

EDITOR'S  
NOTE

Karl Marx once said, "Society does not consist of individuals but expresses the sum of interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand." Today's SLR looks at such interrelations. Zeena Choudhury's story makes us think of those relations that could have been and should have been but never quite were what we hoped it would be. Conversely, Day Two of Sabrina Islam's travel journal reminds us that 'inner-relations' trumps interrelations. Food for thought we hope you will relish.

MUNIZE MANZUR

## TEA WITH MISS BROOKS

ZEENA CHOUDHURY

Once in Darjeeling, when I was 12 years old, I remember standing in front of a smallish bank, staring at all the flowers neatly planted in rows. There were lots of petunias, phlox and too many red geraniums. I wondered why geraniums and not pink cosmos or even blue laburnums.

I was spending the last day of my week long summer vacation with my grandmother who had especially come over from Calcutta. My parents were in America and I had been safely placed in Loreto convent school – a 'proper' school for young ladies who had already passed the requisite condition of having three references from three English couples. The year was 1946 and, though

and green tiled house. "So I will certainly not run away with you – at least, not too far! But, come to think of it, Nanna is very welcome. Shall I go and ask her in?"

With that, Lavender entered the house and invited Nanna for tea. Nanna, who spoke only Bangla, nodded her head at the invitation and told me to tell her that she would certainly come; Not now, but tomorrow at tea time, around 4:00 p.m.

With a twinkle in her eyes, Lavender said, "I'll be waiting. Don't be too late or the scones will fall flat on their bottoms!"

I thought she was funny and quite intriguing. Next day, Nanna and I walked down the road to Miss Lavender Brook's house. We were both excited as the English did not mix too well with the natives and here we were, right at the doorstep of one. We rang the bell. A stooped old man dressed in a bearer's uniform welcomed us and showed us into the drawing room. It was a green velvet room with a grand chandelier hanging from the ceiling. Miss Brooks appeared. She seemed delighted and excited too.

"My goodness! This is the first time I've had visitors over."

That seemed a very strange greeting. Did she live all alone in this vast house? Didn't she have any relatives? In reply to my grandmother's query she informed us that all her relatives were on the walls. We were taken aback and then realized that she indeed lived alone – her only memories were nailed to the walls.

Like all curious visitors, my grandmother started plying her with more questions. How had she come to India? Why did she not marry and where were all her relatives?

Stop! Stop! She motioned to me.

"What is your Nanna saying?"

"Oh, she asked if you were a spinster and if you were an orphan and where were your parents, brothers and sisters?"

"I am alone," she replied. "I am 67 years old and a widow. He died in France during the First World War. He was so young – only 22 years old. Those fields are now covered with red poppies. Come, I'll show you all my pictures. I've hung them on that wall. I walk past that way every time I go to the dining room. I always gaze at Edmund's picture and say a little prayer."

We got up and went to the wall. Indeed, it was covered with many pictures – old photos going brown in color. She pointed to a large silver framed photograph of a young man dressed in an army uniform. He had a cheerful, sunny smile on his face. Then she pointed to an elderly couple.

"Those are my parent. Father was a box-wallah."

"Box-wallah?" I said curiously.

"That's what you call people employed in business. I don't know why. Perhaps the earliest ones used to carry goods in a box."

I immediately thought about the box-wallah who came to our house carrying a tin trunk filled with breads, pies and pastries.

"I know what you are thinking," said Miss Brooks. "I don't think my Papa did business like

that. He had an office in Calcutta and I think he dealt in cement. Lots of new houses were being built at the turn of the century. My father bought this house as a present for Mama – so that Mama and five of us children could come up every May and stay till October."

My glance shifted to the other pictures – one was of two boys with cricket bats. I pointed to them.

"Those are Neville and James. The pictures next to them show Neville with his wife and children, and James in a Jesuit dress. James became a Catholic and entered the seminary in Ireland. He never came back to India. Neville's a banker and stays in the city. He's doing very well, but I never hear from him. The same goes for Christine, my younger sister. She settled in Australia right in the heart of the sheep country. Her husband is Australian and does he speak with an accent! She met him during the 1914 war in Calcutta. That's where I met Edmund – very proper English he spoke too – not at all like Christine's boyfriend. We were all very impressed. We met at the cricket and football club on New Year's Eve."

