

FICTION

Woolf in the wind

A conversation inspired by Virginia Woolf, who passed away on March 28, 1941



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI; ORIGINAL PHOTO SOURCE REUTERS

When you are in Moheshkhali, an island filled with people struggling to get by on mastering the ocean, where women get burned by the water and walk like any other women who have to survive for their children walk, and you descend there for a night as another kind of women who have those same instincts and yet have the privilege to craft new instincts like origami... you imagine Woolf.

SUMAYA MASHRUFA

This was a conversation between two friends.

In Moheshkhali they were stranded. They went there for a day's trip and because the ocean that afternoon didn't want people on it, they had to stay behind. Amongst numerous broken-down shacks and straw-tin houses, they stayed at a local politician's sea-facing, two-storied bungalow. It was managed by the third friend's much older husband.

This was a conversation, like any sensible good conversation between friends, bordering on a rant. The talk started somewhere after midnight when fewer people and more temperamental spirits were out in the open. The third friend and the husband were already allegedly asleep.

They were Nita and Maria, who wanted to love selfishly.

Because their commandment said they had too much at stake to love selflessly.

Because they were the people who promised to never become their mothers.

There's someone else with them.

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There, the someone else is named.

Nita: I wanna start a letter like this, *Dearest, this island I'm staying at*

talks all night.

Maria: Dearest is an intensely sweet word.

Nita: I know. I think if I heard it out in the open I would've sneered. But, when Woolf said it... mwah!

Maria: Also, she said it in a letter.

Nita: Yeah that's true! Seeing her, you know that it's proof you existed in every era.

Maria chuckled, sipping the tea in her hand.

They were sitting on the floor of the balcony that came with the room. The railing came up to the waist, then there was the open-air ruffling and spooning the night.

They agreed the sound of the waves was the most ancient of lullabies.

Nita: I know it sounds arrogant. But you know what I mean. What we are living through is furiously different than any other time. But I don't agree that we are of our time so intensely that people's experiences before us by default become obsolete to our impressions of things. It depends on what people, from both sides of the margin- I mean- I've talked to people my own age, and it happens a lot, where it feels worse than talking to the uncles and aunts I despise the most.

Whereas you talk to someone walking in 1941 near a river by her cottage, the overcoat wrapped around them tightly, checking the heaviness of stones, and you feel her every move in your pulse.

The dark had a glow. Their faces were visible, to each other and to the universe. The sea breeze kept playing with their hair.

Nita: Do you know what is the one

thing I'm inclined to think can perhaps belong exclusively to our generation?

Maria: What?

Nita: The making of everything into a struggle.

Maria said cheers, laughing, and after a moment raised her cup: But we might just be the looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size!

Nita paused for a while, then continued: I know she said it but that's really a reaction against old-school sexism, which still exists, and we do recognise it because we've seen our mothers, the mighty looking glasses. But ours isn't that straightforward. Ours is much more subtle, layered, grey... Like everything of our time, it is hard to know the face of the enemy. Because frankly there isn't one, it's just all a collective mode of production catering to what sells most.

Maria: Aren't we lucky! We have our culture and religion crashing against each other and then coming together in the weirdest but most predictable of ways.

Their laughs, right then, had a hint of joyful lunacy in them.

Maria: But remember she said we as women don't have countries.

Nita: A country wouldn't suffice, she wants the whole world. No wonder she gets us.

Maria: More than our own people.

Nita: That's why I say it's not that people changed, it's just that technology changed. I'm sure Woolf at some point or the other wanted to be cool for people she liked and sometimes felt tormented because she wasn't cool enough in front of the people she hated. But she had better things to do. I don't.

Maria nodded: Yes, we don't. And I can't continue to label this our era of darkness. Because what if this is it... What if it doesn't get any better, what if this is the peak?

After a pause, Nita: But then you remember we promised to never become our mothers.

Maria leaned on the railing, half of her body outside the balcony: Yeah, we say a lot of things, but what if it's inevitable? That we are just our mothers wrapped in a new Teflon time. And our lovers are no better and no worse than our fathers.

They stayed silent.

Maria: Maybe life will sort itself out.

Nita: No it won't. Life isn't an entity. Life is what you make of it or don't get to make of it.

