

THE SECOND WIFE

Zeena Choudhury

In our family my maternal grandmother was known as *Choti Amma*. She was indeed my nana's second wife. The first wife or *Buri Amma* had already died by the time I was born. However she was always talked about as if she was alive. Her room was kept intact. In fact it was a nice room to hide in and read books undisturbed. My grandfather lived in Dhaka and my grandmother lived in Calcutta even after the partition of India in 1947. He would occasionally appear and make a great deal of fuss about his food. He was diabetic and ate sliced cabbage instead of rice. He hardly knew we (my brother and I) existed. Out of curiosity I once asked nana how he knew what room to sleep at night when both his wives were alive.

"Oh!" he informed us, "It was a neat arrangement". That is why nana, who had six children and *Buri Amma* who had four had some of their children born within a month of each other. We all accepted this peculiar fact very naturally. I was curious about *Buri Amma*. My mother would only tell me that she had died of cancer and that it was she who had missed her. To me the whole arrangement of how two wives living under the same room seemed unacceptable. After all my paternal grandfather-Dada had only one wife and my father had only one-- my mother? I asked my mother why nana had to be the second wife.

"Well," said my mother. "She was only 14 years old and was herself the second of four sisters and a brother. Her mother had died of tuberculosis, her father had remarried and though his second wife was harmless enough, it was nana's step grandmother who wanted to get rid of the girls as soon as possible. All the four girls were eventually married off to men old enough to be their fathers. My grandmother's marriage to nana saheb was exceptional for two facts; one that he was only ten years older than her and the second that he had to win her hand through an essay competition".

"How curious is that!" I said. The whole thing was not only curious but also very sad. My grandfather (meaning my mother's father) was an eccentric lawyer who had himself had an earlier marriage with an Irish lady called Agnes Dewell whose father had an Indigo plantation and one of those infamous houses at Neel Kuti, Indigo House, adjoining my great grandfather's estate. Agnes and Rahman met when she was sent to Loreto Convent in Darjeeling. He followed her and they eloped and got married. It all created a great stir, and Rahman had to leave his estates and settle in the Central Provinces - in Patna - the capital of Bihar with Agnes. There he practiced as a lawyer (he had earlier got a degree from the Lincoln's Inn in London), and there he had his five children. When Agnes died he married a young girl to look after the children- this time it was a conventional Muslim girl who had brought along with her villainous mother. Rahman however could be very eccentric.

Dolly, my grandmother was his great favourite. A lot of young men sent in their proposals- so much so that Rahman thought that the best way was to hold an essay competition. The suitor, whose essay was judged the best, would win his daughter's hand. nana saheb was a brilliant student and at that time already holding a position in the Provincial Civil Service of Bengal. He easily won the contest and Dolly's marriage to him was the prize. But one thing that my grandfather did not believe, in all his eccentricity, and that was a second wife when the first wife was alive. My grandfather, Nana Sahib kept his first marriage hidden from his future father in law's knowledge. It is said that my

grandfather, on his part, had to marry his first cousin as it was part of the family tradition. His family believed him to be reluctant as she was considered very dark and therefore not that beautiful. He was promised that if he kept up the family honour he could choose whom so ever he wished as his second wife. It is strange how skin colour plays such an important part in a woman's physical appearance. My grandmother was very fair (she was half Irish) but apart from that she had beautiful features and was considered to be the most beautiful girl in Patna.

Soon after, the couple left for Dhaka. Rahman came to learn that he had been outwitted by Nana Sahib. Rahman chased the young couple- but unfortunately contracted smallpox on the way. He was brought home and died a few days later having leaving Sarah as Nana Sahib's second wife.

Sarah hated Dhaka; she disliked her cloistered living quarters and it seemed very strange to her to be living in such close proximity with people all of whom had second or even third wives. She would pine for Patna - the hateful step grandmother notwithstanding. She had lived in a beautiful bungalow with manicured lawns and a well laid out garden. She missed Polly and Norah and little Habib. The eldest Miriam had already moved away-herself - married to an older man. She remembered how Mary or Miriam had cried her heart out when Sarah was getting married. She later wrote to

Along with her came *Buri Amma* and as far as I could find out Sarah got along with her without any friction. The children born to these two ladies appeared and life was harmonious enough. Both these ladies indulged themselves in going to the theatres and the newly introduced bioscopes. They didn't shop as shops came to them, rather the owner would come with his wares, whether it was saris or jewellery. Oh yes, Nana Sahib was a wealthy man. People rumoured that he had made a lot of money in the newly founded stock exchange. Besides he had bought a lot of real estate both in Calcutta and in Dhaka. They all lived in 7 Park Lane which was named after London's Park Lane so it was quite a posh area.