"I can't make out – what are you – Catholic or Protestant?" I asked.

"Oh! My goodness! We were all good Presbyterians until James became a Catholic and shocked all of us."

We stood gazing at the pictures for a long time. All of Miss Brook's relatives pinned to the wall. During the course of the meal, too busy eating, we kept silent. She had lovely lemon curd tarts; a fruit cake; warm scones sliced in half, filled with cream and jam; and aromatic Darjeeling tea.

"Now," said Miss Brooks turning to Nanna, "I want to know about you."

My grandmother replied that she had seven children – six boys and one girl. I did not add that she was the second wife and Nana Sahib had just married for a third time!

"You must be so busy with your large family," said Miss Brooks.

"My daughter is now married and studying in Amrika along with her engineer husband," replied Nanna. "My eldest son is married to an Angrez girl. They have two children. They stay in Calcutta. The other boys are in college. One is in the Air Force. He just got married but he stays far away in Rawalpindi. I miss Khalid and Amina very much."

"You've got nothing to be worried about. You still have the other children and I'm sure you have sisters and brothers as well. You yourself are so young," she said to my 57 year old Nanna. "Just look at me. I am alone - all alone. I don't even have a cat or a dog that will be sad when I die. As for my family, we've just grown apart. They never write."

"What did you do when Edmund died?"

"I was completely devastated. I felt very ill and it took me two months to recover. I have never recovered emotionally. Edmund was and is always in my heart. When my parents died – one after the other – I was left with this house in Darjeeling. You know, sometimes I wish that the English were more friendly. I never learnt to speak Bengali or Hindustani, so I never made any local friends. I

find the work of the various English clubs very tiresome. The only solace we have is when I read all of Edmund's letters and dream a life that I would have with him...had he lived."

While I was translating between the two, my eyes kept wandering up to the grand crystal chandelier.

"Yes," said Miss Brooks to me. "It is very beautiful. Papa bought it for Mama on their wedding anniversary. I can see so many Lavenders when I look at the faces. Oh, how I miss our Christmas parties, our birthday parties...all the parties where we would cut our cakes standing under this chandelier. I also remember that fateful telegram informing me of his death. It came to me as he must have said that I was his next of kin. I sent the telegram to his parents."

Even as a 12 year old, I felt she could have done something. Couldn't she have gotten remarried?

"No – never. I could not betray Edmund's love."

Worked?

"I had my parents to look after. I was the only one left at home."

A phrase came to my mind which I uttered boldly: "Where there's a will there's a way."

"That is such a cliché, and you are too young to be saying that. What do you know about life?" said an angry Miss Brooks. Two tears coursed down her cheeks.

We got up to leave.

"Please come again. Yes please do. Come alone if you want. Think of me as a second Nanna," said Miss Brooks as she closed the door.

I promise I will come again – maybe next Saturday when I come for the weekend," I replied. Then I bade her goodbye and left with Nanna.

"She's so lonely – left all alone. I wonder why she never returned to Bilayat." Nanna mused. "I know the answer," she carried on, "Her family does not care for her. Those who did are dead. What has she to go back to?"

The next day was Monday and I returned to school. Miss Brooks stayed in my mind for a week. Then I forgot about her. I only remembered the following Friday when I was walking up to my grandmother's house. Miss Brook's house was dark and silent as I walked past it. I shivered and ran.

My grandmother was saying her evening prayers. She turned her face to each side and said her salaams, indicating that the prayer was over. She saw me and heaved a sigh.

"What is it?" I asked. "Any news from Mummy and Daddy?"

"No," she uttered in a depressed tone. "It's Miss Lavender Brooks. She killed herself this morning. She hung herself from the crystal chandelier. She had a curtain cord tied round her neck. Her old servant found her this morning and came to tell me. Perhaps he thought that we were the only ones who might be interested."

Two visitors, an elderly lady and a young girl, who had tea with Miss Lavender Brooks last Sunday.



they still had a year to go, the British were still the reigning class.

