

THE RISING OF THE DEAD

ZEENA CHOUDHURY

I stepped inside the house through the drawing room doors. The smell of death assailed my senses. The smell was stale – all pervasive. A boy had died four days ago and his mother and father had bought his body back from London to Dhaka to be buried with all the attendant rituals.

We buried the boy on arrival, and yesterday the funeral ceremony had taken place four days after the death of the boy. White sheets covered the drawing room floor as well as the porch outside; the mullah had intoned the Koranic verses, interspersed with Bangla translations. He had enjoined us to pray for the departed soul—he did not forget to add the names of all struggling Muslims, especially the philistines (Palestinians). He went back again to the dead boy begging us to pray for this holy soul—only 19 years – who has fallen from the balcony of his college and crushed into the ground below.

I remembered all this as I crossed the drawing room door leading towards my sister-in-laws bed. I had to struggle past hordes of women – their heads covered; muttering prayers over their tasbeeh. I walked up to Sarah, my sister-in-law and planted a kiss on her forehead. She held my hands: "Bhabhi, I want to die. I want to join my son. Please bury me in his grave."

At that moment someone offered her a sip of water from a glass – she threw it across the room. "Can't you people realise that I want to die—die—die? He was inside me for a whole nine months and now aged nineteen years he has been snatched by you, God. Why didn't you take me? Why, why, why?"

We could not give any answer. I quietly slipped out of the room. I went into the kitchen veranda where I saw a middle aged cousin with her three daughters. They were busy making *samosas*, pastries for the visitors.

They were close relatives of my mother-in-law. One of her many nieces. Her husband too had been killed. A thief had entered their house and as the husband accosted him he had knifed him right through the stomach. Since then Fahmida Bubu had lived an impoverished life – her low government job (my father-in-law helped her to get the post) supplemented by any money, clothes food the various relatives gave to her. She had a son who had

the children. One day I happened to look at one of Farida's drawing books. I was quite taken by surprise. Farida had drawn herself as a princess surrounded by her courtiers – she had named the courtiers after the various children in the house. She however was right in the centre with a huge sceptre in her hands.

"So, Seema," I said to the girl "You want to be a princess."

"No," said Seema, "I actually want to be a queen." She laughed, gave a shy giggle and then very soon assumed an impassive face. I went on to for something else, but that picture stayed in my mind. Every now and then I would glance at Farida. What did those women think of Farida? How did they enjoy being taken for granted? How keenly did Farida feel being treated as an invisible object? For indeed, none of us—meaning my parents-in-law, the daughters-in-laws and our respective husbands even the servants treated them with any great importance. They were like pieces of furniture – if we needed them we used them, pushed them aside and went our different ways.

"That was because you could keep an eye on him. Don't you realise he felt suffocated?"

"What rubbish," exclaimed Sarah vehemently, "It was only me he needed. Oh, Riad make him understand how much you loved me—only me. Now I want to die and stay with you forever."

My mother-in-law screamed, "Sarah has gone berserk—totally hysterical. Someone try and stop her. Everyone is listening—It's just too terrible."

"My darling girl, please let Riad's soul rest in peace," said Hashmat's mother, Riad's Dadu. But the hoarse wailing carried on.

Now the prayers were over – women crowded the bed. It was heart wrenching. Suddenly, I saw Farida enter the room with a candle in hand. "Make way, make way," she screamed and then just as she approached the bed, she slid to the floor and white spit started dribbling down the sides of her mouth. The candles slid to the floor. Farida seemed to be muttering something.



Well, to come back to the bereaved mother, Farida and Reema were both rubbing her hands and pressing her head, while Fahmida Bubu was trying to get Sarah to swallow some food – but to no avail. Reema and Fahmida Bubu persisted in their efforts – while Farida seemed to have slipped into the kitchen.

It was getting close to Maghreb prayers. The adhan was loudly beckoning the faithful. All the women went in to the drawing room to say their prayers. The men prayed on various prayer mats in the porch and in the verandas. A silent hush descended. Only Sarah's wails could be heard. Reema, Fahmida and I remained with her – we would pray later – we decided.

"Riad, my Riad, if only I could see you," wailed Sarah, "Why did you fall off the balcony? Why did you bend over? What did you want to see so urgently. Oh God what if he did not lose his balance but was pushed over deliberately?"

"Hush, hush," said Amma, "It's time for prayers."

She went back to her prayers. Sarah got hiccups and Fahmida Bubu thrust some water in to Sarah's parched throat.

"Now, I can't even cry any more," wailed Sarah again, "No more tears are left in my eyes. Riad, if only I could talk to you. Why did you throw yourself over?"

