



Editor's Note: The moon claims a very special place in our literature and culture incorporating romance and philosophy alike. Even though the dictionary entry on "moon" is very prosaic and insipid, most people find something interesting to tell about the moon. *Star* Literature Page presents this week an issue on this amazing everyday phenomenon.

POETRY

LALON'S MOON SONGS

TRANSLATED BY SUBRATA AUGUSTINE GOMES

1. Moon Song (Chander gaye chand legechhe)

A moon merging with another moon—
What are we to make of this?
A mother in her daughter's womb, what
Do they call that genesis?

There was this girl but six months old,
At nine months she carried, we're told,
Had three kids at eleven months, which one
Of them earns a fakir's bliss?

There's a house that has no door,
A man too, that has no word,
Who would give him food and who'd
Lit the evening lamp of his?

To the fakirs Lalon hums:
A son dies if he's touched by mom—
One that knows not what it means,
Knows not what a fakir is.

2. The Moon, Clandestine (Chand ache chande ghera)

Moon wrapped in moon, oh, how
Should you hope to trap it now?
Countless moons emanate bliss,
A fugitive moon in their midst—
And as soon as I find, it renders my eyes blind
With its radiant blitz.

Moon-fruit on Beauty's tree—
One can almost see its random glee...
If to moon-bazar you go, beware that vertigo
Splashes of moonlight can cause thee.

There's that magic city—"Alek" is its name,
Where sun sets at night, daytime you'll need a lamp,
And those that know about it are the clear-sighted,
Lalon says, they've viewed the lunar realm.

3. The Brightest Moon (Onek bhagyer phole she chandkeu dekhite pay)

This Moon can be glimpsed
By only the luckiest eyes,
Never does it wane,
As bright on both sides.

In the world in which it shines
Day with Night entwines—
Brighter than a million moons,
Alighting endless skies.

A drop of water in an ocean,
In its midst a golden mountain,
In a speck this unknown moon
Has built its paradise.

Once viewed, you have no pain,
Once touched, you aren't the same
Any more; oh, such a moon
How could Lalon surmise...

4. The Foursome Moon (charti chondro bhaber bhubone)

In the world of ideas
There rises a fourfold moon.
Only one of its faces is self-effulgent,
Everybody sees that one.

One who's deciphered this
His strength of faith is limitless.
He'd trap the moon at will,
The very one that can't be known.

Four moons in a single lunar mass
With a forever changing face.
He who peeps into the antechamber
Will spot the secret fount.

If for the manna-moon you thirst
The toxic moon must needs be dealt with first.
In every coitus, Siraj Sai says, Thus
There's both potion and poison.

Subrata Augustine Gomes is a poet and a translator.


FICTION

The Story of a Moonlit Night (Part I)

SHAHEEN AKHTAR
TRANSLATED BY ARIFA GHANI RAHMAN

It was a moonlit night – I wouldn't have known had I not gone to the rooftop.

When Ismat and I climbed up to the rooftop to talk in peace, it was still dark. A few *kanakchapas* from the end of the season seemed to play hide and seek from the branches of the bare bush. They smelled better than they looked. Ismat used to value such things before but now she didn't care. She held the teacup to her chest and stared at nothing. Resignedly, I pushed the cane chair towards her and sat on the swing myself. In the dusky light we faced each other, silently. There was a time when we couldn't sleep without confiding in each other. That was probably two decades ago. And now – we couldn't speak of our innermost feelings but at least we could talk about others. How long could we just sit there like thunderstruck people? I forced the words out of my mouth – "Your family used to speak in Urdu before. When did they start with Bangla?"

Only the sound of a throatclearing came from the other side.

And yet, I had heard about their practice of Urdu from Ismat herself. When we began to frequent their house in the eighties though, the only sign left were the arms full of glass bangles on the women of the household and their addressing elder sisters as "Baji." Why didn't she want to talk about this now? Or did she not trust me anymore?

I said, "In those days, the elite Muslims of Kolkata used to speak Urdu. I'm sure they didn't change as soon as they landed in Dhaka."

"No, they changed after the Independence." Ismat laughed. "Are you looking for new material for your writing?"

I couldn't even write about things I knew, and this was ...

My mild desire to talk was snuffed like a lamp that had run out of oil.

Ismat had been suffering from schizophrenia for the last twenty years. It happened while she was studying in Scandinavia. Although I felt hurt the last time I went to pick her up at the airport, I had no clue she was ill. While Ismat threw a brief smile at us and climbed into her older brother-in-law's Toyota, we stood like sardines in the terminal. We stared as the driver proceeded to stuff two massive suitcases into the trunk and Ismat relaxed among her sisters. When I think about it now, I feel that the look she gave us through the car window was one of deep sadness. Shathi and I wandered aimlessly through the airport and finally ordered some coffee at the restaurant on the second floor. We both loved Ismat very much. So we could find no explanation for her behavior nor did we know how to reproach her for it. We drank our coffee silently. The planes landed and took off on the runway as the sun set behind the ploughed land beyond the airport. Without turning my head, I said to

Shathi, "People change when they go abroad." Shathi seemed to be waiting to hear something just like this. She pounced instantly, "But that doesn't mean Ismat should change too!"

"Just watch. We will too."

Two days later, Ismat walked into our modest lodgings. At the time, Shathi and I were beyond the reach of our parents, our family. We were 9-5 working women, struggling to survive in Dhaka city without any support from a man. We may not have had any friends, but there was no dearth of enemies. We were startled to see Ismat through the iron grille of our balcony. How haggard she had become in the last two days! She sat on the only chair in our room and smiled to herself. That was enough to rein both Shathi and I in. Although we might be wearing blinders, we knew how shabby our surroundings were.

