

EDITOR'S
NOTE

"The world is a looking glass and gives back to every man the reflection of his own face."

Taking William Thackeray's quote as a starting point, today's SLR presents a fictional piece based on a recent social atrocity. We also have Joe Treasure's monthly column which talks about using personal experiences as an internal looking glass, a social microscope and a future periscope. Another kind of reflection, if you will. Look in closely. Do you like what you see?

Munize Manzur

THE MISSING MIRROR

C. Rashaad Shabab

Sitting in the armchair on his fourth floor balcony, the young master awaited his morning tea. The familiar rattle of tea cup on saucer being wheeled over by the stunted old lady who made his breakfast, signaled that his wait would soon be over. She set down the tray on the table beside him, and looked at him expectantly as he stirred in the milk and sugar and took a sip. She had let the tea brew too long, but it would be unkind to make anything of it, so he swallowed the bitter tea, and with a small nod of his head said, "The tea is good." She smiled broadly, revealing a set of stained teeth that was far from

youthful blood, and the master's temper went swiftly to the point of boiling. He drove his car brashly around the compound and demanded to see the night guard.

The guard was produced and made to stare at the dangling wires and broken plastic where the mirror used to be. When asked if he knew anything about it, he sullenly shook his head. The young master retorted by asking why a night guard should draw his salary if he did not notice what was going on within the compound during the night. When the guard offered no answer, the master speculated that perhaps the guard should no longer be

should teach him a lesson.

When the young master pulled into the construction lot, there was a noticeable uptake of work throughout the site. The hammers clinked a bit louder, and the cement was mixed a bit more vigorously. The contractor greeted his young master with a broad smile and spirited handshake. After a cup of tea – fetched by a small boy – they began negotiations.

The sticking point was the rate for casual labourers. The contractor claimed he needed to pay them three hundred Taka daily. The young master reflected on that – how could these workers with the caloric needs of hard, physical laborers, many of whom he knew to have families, survive on three hundred Taka per day? In fact, he remembered hearing that the workers actually only get a hundred and fifty or two hundred, while the contractor pocketed the rest. While he was uneasy with the meager earnings of the workers, he would not give away his hard-earned money, just to fatten the contractor's margin. The young master insisted on the rate of two hundred and fifty Taka and successfully closed negotiations.

A new pair of jeans was next on the agenda, so the master drove to *Bongo Bazaar*. Though he lived in a country where 48% of the children were malnourished, the young master had gotten too fat for his jeans. After he got out of his car, the young master instinctively bent down to check his hair where his mirror used to be. But of course he could not. Walking to the store, he was unnerved by the possibility that his hair was unkempt: mirrors kept us presentable.

The young master tried on six or seven pairs of jeans before he found some that drew less-than-due attention to his formidable seat. As he looked at his reflection, he realized there were no jeans to hide his heftiness: mirrors confront us with uncomfortable truths. The shopkeeper wanted a thousand Taka, but the master was no fool. He argued that he would not pay a Taka more than five hundred...after all, the jeans were dirtied by some grey powder. Somewhere along the supply chain, a buyer had squeezed a middleman the way our young master had squeezed his contractor. A building with a name we all know collapsed, crushing 1,129 nameless souls, under the weight of global commerce. The shopkeeper came down to seven hundred, and the young master agreed, brushing off the dust from his new jeans.

It was mid-afternoon by the time he pulled into the complex where he lived. It was so hot that his sweat had soaked into the car seat, despite the air-

conditioning. Stepping out of his vehicle was like opening an oven. As he glanced at the defiled triangle of plastic where the mirror used to be, he hoped that some terrible fate had befallen the thief. But before he could walk the few steps to his building, his attention was caught by a figure running eagerly towards him.

"Master! Master! We caught him! The one who stole your mirror! We've held him here for you!" called the guard.

The master was at a loss. He was quite comfortable condemning an anonymous criminal to eternal damnation, but was strangely uncomfortable meeting him. Perhaps he was afraid he might be faced with a day laborer, trying to make ends meet on two hundred and fifty Taka a day. Still, he walked to where the guard was leading.

"Did you find my mirror?" asked the master.

"No, he must have sold it already," panted the guard, avoiding eye contact and quickening his stride.

The master was about to ask, "Then how do you know it was really him?" when they came across a small figure, tied to the base of a coconut tree. Stooped over, and parched in the noon sun, the only thing keeping him from collapsing in a heap were the ropes that bound him to the tree. To the master's horror, before him slumped a child of no more than eight or nine. Motionless, thin and sickly, he looked more like a heap of twigs than man or beast. The master wanted to ask if he was okay, but didn't. He was terrified that the answer was obvious.

The young master's palms were sweating. The guard looked at him, expectant. "What should we do with him? Would you like to take him to the police? There's not much they can do, but beat him up some more. We've beaten him enough so he won't come here again." The sun bore down mercilessly, and the young master could feel his own skin roasting. He wondered how long the child had been tied to the tree, blistering in this pitiless heat.

While the master was trying to understand the sight before him, a man in his early 40s walked by. A teacher who lived in that complex. He stopped and asked what was going on. The guard told him about the mirror. Enraged by the stolen mirror, the passer by launched two savage kicks at the hunger-bared ribs. The child took the kicks like a deflated tyre. Frustrated by his inability to provoke even a whimper, the man muttered something about worthless druggie street kids and walked on.

