

Musing on Things Unspeakable

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Prejudice is a monstrous thing, and so is the tendency to be judgmental—the mindset that allures us to put ourselves in the shining armor of righteousness. I know I have expressed the same attitude by putting “prejudice” and “monstrous” together in the sentence above. My statement discriminates against all the species that do not resemble my humanness. Monsters. It’s what we call those from whom we want to dissociate ourselves: those who commit violent crimes—rape, murder, pedophilia, incest—or engage in non-normative sexual behaviors, or fail to look or behave like humans due to some physical or mental defect. Monsters. They are what we are not. But even though we define them as something different from us, we still try to judge them according to our own terms as if our ability as humans depends on our disapproval of others. What does not look like us or talk like us or dress like us or perform sex like us must not be defined as someone like us. We spread a veil around our human shell and try desperately to save its fragile existence. But to what end? I was pondering on this, standing in a classroom, where I was aghast to see the display of human prejudice at its horrific worst. But before I take my readers to a classroom in the western world, I want to describe another incident that I had experienced in Dhaka a few years ago.

Scenario 1: A Street of Dhaka

Because I have been living abroad for a long time, old roads and newly built highways have jumbled up my memories of Dhaka streets. But if I am not mistaken, I was in an intersection near a fancy car showroom somewhere in the Mohakhali area. I was on my way to give a talk at my old work place—the English Department at the University of Dhaka. Whenever I visit home, Enamul becomes my personal chauffeur. Per the instruction of my sister Bindu—his boss—Enamul drives me everywhere and makes sure I ensue no stupid stunts in the dangerous city (being a ‘foreigner’ that I have become to my own country’s social norms). That day, when our car stopped at the traffic light of that intersection, dozens of needy hands swarmed around us, asking for alms. Enamul asked me not to open the window, but I ignored him. I lowered the window and offered everyone a few bucks. I handed a hundred-taka bill to a one-legged man, standing on crutches. The old man gave me his blessings in Bangla,



“Allah apner bhala koruk,” and limped away to the next car. Another person then approached me and spoke in a distinctively polite voice.

“Assalamu alaikum. People normally don’t give us anything because of who we are. But I noticed you smiled at me when you saw me. And that gave me the courage to approach you.”

I looked at his face. He was clad in a red saree, his eyes were painted in black, and his lips, in red. His long black hair was nicely braided and tied with a pink ribbon. I grabbed a bunch of hundred-taka bills from my purse and handed them. Looking at the amount, the person gave me a smile so

beautiful and so warm that it instantly made me feel blessed.

As I was about to close the car window, the one-legged man appeared from nowhere. He raised his hand and pointed at the direction of his crutches.

“Have you seen my condition? At this old age I’m struggling so hard to survive, and you feel no sympathy for me? You gave that hiza that much money? Aren’t I worthy of your charity? You have more pity for that hijra maagi? Take back your money; I don’t want it.” Shouting at the top of his voice, the man threw a crumpled hundred-taka bill at me and limped away like one heck of a ballsy man.

Scenario 2: A Classroom in the West

I was teaching an upper level course on cultural studies. As usual, my students were graciously accommodating to each other’s individual and intellectual spaces and paid extra attention to Terence, who was clinically blind in his right eye and had an orbital implant in his left eye socket. He had lost that eye in a car crash that killed one of his parents. Terence was lucky to survive, but had to go through a series of reconstructive surgery to rebuild his face. He had a middle-ear hearing aid implant in place of his left ear. The left side of his face had scars that ran like a pair of parallel train tracks through his left cheek, crashing right on the corner of his chin, melting a part of his lips in such a way that made it impossible for him to pull them over his teeth. Terence had to sit on the front row and near the projection board and had to have easy access to the door because of his frequent needs of bathroom breaks. He requested me to stand right in front of him while lecturing because he was a visual learner and found it hard to follow me with his two difficult eyes when I paced around the room. But I was not born to stay stagnant in one location; therefore, I gave him permission to walk behind me as I talked and walked in between rows and by the whiteboards around the four walls of the classroom. On one such day, after I finished giving a lecture on the deployment of sexuality in mass media, the whole class got involved in a discussion on the *Harry Potter* movies and the *Star Wars* franchise, and the *Twilight* saga. We talked about Dumbledore’s homosexuality, Harry’s potential bisexuality, Hermione’s ultimate domestication as a good subservient woman, misogyny in *Star Wars*, and the latent hypersexual elements in the *Rings* movies, among other things. Megan mentioned Kristen Stewart—the lead actor in the *Twilight* movies—who had recently come out of her closeted identity.

“I’m so glad that she showed the courage,” Megan said elatedly.

“And Aubrey Plaza too, from *Parks and Rec*,” added Jason, “she declared she’s bisexual.”

