



FICTION

Sit Down, Sir!

DILRUBA Z. ARA

Gulshan Market Two has not changed much over the last three decades. Surrounding three sides of an open parking lot, it is a square, U-block construction, with a colonnade veranda running along the front of each shop. Some of the shops are new, but most are what they had been when Rita was a teenager. Several high-rise buildings have cropped up in the vicinity, the road in front of it has become one of the busiest in Dhaka — various foreign offices have set up business in this area — but this market place belongs to the Dhaka City Corporation, so it still speaks of bygone times. Rita prefers this market to the others. This remains one of the few places in Dhaka where she doesn't have to spend any energy navigating her way.

She has travelled extensively around the world, walked on many regal avenues and shopped in dazzling stores, and she has witnessed the gradual erasing of specific regional and national characteristics of markets and commodities; everything now looks alike, the shops, the goods, the interior design of the business precincts and floor-walkers who wait on the customers. She can cope with that abroad, but when she returns to Dhaka she feels lonely among her ultra-rich friends and relatives, who seem to feel no pain at the tension created in the ambiance of the city by the fast-changing lifestyle on the one hand and struggling slum dwellers and normal wage earners on the other.

Once this part of the city used to reflect other parts of Dhaka, which in its turn gave Rita a feeling of continuity whenever she returned here, but in recent years she has been feeling lost. Dhaka has been turning into a city under continuous construction. Old buildings have been disappearing, giving place to high-rise monsters. Culturally interested families are forgetting their upbringing to chase riches in order to fit in with the present Dhaka. An unbidden shaft of sorrow penetrates Rita's thoughts, but she shrugs, knowing she must get used to that, and moves on, taking in the echoes of the past that continue to reverberate in the Gulshan Market. Her cousin Sahin walks next to her.

Sahin is a young man back from the US — meticulously dressed in grey trousers and full-sleeved shirt with small grey and light-pink squares. He wears black shoes, and his spectacles are gold-rimmed. He looks well-off, decent, walks slowly, speaks in a measured tone. He can't keep a job because he feels he deserves to be treated in certain ways because of his foreign education. He comes from a wealthy family, so he can afford to resign whenever it suits him. Now too he is free and keeping Rita company. Rita is out to get new curtains for her mother's room.

On the left side corner of the veranda

is a narrow corridor leading to the rear of the building, but at the same time, hidden away in it are a few tiny shops and stalls. Rita and Sahin enter this passage way, walk past a dry cleaner's to step into a small home-textile store. The left wall is decorated with an array of fabrics, while the right is covered with rows of shelves displaying stacks of folded material. A platform is set along the foot of the shelves. A middle-aged shopkeeper is kneeling on some material and folding it. He is stern in his traditional outfit, curved back, bushy beard and paan-stained lips. He looks up, says Salaam to Rita and Sahin, and then continues with his work. Rita takes a quick look at the pile of cloth on the shelves, but nothing attracts her. She exchanges glances with Sahin. There are other shops close by offering home textiles at a reasonable price. Rita crosses the floor to leave the shop through the opposite door. Sahin follows her. The shopkeeper calls from behind:

shops and stalls sprawl onto a crumbling road that seems to be screaming for a makeover itself. The hustle-bustle in the farmers' bazaar across the littered road and the clamminess of the air hit them hard. They stop for a minute.

Rita finds the combination of sounds and smells enclosing - but also distancing, which frustrates her. Her instinct is to reconnect, to get herself moving. Sahin watches her closely. She seems uncomfortable; but perhaps he is imagining it. He is not surprised when she suddenly starts walking. Her pace quickens with every step. Sahin finds himself having to speed up to follow her. A hint of perfume flutters in the wake of her nimble figure. He sniffs the fragrance. Is it Dior's Poison, he wonders! She walks past a few stalls before she is by an entrance leading to a textile shop, where a tailor is sitting at a foot sewing machine, unstitching a cushion cover, his head bending over it. He doesn't look up when they walk past him to

"Sir, please sit down". He shows Sahin the only chair.

"I don't mind the price. Anything will do. It has to be good quality and washable at home," Rita says.

"We do have home-produced material. But perhaps you fancy something from our next-door neighbour's!" There is a twinkle in his eye.

"Pardon?"

"Made in India!"

"Ah, I get it. No, no, I would prefer home-made. What about those up there? Are those Bangladeshi?" She points to the rolls of clothes on one shelf.

"Ah, yes Apa." The young man turns to Sahin, again: "Sit down, Sir!"

Rita was about to ask him to get the rolls down from the shelf, but his continued interest in Sahin's contentment has now begun to annoy her. She is the one who is negotiating with him, yet he is offering the only chair to Sahin. How dare he disregard her like that? Until now she has been comfortable in her familiarity with the place. It had been as though she were walking in her childhood home. But now two contradictory thoughts spring up in her mind:

"This fellow is provincial and a damn chauvinist. One more time, and I will give him a piece of my mind." And then, "But what else can I expect from a male who works in a place like this?"

Rita has lived in the States for thirty years and, despite her American passport, has been taking pride in her Bengali Muslim woman identity. When she refuses to accept Dhaka's modernisation, which has been leaning towards the Western style, she can't, in a part of her mind, help feeling a sense of being more refined than others who don't understand the value of preserving history, tradition and cultural heritage. But now she begins to wonder whether a place preserved in an old-fashioned way reflects itself in its inhabitants. Indeed! That must be it; the mindset of the shopkeeper has been imposed on him by the place itself! His environment has become his mind.