"Hush," said my mother in law, "You've gone mad. 'Let Riad's soul rest in peace.' 'Let her say what she wants. It will make her feel lighter,' said Fahmida Bubu. My mother-in-law gave her a withering look. I looked at her sympathetically. But Sarah did not stop.

"You just shut up," she shouted at her mother, "You've lost no child." She then became hysterical.

"I'm going to kill myself. I promise you all. I'm going to put this pillow on my mouth and nose and suffocate."

Her equally bereaved husband, Hamid, was called and he tried to calm her down.

"You never loved your son like I did," she screamed at Hamid, "You were always correcting him."

"I did it for his own good," replied Hamid.

"See, you let him study in England when I wanted him to be near us."

"I've seen him, and I've spoken to him, Sarah Khala."

Immediately Sarah jumped out of the bed and placed her ears next to Farida's mouth. Someone bathed Farida's face with water and Seema spoke loudly.

"Sarah Khala, I've seen him as cleanly as I'm seeing you. He asked me to give you a message. He spoke very softly. He was wearing a white robe and there was light all around him. He was smiling and then Farida stopped. By that time Sarah got into frenzy. She pulled open Seema's lips, "What did he say? What was the message?"

Farida's mouth started to dribble spit on Sarah's hand. Sarah started to shake Farida violently, "You can't stop now. Say what he said. I beg you. I kiss your feet."

Fahmida Bubu threw a jug of water over Seema's head and face, while Amma tried to wrench Sarah away, but it was an impossible task. Suddenly Farida started to mutter something. Again Sarah put her ears near their dribbling mouth.

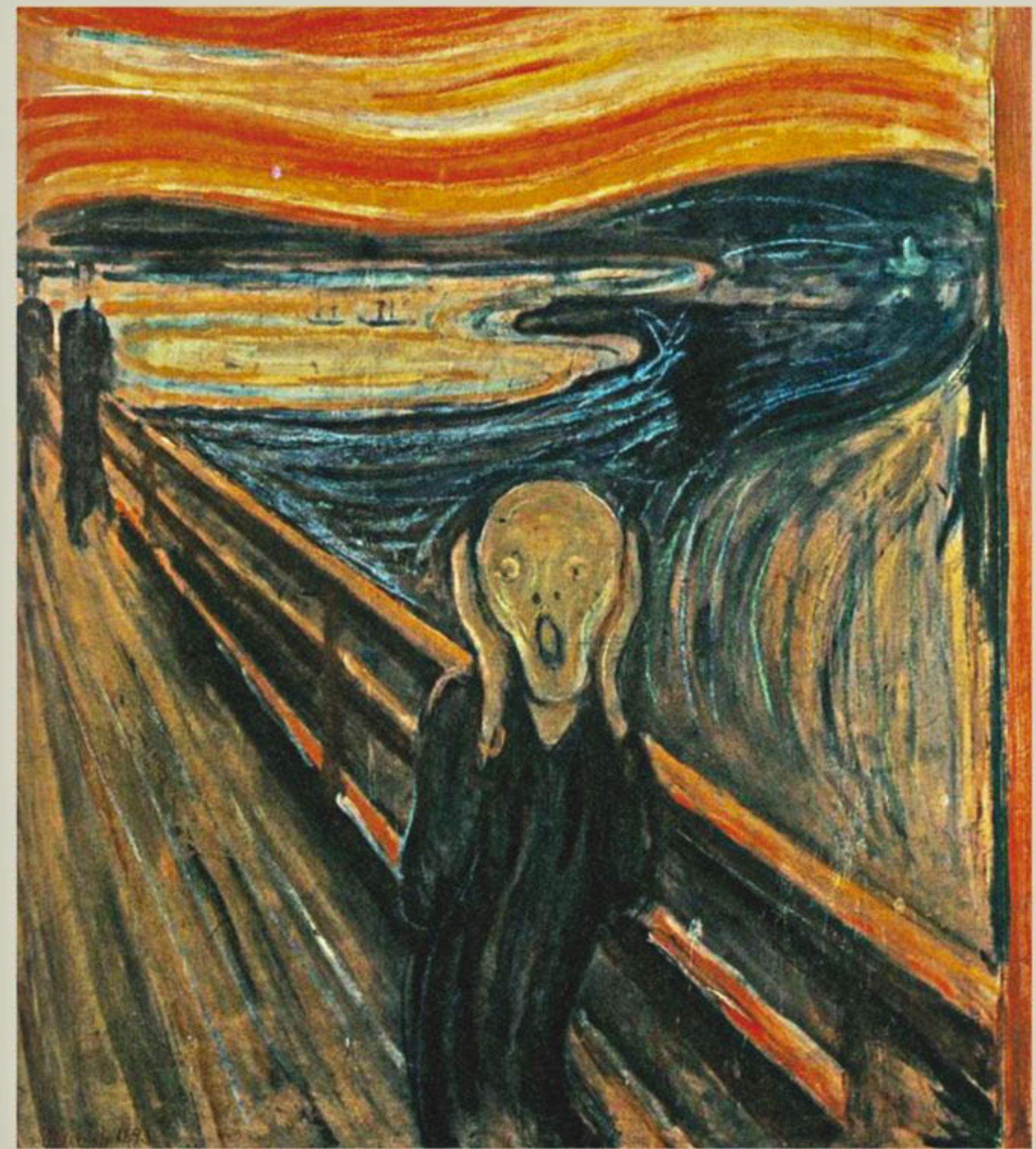
Then Sarah said loudly, "He said to pray for him and to forgive him."