Maria: Sometimes I really hate you.

Nita grinned.

Maria: Even she couldn't continue. How long can you, honestly? It's excruciating. Knowing that the way you feel things...

She broke off, chuckled and sang: You can't explain, they would not understand...

Maria pulled herself back and frowned: And honestly, sometimes I feel I don't understand anything myself. I can't land on an identity. For a woman who wants to forge her own destiny, I'm laughably lost. I don't know what I'm thinking. And at home, they are already fighting my half-baked ideas on how to live, I can't imagine what they'll do when things are fully formed.

Nita: She said as long as she thinks of a man, nobody objects to a woman thinking.

Maria: Yes, but I do think about my man a lot.

Nita: Why wouldn't you? Otherwise, how is it love?

Maria: That is the thing. You have to constantly prove your feminism, even to yourself. You can't let yourself be truly vulnerable and surrender because you think it'll undo all the work you've done to rid yourself of your foremothers. But that is so sad and messed up in its own way. You can't access all your neurons and emotions because of the protocols placed in society long before you came to be, and as a counter-attack, you form your own protocols that cause you an equal amount of pain. How do you get out of that?

Nita: You don't. If you are lucky there will be someone who'll meet you halfway through and you don't have to fully get out of your trench and disband your protective gear.

Maria: So we share the battles?

Nita: We share the battles.

Maria scoffed: We are not sharing the battle even amongst ourselves, there's no sisterhood. It only exists as podium talk!

That made Nita laugh. A seagull in the distance flapped its wings.

Nita: If someone is extremely lucky they'll have a friend. That is the peak. You can't have a gang of women all very close and who all understand the basic common struggle and thus act accordingly...

Maria: Let alone just well-acquainted groups of women keeping the promise to themselves that a certain margin they'll never cross to drag another woman down. Look at Woolf, look how unspeakably lonely she is!

Nita was quiet for a long time, and then said: But we also know why women do that, it's so hard to keep going against the structure at all times... We can't hate them for it.

Maria: Yeah, I definitely hate them for it.

Nita giggled and looked at Maria and continued: I feel now there's no gender to allyhood anyway. Keeping a list of men and their menaces feels archaic, I can't relate to that.

Maria laughed: Are we forgiving them then?

Nita: Trust me, I'll hate when necessary, and was she right in saying that they'll praise our little ideas and whatever. That doesn't necessarily mean they respect us as equals. But the general feeling of seeing the existing paradigm as a shackle and wanting to break free is a genderless idea.

There was silence. It's possible that even after all that talk, they were lying to each other, and to themselves about the true nature of their abyss. Because they had to hold up and couldn't stain the ideal they created as teens. There once was a blank canvas, and they had spray painted, sketched, and written in indelible ink how they would be the women who turn the tide. How they would love their men without making them a prize, how they would aspire to be badass old bitches who find strength in silence, who curse and cuddle in the same breath.

Maria: Will we forget this?

Nita: No. Our dearest August is keeping notes, journaling all this down. Proof will be there.

Maria: He knows that we love him, right?

Nita: Yes. We...

Nita laughed, wrapping her left arm around Maria as the breeze for one last time before dawn brought the ocean closer to them.

...we women are good at letting people know that we love them.

Maria teared up. Unloved and unmoved stones of earth were beginning to be covered in moss.

As the predawn light like cream cheese started to make the world measurable again... they saw a little girl on the beach unbothered by her aloneness start to play mischievous games with the ocean.

Nita smiled: See...The air, this moment. We would've missed it if we thought just walking by the river wasn't enough...We would've missed the ocean.

It is possible that even their friendship wouldn't survive. That they have indeed internalised all the ways one needs to be a woman. That they will hate each other in misguided rage for ever creating a shift in time where a different way of being existed. It's an unmerciful world. But that doesn't matter. It matters that once upon a time they talked and laughed at things you shouldn't laugh at. It matters that Woolf was in the wind.

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TALESPEOPLE SPIELS

In defense of brevity

Honing the skill for writing concisely is an important part of the creativity toolkit. This is Part 2 of a short series on creative writing, from Talespeople, the hosts of Sehri Tales, the annual Ramadan prompt-based flash writing challenge.