Why is she thinking like this? Is this because part of her has become Western and yet at the same time another part of her has been trying to locate a point of reference around her, so that she can feel anchored to a certain place? Otherwise, why would she subject herself to this kind of experience? Why does she insist on standing against this new communal spirit of Dhakabashis, where the erosion of tradition doesn't matter?

It occurs to her that most shopkeepers in Gulshan area address her as Ma'am, and she has been having difficulty in coming to terms with that word. Formerly, every shopkeeper in Dhaka used to address their female consumers as Sister or Aunt in Bengali, but recently those two words have been exchanged

by one English word: Ma'am. That word when uttered by Bengalis, sounds odd in her ears. So far, this young man's manner of greeting has been pleasing. He has addressed her as Apa (Big Sister), like in the old days, and until this particular point of time she has been happy with the sound of that word. It fell so nicely in her ears. But her sense of happiness is now being replaced with frustration generating other feelings within her, propelling her to act contrary to her hitherto reverence for Eastern tradition.

So, she demands:

"What is the matter with you? I am the one who is negotiating with you, I am your customer. Why are you offering him..." (she points to Sahin) "...the chair, and not me?"

"Oh, because whenever we have a couple the Sirs get angry if we don't offer them the chair first!" the young man smiles, "And we have only one chair!"

"Well, I won't have it like that," Rita fumes, "God, civilisation will never reach this country!"

"Don't put the blame on whole country; you are the one who wanted to do your shopping in a traditional shop," Sahin cuts in. "Let's go, we can drive off to Bashundhora Mall. There they will know how to treat a lady."

"Yes. You are right; I should have listened to you from the beginning," Rita turns to the shopkeeper. "Hey, you just lost a customer with a fat wallet."

"Oh, no! Apa!" He jumps up to his feet. "Apa, please don't go. I will borrow a chair from the next-door shop." He turns to the tailor, "Man, what are you waiting for? God! Hurry, go and get a chair! Run!"

The tailor leaves his seat and disappears, to return in a flash with a chair. He places it next to the first. With a little hesitation, Rita and Sahin take their seats. Peace is restored. Rita orders three sets of curtains to be sewn up and pays upfront. She doesn't bargain. The shopkeeper offers them a green coconut each as a treat and ensures them that the curtains will be sewn and delivered on time. They sip the coconut milk out of paper straws, which they both first wipe carefully with Kleenex. Having finished, they stand up. The tailor picks up the borrowed chair and leaves the shop.

"I hope he will know how to treat a woman in the future," Rita whispers, as she and Sahin approach the door. They have to flatten themselves against the wall behind them to let another couple brush pass them to enter the shop.

Rita and Sahin have hardly put their feet outside the cramped room when they hear from behind:

"Sit down, Sir!"

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"Sir, why are you leaving? Wait!"

Sahin turns:

"You don't seem very service minded."

Sahin looks into his eyes. "Are you the proprietor?"

The man quickly stands up and mumbles something from behind his beard that hardly escapes Rita's ears. She starts pulling Sahin out of the shop before he can utter another word. Sahin does not like this part of the market; it is usually abuzz with middle and lower-class shoppers smelling of armpit sweat. Sahin finds it dirty, passé and poorly supplied, but he is also well aware of Rita's obsession with the past. As he follows her, he thinks: she is searching for perceptible continuities in this goddamn place, she has no idea how unrefined these people are.

Once they are out of the cubicle, they find themselves on an arcade, from where

enter the slot, which is cubical, with just enough space for two persons of average size. The interior smells of a blend of naphthalene and fabric. Sunlight streams in through the door and reflects on golden thread. The room has a quaint charm. Rita embraces that feeling. The wall opposite her is fitted with shelves, loaded with vertically stacked material. The shopkeeper is seated on a dais, his legs tucked under him. There is only one chair for the customers. Neither Rita nor Sahin takes sit, each out of courtesy to the other.

"I'm looking for some material for curtains," Rita says, regarding the young man, who is now kneeling on the platform and smiling. He is clean shaven; his teeth are white. He looks gentle.

"If you would tell me your price range, Apa?" he replies, then immediately turns to Sahin:

POETRY

HASAN MARUF

Tears of Dying Calm

I separate the bleeding stars
From the severed heartache of the sun,
Sending telepathic ripples to
Banish the moon into gravity's mirage,
Blooming an oasis void of holographic charm.

Solar thunder stuns
Melting spectral comets
Fallen from Cassiopeia's lips,
Putting ether on the run-
Into the cackling whimper
Of a day's undone hum.

Torpedoed night surges as
Lost son of no one--
I quash all energy,
Breeding a nucleic anomaly
Of symmetrical anarchy-
Blood roses rain from
Tears of dying calm.



Wind

I am the wind,
Of all the Gods' wealth,
The glorious, the most temperate
I grant Earth her life sustaining power
I provide atmosphere for living things
Without me, creatures couldn't breathe
And nothing would be green

However, don't mistake my maternal nature
For vulnerable sobriety.

For my temperament is quite inconstant
When I am outraged, I can explode instantly,
With violent tantrums of tornadoes and hurricanes
Yet, I am most content creating harmony in nature instead
Listen to the sound of my psithurism symphony,

Whispering in the tall grass and rustling in the tree leaves
Here, I sing beautiful melodies with the gust of every breeze.
So, the next time you feel my sweet caress, remember this;
It is I, the Wind, who gives you vita!

Hasan Maruf teaches English in DPS STS School, Dhaka. He entertains himself by looking at things from odd angles.