However, it fronted the back of the Nawab of Murshedabad's palatial house. That took away a little of its exclusivity, but it was nevertheless a good address to have. Nana Sahib had already been to Oxford where he had obtained a first class degree in Bachelor of Civil Law. From then on he had risen high in the echelons of the Provincial Civil Service. However, he was very bitter that he could not be elevated to the high court as a judge as a crafty colleague had foiled his attempts. He went back to being a district judge and eventually settled in Dhaka. He was known always as a brilliant judge and the first B.C.L of Bengal amongst the Moslems. However, his desire to go to Dhaka did not find favour with Sarah. She absolutely refused to leave Calcutta.

English, went to the newly founded English colleges and university in Dhaka and eventually succeeded in joining the prestigious Bengal Civil Service. A man who could do all this was not going to brook interference with all his plans. He would try with persuasion to guide, and if he did not succeed he would go to Dhaka alone. But grandfather, for all his guile and independence was ready to be persuaded when it suited him and it suited him very much to have a third wife.

I clearly remember the scene in the Park Lane house in Calcutta, when my grandfather broke the news to my grandmother.

He said " You have decided to remain in Calcutta, to be fair to you I will leave you this 7 Park Lane house and another mansion, so that you will have a healthy monthly income, I have decided to marry a Hindu widow. She will become a Muslim and I will attain *behesth* for converting a Hindu into the Moslem faith".

This was all he said in the presence of my parents and my younger uncles.

My mother shouted "Those days are gone. You cannot marry again when my mother is alive. I will not let you. You have been persuaded by my stepbrothers who were always jealous of us. As an educated man you don't seriously believe that you will attain heaven by marrying a Hindu woman."

Hardly had my mother spoken these words when my grandfather walked up



Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *La Liseuse (Young Girl Reading)*, Oil-on-canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, United States.

Finish the Book and Die

Sharyar Shaams

I first came across the term "Pulling a Robert Jordan" while reading a 2011 *New Yorker* essay on George R.R. Martin and the treatment some of his fans subjected him to for taking seven years to come out with the fifth volume of *A Song of Ice and Fire*. "You better not pull a Jordan over us," his fans emailed. Robert Jordan had died of amyloidosis before being able to finish his *Wheel of Time*.

It is as if Martin was expected to follow the "norms" of genre writers: dutifully pumping out succeeding installments of their sagas with unyielding punctuality. For if we cross the phantom barricades of genres and foray into the land of "literary writers" we'd notice it isn't that odd or outrageous to come out with a book after an extended period of time. Indeed, it can be called fashionable, for lack of a better word, nowadays to come back with a bang after everyone's already forgotten you're there. Most contemporary bigshots I adore seem to participate in this. Ishiguro brought out his latest novel this year after a decade. Donna Tartt does this on average. (This isn't to say there aren't those who do not indulge in the 'at least one book a year' rule. E.g., William T. Vollmann.)

Fans don't go crazy. This is because these books we are talking about don't have enormous fan-followings and are mostly standalone and not part of any larger series, and even in the rare cases when they are, authors, unlike George R.R. Martin, are given their space and left to take their time with their manuscripts. I waste so many words to say this because it seems only recently that genre writers are claiming their right to finish their books whenever they want to and not with a gun on their heads. Writers lead complicated lives and not everyone writes the same way. If a writer happens to write slow, even though what she's writing is a vast saga with hundreds of storylines interweaving and a massive invented history exposed in flashbacks that would need at least a dozen books to cover, there's really nothing we can do about it.

So here's a question: if a writer dies before finishing the story, should someone else continue it? Should it be finished at all and kept just the way it is, unfinished?

Well, before Robert Jordan passed away he did intend for someone else to finish *WoT* and left notes on how the series should end. Brandon Sanderson, commissioned by Jordan's widow to finish *Wheel of Time*, had what one redditor over the internet labelled, "established an unprecedented precedent". The circumstances that led to his finishing *WoT* were "unique" and "specific" but people took it as something "commonplace" rather than an "anomaly". And so similar treatment ensued.