“And Sheldon Cooper! I mean, Jim Parsons...his husband is so handsome!” someone remarked.

“I don’t know about you guys, but I was quite heartbroken to find out that Matt Bomer’s gay.” I smiled as the students kept

teasing me on my ‘gay crush.’

“Hold on, rewind please!” said Terence. “Kristen Stewart is a lez? That’s disgusting! I’ve been a fan of hers all this while! Ugh!”

“What!” Megan burst out. “Do you know how much it means to us?”

“Seriously. I was so happy when I heard that,” you commented Heather.

“You guys are lez too!” Terence started laughing.

Megan’s face flushed in anger. It was Megan who always recorded my lectures for Terence whenever he missed a class, and it was she who had offered him her seat the very first day when Terence requested to be seated near the door. I stood there watching the insolence that glowed in Terence’s face, while the rest of the class looked utterly perplexed. Having read Butler, Sedgwick, Freud, and Foucault, they were ready to raise a pandemonium of argument on that issue. But they did not want to attack Terence—the boy who had lost a parent in a car crash and carried the pain of that loss as an ugly scar all over his face. In my head, I saw myself trapped in a car and being rebuked by a one-legged man in a busy street of Dhaka. I walked to Terence and stood close to him so that he could hear me loud and clear and see my face when I spoke.

“Your *forking head is stuck in the *shoot-hole* of your own *arse. Turn off the porn channel that’s running inside your head and listen to me carefully: who you are is not how you *fork. Stop thinking with your *ding right now and learn to see people as people.”

I then asked everyone to stand up if they identify themselves as—and I wrote every word on the board—Straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, ally, pansexual, sapiosexual, agender, gender queer, bigender, gender variant, pangender.

The whole class stood up.

“Wonderful!” I said. “Now brace yourself for a bonding event. Terence and I will take a tolerance walk around the class and give each of you a big hug.”

I followed Terence as he moved from one chair to another and from one row to the next, hugging his classmates who were humans—just like him.

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A Translation of Manik Bandopadhyay’s “Pragaitihashik” Prehistoric (Part-I)

MOTIUR RAHMAN

Bhikhu suffered terribly throughout the rainy season. At the beginning of Ashar while raiding Baikuntha Shaha’s depot at Basantapur, Bhikhu’s whole gang got caught in *flagrante delicto*. Out of the eleven only Bhikhu managed to escape with a spear injury over his shoulder. He walked about ten miles overnight seeking a hideout near the broken bridge. Under the thick prairie grass, half sunk in a mire he spent the whole day. After nightfall, he walked nine more miles and reached Pehlad Bagdi’s doorstep at Chitalpur.

Pehlad refused him any shelter right away.

Pointing at the wound he said, “Does not seem an easy one, pa! It will fester, swell, and eventually, people will find out very soon. What do I do then? Only if you hadn’t killed the man...”

“Now I feel like killing you, Pehlad!”

“In your wild dreams, perhaps!”

As there was no way out, Bhikhu took refuge in the woods nearby about five miles to the north. In the middle of an impregnable *sinjuri* bush around a remote part of the woods, Pehlad built him an entresol of bamboo with a roof built of palm leaves. Pehlad tried to lighten him up and said, “Rain has scared all the tigers off to the hills. Only if you can keep away from snakes, it is quite comfy here.”

“What shall I eat?”

“Here, I have left some puffed rice and molasses. I will visit every second day and bring you some rice, wait till then. If I show up every day, it might cause suspicion.”

Wrapping the wound with some leaves and herbs, Pehlad left Bhikhu and promised to come back. As the night deepened, so did his high fever and he stayed awake. The next day he found what Pehlad said to be true; the wound—it was swelling, causing the entire right arm to bloat up so extremely that Bhikhu was unable to move.

Out in the woods where even tigers dared not live during the monsoon-soaked in rain, fighting mosquitoes and insects, removing one or two leeches every hour, enduring high fever and unbearable physical pain, Bhikhu spent two days and two nights inside that tiny hideout of his. Torrents left him drenched, and

the scorching sun made the place so damp and frowsy that he felt suffocated; insects, too, did not leave him in peace even for a moment. Soon he ran out of his stock of tobacco that Pehlad left for him. He had a few days’ reserve of puffed rice but there was not much of molasses left. The smell invited ants as they came in groups only to find there was none left for them. However, they refused to go away and continued to leave their marks of angry despair on Bhikhu all day and night long.