"My beloved son you have done no wrong." Then again Sarah put her ears to Farida's mouth which kept muttering, "Salaam, Salaam, Salam – peace, peace, peace."

Sarah exclaimed, "My son wants to be left in peace. Yes, I will stop crying and start praying to God. Oh, God, thank you for letting me hear my son's message. Come, Farida. Get up and lie down beside me."

In the meanwhile, Farida got up. Farida abruptly opened her eyes wide and wiped the spit from her mouth. All of us watched Sarah wipe Farida's forehead. We forgot about Sarah's grief. Soon everyone filed out of the room silently. I was the last to leave. Just before I left, I happened to look at Farida. I noticed her face was calm and serene but there was a hint of smile around her lips.

A few of us helped in putting Farida on Sarah's bed. Sarah herself was busy wiping Farida's face. When she was sure that she was comfortable, she turned to all of us and called out, "Bring her some food and water. Let both of us remain here alone. All of you please leave. Today I have found that a saint has bought a message from Riad and from the Almighty."



NIGHTMARE

S M SHAHRUKH

When did these dead people awake from their graves?

Intermingling with those who are still living?
Butchers of history cavorting with its heroes,
The everyday nondescript taking monstrous forms,
Matter morphed into a stream of fluid horror,
Disturbing dreams in Technicolor
Or are they in brilliant monochrome?
Gremlins, hobgoblins, angels, demons,
Lovers, leavers, haters, friends and foes –
All get together on the inside of my head
Writing weird scenes of convoluted gothic plays
Weirder than the paintings of Salvador Dali
Makes me scream like Edvard Munch's androgyne...
Horrific things muddle the grey when I try to sleep
It discourages any further attempts of
Closing my eyes and welcoming the dark.

We Are At Odds

RUBAB ABDULLAH

Time changes
And we too
with phases
Giving so much love to others
Wordlessly many humane souls ooze out
Leave no choice for us but to groan

Habitually in our lonely hours
We have to kneel before you, O dear Lord!
Holy men preach your words for tolerance
For equality and, for love
Even if sometimes things seem to be falling apart

But we bruise the peace of mind
Through the outlandish false pride
In the name of religion
Sometimes we are at odds
Breaking ourselves into pieces quotidian.

(Rubab Abdullah writes from Ohio, USA)

Well, to come back to the bereaved mother, Farida and Reema were both rubbing her hands and pressing her head, while Fahmida Bubu was trying to get Sarah to swallow some food – but to no avail. Reema and Fahmida Bubu persisted in their efforts – while Farida seemed to have slipped into the kitchen.

run away after his matriculation and joined the army; He too sent money to his mother. But everything she received was too meagre.

We all called upon her to help us when we needed her to help in the kitchen and around the house. Actually the two daughters, Farida and Reema, 18 and 16 years respectively made the beds, looked after our children and ran errands, work which could not have been entrusted to servants. Indeed they were invisible to most of us unless their help was required.

Sometimes I used to wonder what went through the minds of those young girls – but even my thoughts were stray thoughts—quickly forgotten.

I remember once coming across something very curious, both the girls were watching over my children. Actually they were drawing pictures in a book and then telling them stories about the pictures, Farida, the eldest was particularly good at drawing imaginary fairy tales. Reema drew the usual alphabets and numbers and tested

“ব্যপ-সৃষ্টিতে অসাধারণ প্রতিভার প্রয়োজন। ... বন্ধু আবুল মনসুরের হাত-সাফাই দেখে বিস্মিত হলাম। ভাষার কান মলে রস সৃষ্টির ক্ষমতা আবুল মনসুরের অসাধারণ। এ যেন পাকা গুস্তাদী হাত।”

—কাজী নজরুল ইসলাম



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