



FICTION

Death is not Funny, Nor is Hamlet a Coward

MARZIA RAHMAN

I got a visitor today. My mother. It was a bright morning, one of those days when you get a feeling that something good will happen. And then mother came. And mother looked perturbed. And I realised it will be like any other day with nothing but madness all around.

She looked around the room a couple of times; I followed her gaze. There was nothing much to see here—a bed in the centre, a side table, a small window and a chair where she sat and couldn't find a word to say to

doesn't my little brother, Asif who is no longer little come to see me? Does bougainvillea still bloom on the rooftop of the house? Do they have a cat now? A parrot?

She said that she wouldn't be able to stay long. She asked how long they would keep me here.

I said I don't know. I asked her about home.

She shifted in her seat. She wanted to go. I wanted her to stay, but I didn't press her. I asked her to bring Asif next time.

a strong urge to return home. Told mother so.

She looked worried and struggled to find words. At last, she said, "We didn't tell anyone about your divorce. There are people back home who think you are still married." She suddenly started coughing. I offered her water, she declined.

She cleared her voice and continued very slowly and softly, "Your father wants to keep it that way...well, anyway, what good will it do to let people know? Divorce, suicide attempt, living-in-relation..." she shuddered. "What will people say? What kind of a daughter have we raised?" she sounded sad, hopeless.

The corners of my eyes itched with tears. I didn't want her to see that. There was a big fig tree by the window; a parrot perched there, pecking at a branch. I watched the bird and tried to think of something happy, something colourful. The wide courtyard of my parent's house flashed before my eyes, where I played hopscotch and chased a playful cat. I shook my head.

Before leaving, she put her hand on my head and muttered something, a wish or maybe a prayer. I pushed her hand away.

I usually pretend to take the medicines I am given here. But when the nurse is not around, I throw them away. Today, I took them all. The blue one makes me drowsy. It feels good to float between wakefulness and sleep; my mind fills with the noise of a thousand thoughts. Past and present mingle—I am a six-year-old girl standing before a dead lizard, wondering isn't death a funny thing?—I am a young woman, holding a book. What's the title? I squint my eyes to read it. It's Hamlet. I never liked the character—a cowardly man riddled with silly choices. But maybe I have been wrong all along. Death is not funny. It's a serious business. Like resurrection. Neither is Hamlet a coward! He is just a trapped man, waiting for a second chance.

Marzia Rahman is a fiction writer and translator.



her daughter. I thought I should say something to cheer her up. To lighten up the mood. Should I tell her how we spend our time here? How we do things on a whim and can easily get away! Only because we are not ourselves—we are deluded, insane, suicidal and it happily frees us from all social norms.

I wanted to ask her about something very important, but I couldn't remember it at the moment. It comes to me later. Why did she come alone? Is Baba still upset? Why

She hesitated for a second and then said, "Your father doesn't know I am here." She fiddled with the edge of her sari and stared at the white bed sheet. I looked at it too. I wondered why clinics and hospitals put white sheets; they should spread bright, colourful ones. The white sheet reminded me of burial. Suddenly, I recalled that as a little girl, I buried a tin box in the backyard of our house. I suddenly felt a strong urge to dig up that box and see what stuff I put in there! What childish frivolities! I felt



POETRY

TIME

RUSAFA HUSSAIN

Does Time have the time
To ever stop by the Clock?
Take a little break?
Drink a cup of tea?
Come Time, come relax with me.

How funny you are, Time!
How clever, how true!
They say "Third time's a charm"
But you don't need the third opportunity
You are enough of a charmer already.

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CAUTION

MD. MEHEDI HASSAN

Love is ok
till it becomes like
the curiosity of country-lads
when they go to airports
just to see
how aeroplanes fly

but putting on spotless garments
when you sit on your knees:
love is the water of Buriganga—
you drink, you die.

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A Public Obscenity?

SAIKAT MAJUMDAR

What does it mean to read a book in a public place these days?

It may seem counterintuitive, but the culture of reading, especially reading in public, has its own history of shame. In J.M. Coetzee's quasi-fictional text, "The Novel in Africa," Emmanuel Egudu, the unreliable native informant of Black African culture, accuses Europeans of shutting themselves in their cocoons with their books in every public place imaginable. In Africa, he says, we are not like that; we are too communal, too warm, too sensuous a culture to cut ourselves off from our fellow human beings to bury our noses in books.