Stories need to end. It's up to the literary executioners (who are almost always family of the writer) to understand, when faced with this dilemma, whether the story actually needs another writer or not. Eoin Colfer writing the sixth volume of Douglas Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to Galaxy* was nothing short of a disaster. Skimming through it made me realise how it was just another Artemis Fowl story with Adams's characters. Don't get me wrong. Artemis Fowl is decent YA but *The Hitchhiker's Guide to Galaxy* is better off without Colfer's contribution. There was no need of this because "Mostly harmless" left the story with a perfect ending befitting Addams's eccentricity.

I don't see anything wrong with someone else finishing my story as long as the story is in need of one.



A Syce Holding Two Carriage Horses, mid-19th century, India (Calcutta), Ink and opaque watercolor on paper.

Sarah that she had misgivings about her husband. How tragic that her misgivings had proved right.

In the meantime, Sarah had to adjust to life within shuttered walls of old Dhaka. Strict "purdah" was observed. Her new family taunted her for being a *fiyangi*. Her husband was not as endearing either. His family had kept their promise by allowing him to have a second wife - a second more beautiful wife- but he really had no interactions with her except at night. He would go to work during the day and when he returned he would socialize with all the male members of the family in the *maidana*, men's quarters. He felt a certain amount of guilt for marrying so hastily after his first marriage or was it revenge on *Buri Amma* who, according to my mother, was herself reluctant in marrying Nana Sahib as she was rumoured to have been in love with his younger brother. Yes all these love affairs took place quite frequently behind the heavily cloistered doors.

This was the complicated social milieu that Sarah found herself enmeshed in. Sarah herself disliked her husband for the trick that he had played and she hated her confined social set up. She was happy when they moved to Calcutta.

An aunt told me that my grandfather had offered her a priceless diamond set if only she would accompany him. I guess he was lonely. *Buri Amma* had already died. Many of the children were already married including my mother and he therefore wished his second wife to accompany him. Sarah was adamant. According to her she was never going back to those dusty streets of Dhaka with its heavily shuttered houses and especially not to the intrigue of a large family. This was to prove her downfall as the only remaining wife of Judge Sahib.

Nana Sahib was born in to a family of intrigue; He had had to make his way in to the bureaucratic world of civil servants. He had to literally tear himself away from the intrigues of Moulvi Bari so called because earlier forefathers had worked as moulvi of the East India Company as native officers. They had also successfully set themselves up as the traders of Dhaka cheese (heavily salted to retain their freshness) to the British army during the British Afghan war. Later generations had turned away from the British even to the extent of spurning the language totally, retaining only Persian as their lingua franca. It was this tradition that my grandfather had to break away from. He assiduously learnt

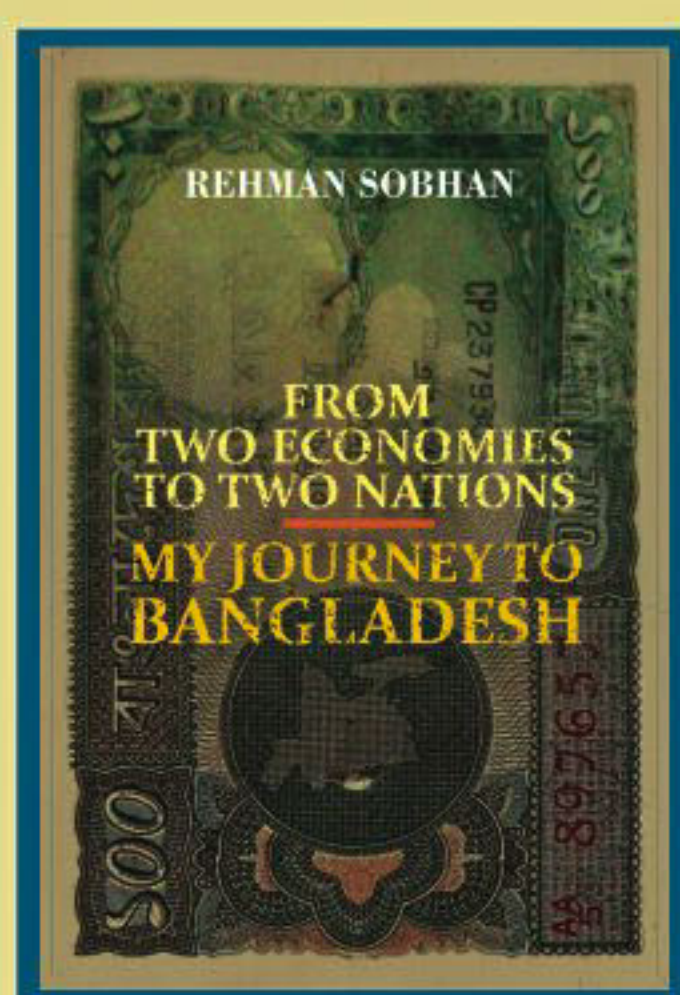
to my grandmother and gave her a resounding slap especially embarrassing as it was in front of my father, her son in law.