Anyone returning from abroad was bound to find it disgusting. The two of us sat meekly on the floor. When Ismat finally spoke, our eyes opened wide in shock. What?! Boro Dulabhai knocked on her door whenever he felt like it? He was an angel! He was the only one who was apologetic the other day at the airport because there was no space in his car for us. And the two older sisters had pretended not to know us. And Ismat here was dismissing everything with a smile!

"He probably thought I had just come from the land of free sex, so I wouldn't be too picky about whether he was my brother or brother-in-law."

Ismat shocked us even more when she said her two older sisters had banded together against her. They were staking out on the balcony outside her room to drive her crazy and out of the house. Her elderly parents had joined them too.

Ismat did not actually go mad and leave the house but she was suspicious even now. Recently, a doctor had named these symptoms "Thought Sharing." Although no one actually said what they thought of her, Ismat believed she had heard their thoughts.

I squirmed uncomfortably and disturbed the swing's rhythm. Even though my lips were locked now, didn't Ismat realize she was unwanted here? I'd much rather go to my room to write. Quite a number of papers were clamoring for my articles. In fact, I'd prefer talking about market prices, my colleagues' rat race to attend workshops and seminars abroad, the terrible state of affairs in the country with my family. There would be no need to hide my thoughts, at least not inside my own home.

I was just about to get off the swing when, from behind the enormous pillars of the new construction next door, peeped the huge reddish moon. Ismat stirred. In other words, she seemed to be getting ready to say what she had planned when she left her house without telling anyone.

The moon grew larger. Its bright light passed over the plants in the flowerpots to our faces. The moon's

bright light?! Ismat began to tell a story from the eighties. It was one of ours. The Bishwa Shahitya Kendra had just opened, its library filled with many books of literature from different countries and a grassy lawn up front. A concrete platform under the trees with folding chairs, an arrangement for tea and snacks, and the mix of conversation of young men and women – a scene unfamiliar in a middle class area of Dhaka. We were ecstatic. Three of us were returning on a rickshaw along Manik Mia Avenue., the Aarong building straight ahead. There was no giant billboard on top of the building and we saw the sun setting behind the building. One of us yelled out, "What a beautiful moon!"

Ismat giggled when she finished the story. I laughed along with her. Moonlight in the daytime – who said that? The face of a soft-spoken romantic girl came to mind but I couldn't remember her words.

What I did remember was the strip of river beyond the green dome of the Shia Mosque we could see from the

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fourth floor rooftop of Ismat's home. Many of the confused moments of our life were spent smoking cigarettes behind the locked door of that rooftop and watching the changing faces of the river. The city was trampling the rivers and canals in its mad rush to grow. At that spot now stood the huge matchbox-like apartments of Japan Garden City.

"We're growing older but the changes are not happening according to plan."

"My life, like this country, is in shambles."

"I'm actually sorry for the country. Poor thing. It has no future."

"Worse times are coming."

"Hundreds of years ago on this day, a monkey in the jungle presented Gautam Buddha with honey."

We had been talking at cross purposes for some time now. Not like before. What's gone is gone forever.

The night grew longer. The moon shone so brightly that not only were the hands on my watch visible, we could have found needles on the floor as well. Ismat sat, still as stone, the wrist with the watch on it lying on her lap.

"Don't you go to the rooftop anymore?"

"I can't even stay in my room!"

"No matter how sad we were, we used to go to the rooftop instead of sitting in our room. And we'd lament about everything between the heavens and the earth."

"I didn't imagine then that I'd have no roof over my head."

My heart trembled at Ismat's words.

I floated along on the moonlight and returned to my recent visit to the village of Chatta in Baarhatta.

Through the trees, the light shone down in patterns on the front yard where the girls clapped their hands and danced as they sang, "Tumra oi shuno na go/joler ghaate chikon kala/Amay dake go./O she je amay dake/Amay dake go." [Listen, my dears/There stands my love by the water's edge/Calling me./O he calls me/and he calls me to him.]

"Hey, don't the men in your family mind that you're singing such songs for all to hear?"

The women winked at each other at my words. "Oh, they don't mind at all! We're singing songs about Radha-Krishna. Where's the harm in that?"

"The men of Baarhatta are fools!"

For the first time, Ismat laughed out loud like in the eighties.

"Fools – or too clever – I don't know. I went for a day for my research. How could I figured out their darkest secrets just by listening to a few songs and asking a few questions like an intellectual?"

"I think those women are the real smarts. Even while hiding behind Radha." Ismat joked like before.

"They know how to survive. And the roofs over their heads must be sturdy."

"Hmm. They have their cake and eat it too."

"We're the real fools." My voice sounded soft, even to my ears.

"So you go for training to the village, just like that?"

"What's the harm? City people are constantly trying to teach the villagers a thing or two: how to clean butts after shitting. If you don't have money to buy soap, use a pinch of ash to clean your hands."

"Who knows who's civilized and who's not." Ismat let out a deep sigh. Her own brother, born from the same womb, had come home from Spain after seven years. He had called his divorcee sister a whore. Prostitute. Did anyone, except a whore, leave their husband just because he snored in his sleep?

"Did you hear this yourself?"

"You know, that's a problem. Everyone asks questions like a doctor."

"Is your brother here for good? Then there'll be trouble."

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