

MUSINGS

EXQUISITE GASTRONOMY

MOHAMED SALEHEEN

Dealing with food issues occupied most of my adult life. This gave me exposure to some unforgettable gastronomic experiences. Here are three such episodes.

THE AROMATIC GRASSCUTTER SOUP

After a long field trip, hunger gripped the mission members who could barely wait to eat, yearning for whatever they could find. The Project Manager had arranged lunch near a visiting oil palm plantation site. A massive bowl of boiling soup arrived, with rice, fried plantain and yam served separately. Everyone started to dig into the soup first. When my turn came, I noticed that the soup contained assorted meat, feet of piglets, cray fish and fresh palm nuts; it had a greenish texture that

was trying to figure out. Seeing my inquisitive looks, the Project Manager announced: "The greenish part is the very essence of this soup dish. It is the contents of the intestine of the grasscutter, (a cousin of the "cane rat" species which feeds only on grass), that gives the richness and unworlthy aroma of the soup, and that's why it looks greenish. Have some, very delicious." "Wow, sounds exquisite," I said, and felt satisfied with the yummy fried plantain and rice and yam. Nobody paid much attention to the Project Manager's utterances and enjoyed the lunch. The grasscutter is the second largest rodent after porcupine. I should add: You can also have it smoked or grilled like kebab, though it consumes its own feces or poops. Grasscutter farming is a money

making machine yielding some 30 percent of around \$60 million a year in bushmeat business.

THE SIGNATURE DELICACY

This was at an official dinner in a prestigious restaurant where I happened to be the guest of honor. Amid exchanges of greetings and decorum, the evening began pleasantly with all kinds of drinks and appetizers. Soon nicely decorated food dishes started flowing from all directions. As we began to eat, the Chef

came with a beautiful white oval ceramic dish with something maroonish and shiny in it, and placed it in front of me. From the corner of my eyes, I took an unassuming cursory glance at it without interrupting our conversation. The lady on my left was watching me very carefully throughout. As soon as I finished my remarks on how to foster regional youth talents, she softly uttered: "Esteemed Mister there is no pork served here, we know you don't eat that. This is our signature delicacy - fresh dog meat, you must try it." Having had dogs as pets all my life, I tried politely to dodge the offer by saying, "Please go ahead, there's so much food on the table I am enjoying myself." When she insisted again, a stern look from across the table with a slight tilt of the head quietened her and relieved my invisible stress! My anxiety was put to sleep with perhaps one too many bottoms-up of Chamisul Sotju in a hand-glassed. Nevertheless, it was a lovely evening! Guess how many millions of this faithful friend of humans land up on the table each year - 25 million worldwide, according to 2014 estimates. The notorious Vain festival is famous for canine meat. It's time for a compassionate movement to ban the endless slaughtering of man's best friend.

Nirvana. The Pastor first chanted some thankful prayers and then pointed to the statue and remarked: "That's the role model; we must aspire to be like him." Food was served immediately thereafter. In the middle of the table was placed a big shack of barbecued ribs (huge in size), on my right was a golden crispy roasted chicken, on the right of Father Pastor was a squarish chunk of a white dish which looked to me like steamed fish. Other dishes included roasted potatoes, beans and carrot salad, freshly baked bread, cottage cheese and some juicy fruits. After-meal servings included a choice of herbal tea or spicy turkish like coffee and a bottle of locally made schnapps, all of which were nicely placed on a side trolley. My eyes were set on the ribs but the Father said: "For you is the chicken," the pork ribs are for us. "Upon gently enquiring about the white chunk near him, Sister Mary whispered into my ear." That's Father's specialty, he found a big python in the forest today; he loves that white meat, he hunts one once a week. "I happily settled with my chicken and the veggies. What a sumptuous meal it was - all the food were grown in the parish property including the poor python! Nobody in the surrounding communities suffered from food insecurity. While retiring for the evening, I prayed that Father Pastor does not pass on his predatory "white meat" habit to his merciful companions and devout followers. My own awareness lesson was that, with such regular feasting, Nirvana will surely remain miles away! My environmental knowledge hadn't matured by then, yet a silent thought flashed through as to who will halt the ecological imbalance that Father began by ignorantly ridding the forest of snakes and snails to his culinary delight!

Mohamed Saleheen retired recently from the World Food Programme. He represented it in different countries of the world & now lives in Rome.



THE PASTOR'S SPECIAL WHITE MEAT

At a missionary center, where I went to provide training on conscientization and group dynamics, it was time for dinner. Six of us were evenly seated across the neatly laid mahogany dining table. At the corner on a high mantled shelf, stood a wooden statue of Lord Buddha in a meditation posture. The stomach of the statue was finely carved upwards giving a convincing image of having achieved

REVIEWS

Is It Truth or Dare?