As I stood reflecting deeply about the presence of ugly red geraniums, I felt a tug at my plaits. I turned around to see a wizened old lady in a brown tweed skirt and jacket; neatly assembled with a brown blouse and a circle of pearls swirled into a brooch.

"You look just like a little English girl. What are you staring at so intently? Or were you lost in your thoughts? And, what may your name be?"

"Well," I replied, quite flattered to think that she thought me English, "I am Zainab. But I do not know who you are."

"I am Miss Brooks – Miss Lavender Brooks – and I was hoping that I could ask you to come over and have some tea and scones."

"You will also have to ask Nanna, my maternal grandmother, as I am not allowed to go out with strangers."

"I am your next door neighbour," replied Lavender Brooks. She pointed out to a large white

BUCKET LIST: *The Kerala Journal*

SABRINA ISLAM

## DAY 2: Rasayana, the path to rejuvenation

I wake up to the chirping of birds. So many different types of sounds! There are beautiful Koels singing on the tree tops. Just like peacocks, the male Koel is more colourful and prettier than the female. Their song plays all around like an orchestra.

I walk out. The tranquil lake in front of my bungalow takes me by surprise. A small boat with two tourists quietly passes by. I make my way to the breakfast place. Too many choices. It reminds me of a haiku I had written long ago:

Temptations galore  
Option paralysis hits  
Indecisive me.

I am a dosa idli fan. It'll be dosa. Everyday. I make a mental note: must check calorie count for dosa, idli, sambhar, poha and vada.

A beautiful dark skinned woman wearing a white cotton saree with a gold border brings me my dosa. I ask her the name of the saree.

"Setta Saree" she says. (I later learn it's called Set).

"Can I get it here?" I ask.

She swings her head side to side. Pretty soon I will start to say 'yes' by saying 'no', I think.

Another waiter, Mohammad Shafi, is very happy to find a Muslim woman traveler. I have a tell-tale name. He gives me a rundown on the place, and instead of regular coffee, he brings me nice Kerala coffee.

I spend the next hour with the Ayurveda doctor who tells me that Ayurveda, one of the upavedas of the four Vedas, is 5000 years old. Brahma had memorized it and it's been passed on from smriti

(memory) and sruti (hearing). He points out that if Brahma had memorized it, it must have existed before that, that some other power created or discovered it! Interesting! Aliens, perhaps?

He recommends the Rasayana therapy for me. Which literally means the Path to Rasa or essence of life. It will apparently help me gain longevity and memory among many things. I am sold already as I am already struggling with a fading memory! I share with him how the basic principles and practices of Ayurveda are similar to Islam: waking up at 'Brahma muhurta' as we do for Fajr prayers before dawn, cleanliness by bathing everyday which is similar to our Wazu, and how the Ayurveda practice of eating only three fourths of one's food is also a lesson from our holy prophet.

Later, a guide takes a British NRI couple and me around the property. We see a butterfly park, the meditation and yoga rooms, sunset viewpoints and the Vechoor cows – small cows that are similar in size to calves.

I spend the next two hours getting rejuvenated the Rasayana way. And, to make amends for the dosa gluttony of the morning, I opt for a watermelon rocket salad at lunch. Except, the rocket is our very own deshi 'thaankuni paata', known as koduvan in Malayalam.

I run into the NRI couple again and have a cool cucumber drink with them at the pool bar. He is a pharmacist by profession but by the end of our conversation, he is ready to come to Bangladesh and start a glass etching business.

I rush to get my camera and then get on the boat for a sunset cruise on the water. A spectacular sunset and the tranquil backwaters have me spellbound. There are two other women travelers



from Israel on the boat. We become friends instantly. A flautist plays while a white and gold 'Setta saree' clad beauty brings us lime and mint juice. The sky is cloudy and the breeze feels like silk on my skin.

My Israeli friends and I end up having dinner by the pool: fresh snapper and jumbo king prawns. Over dinner, I learn more about the

Jewish religion – most of which they don't follow – than I have ever heard or read about.

I am not usually an early riser but my plan is to wake up at the crack of dawn tomorrow to do yoga. Slowly a calmness seems to be sinking in and rejuvenating my soul. The open roof toilet no longer bothers me and I am sure the smell of citronella and jasmine will soon lull me to sleep.