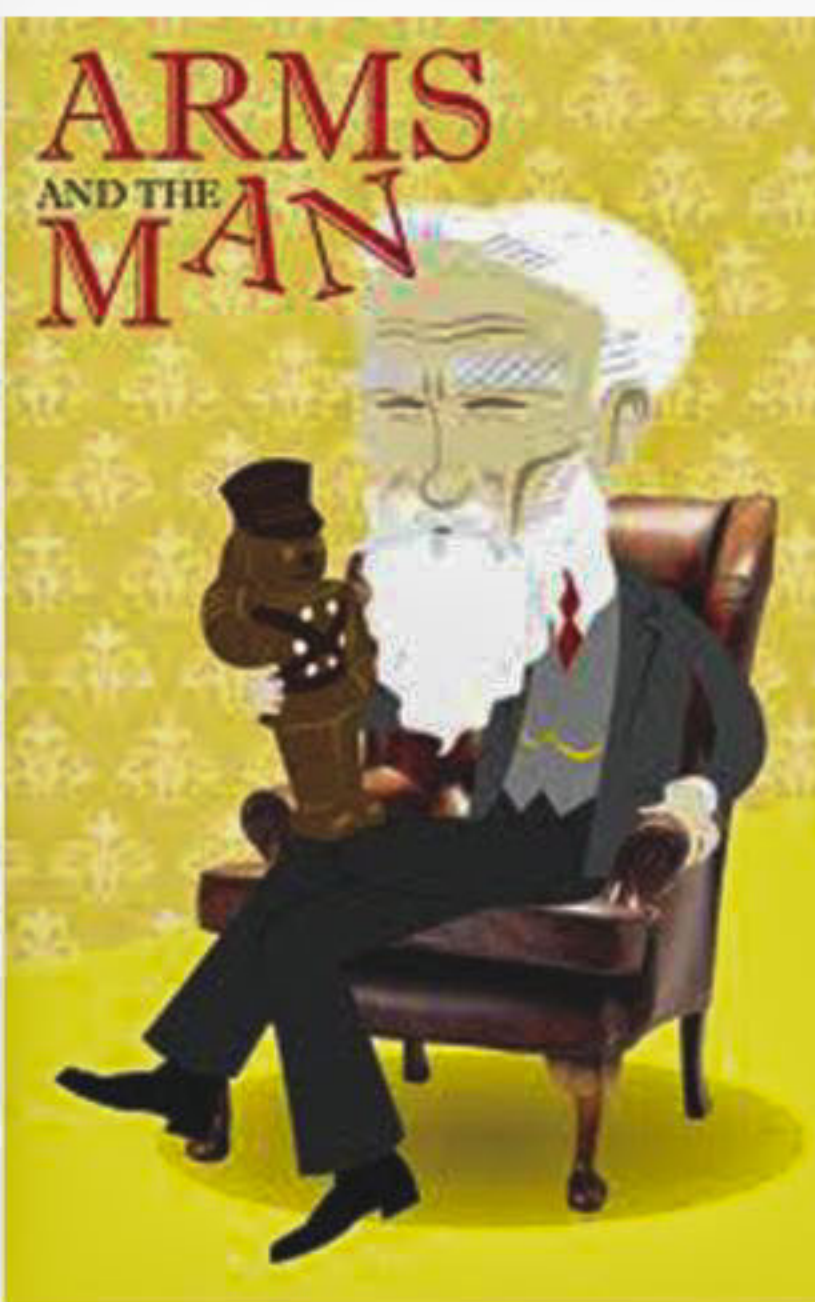
So that our language skills and writings can become improved, our limited vocabulary more enriched and our desire to read books no longer remains embedded. The sad, underlying truth, however, is that English Literature classes often don't help. Because most of them are taught in the wrong way if you'll blatantly admit, the consequences accumulate to half the students fearing the subject and the other half remaining aloof and indifferent.

When I was in eighth grade, we were given the book *Arms and the Man* by George Bernard Shaw for our English Literature Class. I had bought the book during the holidays, and at that time, wasn't familiar with the name Bernard Shaw. Frankly, I had absolutely no idea who he was as a writer, what were his attributes, and couldn't care less if he were alive or dead. Nevertheless, I started reading the play, more in an effort to appease my mother and also I didn't want to start classes utterly clueless. I liked and enjoyed the simplistic dialogues that the characters used, and all the characters



where I never picked it up again in the holidays, and had another game up my sleeves to gain good marks—to surf the internet whenever we were to give a test.

Our eighth-grade English Literature class was taught by this respectable lady, Nilofar Prakash, who had come from India. I had thought that we would straightaway start with the play and perhaps finish it in one term, considering there were only three scenes and the book was very short. However, she made us do a project first dealing on the background where the story was set,



focusing mainly on the Victorian era and the biography of George Bernard Shaw. Our project mainly involved finding anything about Shaw and drawing some sketches of places where we could write phrases or paragraphs about him. As you can imagine, researching about the writer proved to be much more exciting than I could have ever thought, as Shaw wasn't just any normal playwright, but possessed so many other extraordinary, witty, eccentric, even mind blowing qualities. That beginning proved to be one of the best introductory sessions to start off the class.

Our teacher went on to great depths to explain almost every single line; and though in the beginning, it seemed a lot of work, I soon became very appreciative. After all, there were so many hidden underlying themes that existed in the dialogues and needed to be explored thoroughly. So many ambiguous references to class divisions and the almost laughable phoniness that people from the upper class showed just to fit into their 'respectable' societies, were delineated to us, giving acute knowledge that it exists painfully in our society, even now. Our teacher often used to ask us what we thought of the dialogues as well; and you would be surprised at how differently everyone viewed them from each other.

We also had loads of fun in the classes too. Our teacher sometimes used to make the students act out some parts, which provided a showcase for anyone to show off his or her acting skills or just be plain dramatic. We even listened to contemporary songs from her Ipod, that she would connect to an amplifier, and compared it with the theatrical love that Sergius, one of the main leads of the story, always displayed for his upper-class lady love, which was a dark contrast to what he really felt for someone beneath his own class. But the classes were also a learning experience, since we gave tests based on the dialogues and wrote about the messages that were being conveyed to the readers and what we thought about them too. Then later we had to pen down essays on character analysis and development of the different characters, the plots, etc.

I cannot speak for my classmates. I can only say that memories of the class still stick to my mind, even after four years. It was something I greatly looked forward to every day of school. It was a chance for all of us to say what we thought of the story and the characters and see for ourselves how greatly all of our opinions differed. It's exactly how any class, be it any subject, should be taught—a platform for students to voice their thoughts, learn, grow up, and still be young at heart.

SAMIHA MATIN IS A YOUNG WRITER.

POETRY

See my inner being

TULIP CHOWDHURY

See my inner being;
The soul that roams around
Heart sharing your life
Tears and the smiles,
Doors open
All the time!

You can come
Explore inside out
And definitely you'll find
A Me, full of empathy
Full of light
To show you ways,
Willing to love
Reach out hands,
When you are in doubt
To be there
Point out the right ways.

The outside self;
Is for you to judge
But I would request,
See my inside.
And then you decide
If you really want
To accept me
For what I am
And walk along
Stride by stride
Holding my hands
While two hearts
Beat as one!

Will you do that, just for once And see my heart, for what I am?

TULIP CHOWDHURY TEACHES AND WRITES SHORT STORIES.