In Coetzee's fellow South African Zoë Wicomb's short story, "Behind the Bougainvillea," the light-skinned mixed-race protagonist passes as white to get access to the indoor waiting room of the doctor's office while a crowd of black and coloured patients wait outside in the sun. To while away the time she opens a book but quickly decides against what she feels is the pretentious gesture of reading. She cannot bear this to add to her already-heavy guilt of racial passing.

Across the world, reading a book is the loaded gesture of the educated bourgeoisie, its ticket to progress and its mark of shame.

In Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, the weirdest dystopian fantasy shoots through a character. What if the time comes when sex and conversation trade places in human society? What if it becomes the normal thing to ask for – and offer – sex on the very first meeting, including accidental ones, while conversation becomes a dark and forbidden pleasure?

Quickly, the character sees a chilling future: people having sex in coffee shops and train stations with nobody batting an eyelid, while at the same time seeking out the darkest and most clandestine of locations to talk about

the weather: dark stairwells, abandoned warehouses, deserted streets. Kissing of the most passionate kind is done in open air, while people can dare to shake hands only under the table where adulterers used to play footsie in the past. Sex is easy but conversation has the weight of courtship.

The scariest thing about dystopias is that they have a root in the real. We're always halfway into a dystopia (The good news is that the same works for utopias too). I'm serious, therefore, when I say that a prime contender for the forbidden act today is reading a book in public.

Readers of the Literature page of *The Daily Star* will understand. You are already part of this forbidden public. You remember the time when it was common to see people reading real books in public places: airports, flights, trains, doctor's offices – again, real books, not the glossy excuses for magazines they stock there. You don't have to be ancient to remember this; quite enough if you have active memory that stretches fifteen or at most twenty years. Look around now – in trains and

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planes and metros and public places of every ilk. Nobody's reading a book. Not that we've travelled much during these pandemic times. We still remember.

It hit me one day while waiting in an airport. It was a moment of shame, of getting



caught in an illicit act in public. Because the illicit changes shape across time and space. There are places in America now where smoking in public will draw more toxic glances than carrying a gun.

We now live on the other end of the time when reading a book was a ticket to rebellion. Stories of young unmarried women in 19th century Bengal swiftly hiding books under their pillows so that nobody could catch them reading novels now make up harmless jokes. That rebel modernity is now a fossil.

I cannot escape the aura of fossil activism because I, too, come from the other end. I got my first iPhone in 2008, given to me by my then employer, Stanford University. For the

next eight years, living on Palo Alto's University Avenue, a few blocks away from Facebook's original office and Silicon Valley's most prized Apple Store, I updated my iPhone every year, to find that I was programmed to check my email and social media at every traffic light for which I had to press on the brake for 60 seconds. I gave up using a smartphone when I relocated to India in 2016. Have never been happier in my life. Still, there is a price to pay: the sensory (never mind the virtual) exclusion from the public community of smartphones. They are both in sync with the times and truly enmeshed in a community while one feels like an ancient outlier, never more when pulling out a (often hardcover) book in public.

Benedict Anderson described print culture as the creator of the imagined community. By reading the same newspaper, strangers throughout the land, who would never meet one another, formed a national community. Online communities aside, the physical reality of a roomful of people glued to their smartphones also creates a sensory community. There, the one reading a book might as well scream: "Keep your distance. I'm not one of you." Not a pleasant feeling.

I pull out my book while waiting to pick up my children at their school. My exclusion from the community of WhatsApping parents is cemented by the odd and obsolete gesture of standing in a corner and reading a book under the midday sun. In airport lounges, my hardcover book, usually with the dustjacket off, wears a crusty library body and looks Palaeolithic next to the seemingly magnetic tablets of the tweens, decadent beside the blue-toothed iPhones of conference-calling corporate citizens.

Of the many ways reading a book is like prayer, this one is perhaps the most important: they both have the appearance of isolation when they are both actually about communication. Like the faithful, the reader thrives best in a physical community. Hence temples, churches and mosques, where we pray together. Hence public reading rooms of libraries, where we can read together. Once upon a time our public spaces used to be reading spaces, where we communicated silently with strangers through our shared love of words printed on paper. Those of us who still read in public are now left in the cold. The act is obsolete enough to become radical again.

Saikat Majumdar's books include the novels *The Firebird* and *The Scent of God*.