REVIEWED BY MARZIA RAHMAN

Truth or Dare, Nadia Kabir Barb, BLB, ISBN 987-984-34-3005-2, 2017

Those familiar with Nadia Kabir Barb's column *Straight Talk* in *The Daily Star* will be pleased with her short fiction debut *Truth or Dare*. Published by Bengal Lights Books in 2017, this anthology of twelve stories takes readers on an intimate journey across two cities, Dhaka and London, with characters that are richly drawn and varied. A British Bangladeshi author, Barb draws inspiration from her multicultural background. The articles of her newspaper column had delved into social-political issues as well as common everyday occurrences.

The stories of her debut collection too teem with themes as diverse as love, betrayal, friendship, loss, midlife crisis, failed marriages, broken families, choices made and soul-zagging.

A number of Barb's stories focus on intimate aspect of relationships. "Can You See Me?" brings together two people who are quite dissimilar and yet quite alike on London Bridge in a cool night. The nineteen-year-old Alexander Ahmed, sans home or a job, meets Nina, on the verge of ending her life, and the two ends up with an unusual friendship, sharing their woes and worries. Raju and Tareq, the two friends of "Truth or Dare," embark on a thrilling game of truth or dare while confronting their innermost fears.

Relationships are thus etched in different shades in Barb's stories. The third story of the collection, "Inside the Bridgace" takes us to the domestic sphere

where Shabana, shabbily treated by her in-laws, keeps her miscarriage a secret. For most of the story, her husband, Anwar remains aloof from his wife's miseries. Only in the end does he turn into a different person, surprising both his wife and mother thereby.

"In Case I Die" and "Let me Go," two interesting stories, share the same undercurrent theme of death. The woman in "In Case I Die," in and out of here senses after a stroke,

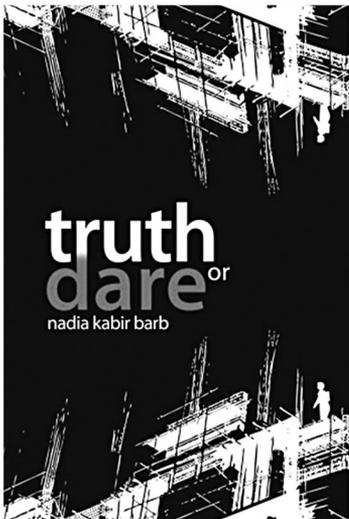
While a few stories portray stereotypical images of Bengali housewives and women, a few others manage to focus on more untypical situations. A lesbian relationship, still a taboo in the east, is presented well in one of the stories. Barb, indeed, doesn't try to give sugar-coated, concocted picture of lives in the west.

realizes that "there is never a right time to die." With the children still young, and a bucket of wish list yet unfulfilled, she wants to scream out: "I am not ready. I am not ready." Barb allows readers access to the mind of the woman by using the stream of consciousness technique. "Let me Go" has a similar theme where a man lies unconsistently while the wife patiently by

his hospital bed, not for his recovery, but for release from a long, unhappy married life. Reminding us of Kate Chopin's famous work "The Story of an Hour," the second story stages the final scene of a drama that began a long ago. Strangely enough, the titles of these two stories echo each other, as if one was the answer to the query posed in the other one.

The themes of loss and longings appear in a couple of stories. Maya in "The Descent"

cannot come to terms with life after the loss of her husband, Yusuf. This story, however, seems somewhat out of place in the collection as it has the feel of a thriller where a murderer returns for revenge. The crippled beggar Manik in "In the Lives of Others" despairs at the end of a promising life while watching people queue up in front of the American Embassy where the American dream is being sold in



the form of visas. "The Enlightenment of Rahim Baksh" recounts the story of a protagonist caught in a midlife crisis, full of lustful longings and looking for a fling. Romance does swirl up in his life but his hopes are dashed: Rahim is in the end back to a

mundane existence and his boring wife. Homelessness is a common theme in both the first and last story of the collection and one wonders if this arrangement was a deliberate one. Barb depicts the human condition in them through portraying afflicted

people in both the east and the west. While Alexander Ahmed in the first story "Can You See Me," is a homeless boy in London who drifts from one place to another in search of a comfortable night's stay, Manik, the central character of the concluding story "In the Lives of Others" is seen lying in a Dhaka street after a fatal accident.

While a few stories portray stereotypical images of Bengali housewives and women, a few others manage to focus on more untypical situations. A lesbian relationship, still a taboo in the east, is presented well in one of the stories. Barb, indeed, doesn't try to give sugar-coated, concocted picture of lives in the west. Murders, separations and disintegration of families in the west are depicted in stories such as "The Descent," "My Father's Daughter," and "Don't Shoot the Messenger."

Nadia Kabir Barb's stories are mostly amusing and often unpredictable. Readers in both the east and the west will surely find it them on a par. Just as the picture of life in the west is present here for Bengali readers, a slice of Bangladeshi life is on offer here for western readers as well. Barb's honest attempt at giving us glimpses of both these worlds would thus be applauded. She has done a commendable job in this debut collection and one hopes she will keep offering such noteworthy fiction in the future as well.

Marzia Rahman is a translator and fiction writer based in Dhaka.