Cursing Pehlad to death Bhikhu kept on fighting for survival with the last bit of his might. On the day Pehlad was supposed to come, Bhikhu ran out of water in the morning. He waited for Pehlad till afternoon and unable to put up with the thirst anymore, had to go out in search of water. The struggle he had to undergo to bring his half-filled pitcher from a stream not that far from the entresol was beyond description. Helpless against the hunger, he filled his stomach with the leftovers of dry puffed rice. One by one he squeezed the ants and other insects to death with the only hand he could use. In order for the toxins to be sucked out, he himself placed the leeches around the wound. Discovering a green snake peeping at him somewhere from the thick *sinjuri* leaves, he waited for two long hours to kill it. Then he kept beating around the bush, making loud noises to scare the snake away. He kept doing it after every two-three hours for as long as he could.

He wouldn’t die; in no way he would. In an environment where even the wild animals did not survive, Bhikhu, a human with flesh-and-bones, did.

Meanwhile, Pehlad went to another village to attend the wedding program of one of his relatives. He did not show up even the following day. Hung-over during and after the wedding, he lost his sense. Not once in these three days he remembered Bhikhu and how he was passing his days deep in a forlorn forest.

Bhikhu’s wound, on the other hand, started festering and reddish pus kept oozing out. His whole body began to inflate by then, too. Fever subsided a little, but the excruciating pain left him exhausted and he remained there, as if in

a trance like an addict. He could not feel the hunger or thirst now. Bloating with his blood, leeches dropped down one after another from the wound without Bhikhu feeling anything. At one point he broke the only pitcher pushing it unknowingly, and the puffed rice began to grow molds as showers of rain made them moist. It produced a very strong pungent smell inviting foxes around the bush at the nightfall.

Upon his return after a long time, Pehlad was left baffled to find Bhikhu in this miserable condition. He had brought some rice, small fish curry and vegetables along with him but ate those himself as he had to wait till the evening. He returned home to fetch his



brother-in-law, Bhorot and a bamboo stretcher. Together, they carried him back to Pehlad’s home and put him in a secret place above the ceiling on a bed of straw.

Such strong a spirit the man had that with this nominal care and almost no medication whatsoever, Bhikhu started recovering. Apparently, he overcame an inevitable death though at the cost of his right arm. Numb and unusable, it resembled a hanging dry bough from a tree. With much effort he could move it a little in the beginning; however, he lost that

ability too, gradually in time.

Once the wound began to heal, Bhikhu learned to get down from the ceiling with the help of his only arm while no one was around. In one of his frequent visits down, he did something shocking.

Pehlad went out with Bhorot to grab a drink and Pehlad’s sister wasn’t home. While taking her son to bed, Pehlad’s wife discovered Bhikhu ogling at her. In an attempt to avoid him, she tried to move elsewhere when he grabbed her by the hand.

Strong and stout, Pehlad’s wife belonged to the Bagdi family. It was not possible for Bhikhu to get hold of her with his feeble



physique and only functioning arm. She jerked his grip off right away and eventually left the room hurling some verbal abuse at him. Once Pehlad returned home, he came to know about everything.

Heavily drunk, Pehlad could not stand this treachery and instantly reached a conclusion that Bhikhu deserved death for what he had done. Giving his wife a wild blow at first, Pehlad proceeded to smash Bhikhu’s head. Even though drunk, he sensed that no matter how accurate a decision it seemed at first, the

reality was far from that. In his left arm Bhikhu was holding his sharp machete in an attacking position. Therefore, instead of a massive bloodshed it was only an exchange of some squabbles between the two.

Pehlad finally exploded, “Why on earth did I squander seven taka on you? Give my money back and get out of my house! Just be gone!”

“I had a baju tied to my waist. You stole that! Give it back first, and I will leave!”

“Who knows of your baju?”

“Give my baju back, Pehlad, if you want to come out unharmed. Unless I get it back, just like I did to the Shah, I will slit your throat! Mark my words! Give my baju, and I will not say a word.”

But Bhikhu did not get it back. As Bhorot appeared right in the middle of their altercation, together they got hold of him. Exhausted and helpless, Bhikhu couldn’t do much and sank his teeth into Pehlad’s arm. Pehlad and Bhorot beat him almost to death and kicked him out of the house. Bhikhu’s almost cured wound started bleeding. Wiping blood with his own hand, Bhikhu limped away into the dark. No one knew where he had gone, but deep in the night, the whole Bagdi village woke up to find Pehlad’s house on fire.

Banging his head against the wall in utter despair and rage, Pehlad regretted his decision of ever entertaining the thought to shelter such a traitor in the first place. Nevertheless, he could not even utter the name of Bhikhu lest the police should sense something.

That very night was the beginning of the second phase of Bhikhu’s antediluvian barbaric life that would continue forward from then on. Having set fire to Pehlad’s house, Bhikhu stole a fish boat and set sail along the flow of the river that ran by the side of Chitalpur village. He was unable to row the boat. Somehow he kept the course of the boat straight all through the night, using a flat plank as the oar. The stream alone couldn’t have taken him that far before it was the dawn.

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