Each of those kicks brought a jolt of realization to the young master's mind. He again tasted the bitterness of his morning tea, this time at the back of his throat. He had lost a mirror and threatened the guard with the loss of his job. Desperate to keep his job, the guard had found a scapegoat – a defenseless street child with no guardian, no shelter and no recourse to justice. And now, presented before our young master, here was the child, weak and puny, without even the strength to grunt when kicked, paying the price for a missing mirror.

"Let him go." The young master barely managed to get the words out, feeling sick and dizzy from the limp and battered sight before him. Shocked at the consequences of the threat he had made that morning, the master – whose benevolence stopped him from complaining about a cup of tea, whose mercifulness stopped him from sacking the night guard – lacked the presence of mind to offer the child so much as a drink of water, let alone a trip to the hospital for first aid.

As he trudged home, morose and ashamed, the young master felt the loss of something more precious than his mirror. He had looked into the eyes of that unfed, unclothed, bound and beaten child and seen his position in society reflected back at him.

He had not deprived the old lady of food, making her stupid and stunted. But being stunted, the best she could do was make his tea. He did not decide how much the contractor paid his laborers. But because they were paid so little, his profits were immense. He did not shove those hapless 1,129 people into that doomed building. But because they were there, his jeans were cheap. The young master had never willfully created an injustice. Yet his entire life, he had benefitted from the myriad injustices that were already there.

Having seen his own image reflected in those unbearable eyes, the young Master Chowdhury had lost the illusion that the one who stole his mirror had ever really been a criminal, and that he himself had ever really been innocent. He could not have stood so tall were he not standing on quite so many. The powerful squeeze the powerless, just by being on top. And the ones under them, squeeze the ones under themselves – all the way down, until all that is left to squash are little children, feeble and crushed. Because we, the powerful, have left them so utterly powerless.

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complete. Pleased with his own graciousness, he went back to his newspaper, taking as much notice of her missing teeth, as her stunted stature.

After breakfast, the young master needed to visit the site of a construction project his family had undertaken to negotiate rates with the contractor. On the way back, he needed to buy a new pair of jeans as he had gotten too plump for his old ones. With traffic, that would take until lunch.

As he approached his car, the young master was in for a rude surprise. The left side mirror had been stolen over the night. The day was hot, as was his

entitled to any salary at all; and sped off.

Navigating chaotic Dhaka without the mirror made the young master both vulnerable and a danger to others: mirrors help us keep each other safe. The constant reminder of his loss irked him. His beautiful car had been defiled by some low-life criminal. Added to this, was that careless night guard who was either sleeping on the job or a partner in crime. Yet, the master was reluctant to fire him: the guard's family depended on this job. With this realization, the master again felt good about himself – he would be merciful and not fire the guard. The threat alone

SLR WRITING
COMPETITION

Aspiring writers are invited
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on
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You must be over
18 years old.

Only **ONE** entry
per person.

WORD LIMIT
500 words.

DEADLINE
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Winning entries will be printed in the SLR page. Attach your story as a .doc with the email subject line: "SLR Competition-04". Send your entries to DSLitEditor@gmail.com.

Truth-telling and the right to publish

Joe Treasure

The career of the British concert pianist James Rhodes has been anything but conventional. He was more or less self-taught until he was 13. He never attended music college. After leaving school, he gave up the piano for more than ten years.

Driven to reconnect with music if only vicariously, he approached the agent of the renowned pianist Grigory Sokolov, not for an audition, but merely hoping to get a job representing musicians. At his first meeting with Panozzo, the agent, Rhodes admitted to having played piano a bit as a child. Panozzo asked him to play something and, astounded to hear an amateur perform so well, fixed him up with a teacher. A few years later, Rhodes was signing recording deals and winning prizes.

If that sounds like a fairy tale, it's one with its full share of darkness. When Rhodes set out to write a memoir, he decided to give an uncensored account of the repeated sexual abuse he had suffered in childhood, the physical and mental suffering it had caused him, and the way music had saved his life. For almost a year its publication was prevented by a court ruling, after his ex-wife argued that the book would harm their 11-year old son. In May of this year, that ruling was



overturned by the UK Supreme Court. *Instrumental* is now set to be published by Canongate.

Autobiography has a long history. Over the centuries, powerful men have often been moved to reflect on how they achieved greatness. A very different impulse towards confession is reflected in a tradition of conversion stories, such as *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*,

which John Bunyan wrote while in prison in the 1660s. Classic autobiographies have also been inspired by more material forms of salvation. Frederick Douglass, the African American orator and abolitionist, published his autobiography in 1845 with the subtitle: *An American Slave*.

Since the late twentieth century there has been an explosion in personal

writing, often with an emphasis on stories of survival. These writers claim our attention because of what they endured rather than by the status they have subsequently achieved. Though there's no shortage of celebrity memoirs, the interesting development has been these records of otherwise invisible lives.

The genre sometimes known as "miserable lit" is open to satire. It's also open to exploitation. When James Frey was discovered in 2006 to have exaggerated both his sins and his suffering in *A Million Little Pieces*, Oprah Winfrey expressed her outrage on behalf of the readers he had betrayed. The strength of this reaction was a reminder that, while we may require memoirs to engage us as novels do, their appeal rests on some level of factual accuracy. That is an essential part of their contract with the reader.

In the case of James Rhodes, the principle the Supreme Court upheld was the right of an individual to tell his or own story "in all its searing detail" for whoever wants to hear it.

Joe Treasure is the author of two novels: *"The Male Gaze"* and *"Besotted"*. Read more of him at <http://joetreasure.blogspot.co.uk/>