"It's all your doing Sarah. You have poisoned my daughter's mind against me. I who educated her to be a graduate (my mother was indeed one of the earliest female Moslem graduates) and even gave her a car to go to college and that too before her marriage."

My mother shouted. "It is you who have poisoned our stepbrothers and sister. They were always jealous that we being larger would inherit more. Father, please do not do this. I will personally persuade my mother to go to Dhaka - it's her refusal that has caused you anger and revenge."

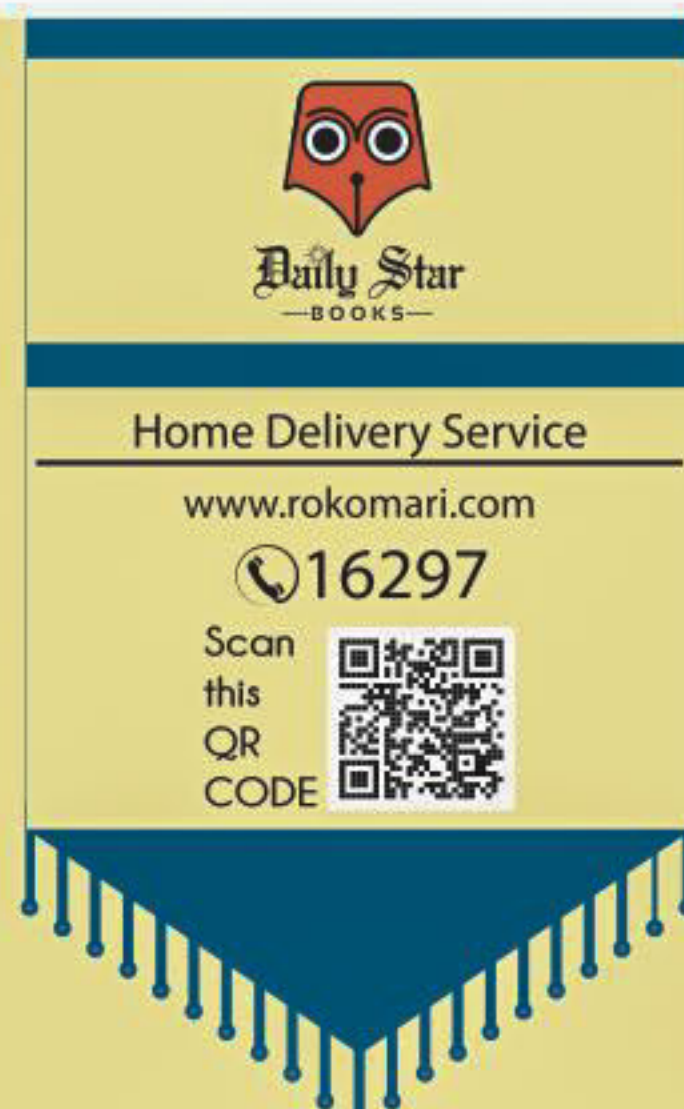
My grandfather came towards my mother, but was impeded by my father. He then turned around and went to another room and called the servants to pack his bags. He would leave for Dhaka immediately.

Two days later we heard that my grandfather had remarried. He wrote to my grandmother that she should be grateful that he was not going to give her *talak*. She however must do her duties as a wife by receiving him whenever he was in Calcutta.



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TO TWO NATIONS
MY JOURNEY TO
BANGLADESH

by
REHMAN SOBHAN



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