SABRINA FATMA AHMAD

Scenario 1:

You've got a fantastic project, and have found a potential investor for this. They've given you two minutes to deliver a killer pitch and convince them you're worth it.

Scenario 2:

A big-name international publisher has made an open call for submissions. You know they'll get thousands. Your cover letter has to be punchy enough to make them hit pause and pay attention to you.

Scenario 3:

The college you're applying to has asked for a personal statement in under 250 words...and you know where I'm going with this.

Over the past half a decade of facilitating Sehri Tales, the one question I keep getting about is why won't I budge on the 250-word limit, and this seems to be the hill I'll die on, so once more to the breach.

Don't get me wrong. I love me a

well-worded, nuanced longform. To be able to immerse one's readers in one's words is an admirable gift. But building the muscles for writing concisely is an important, if not essential skill in this age of tight deadlines, shrinking print space, and diminishing attention spans.

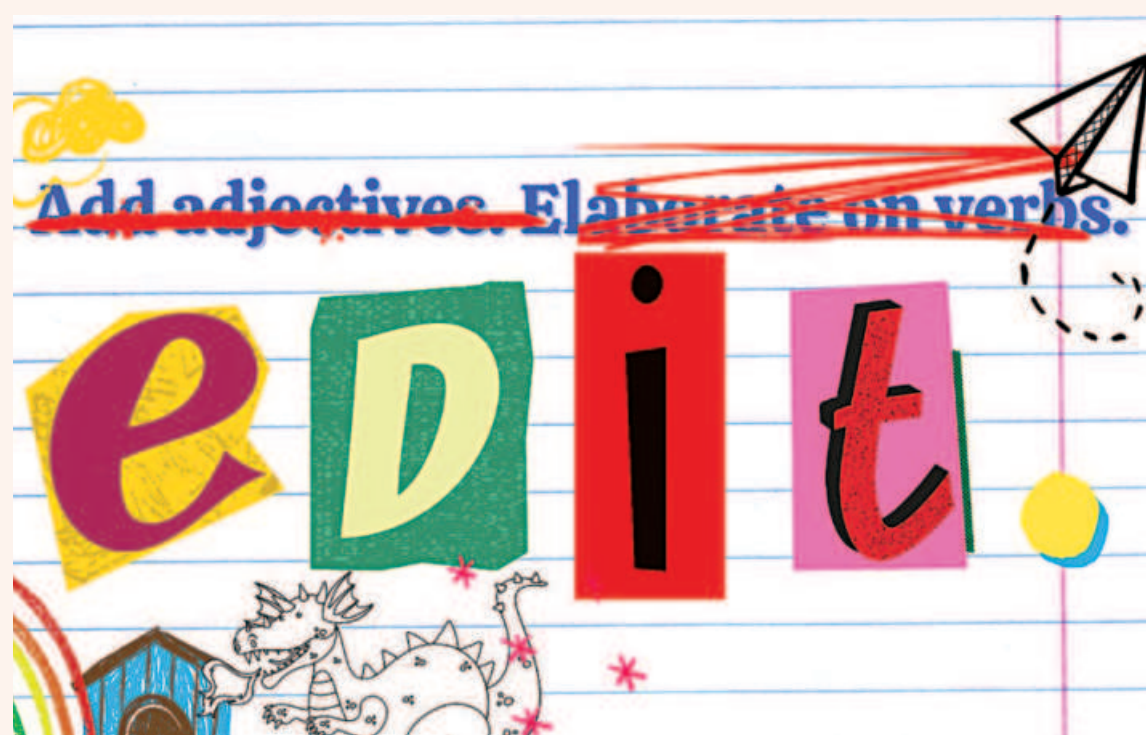
There are many ways you can tighten your writing to make it effective. Here are a few tips I've learned as an editor over the past 20 years.

Think structure

Whether it's flash fiction or a college essay, think about the beginning, middle and end of the story. If you've got those signposts figured out, you're better able to get from point A to B without meandering like a lost Hobbit.

Stay focused

For pitches and editorials alike, you want to keep your main objective in mind. Crowding the piece with too many variables and points will only eat up space, time, and lose you



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

the argument. Know what you're aiming for with the piece, and narrow in on that.

Choose your words wisely

Sometimes you can achieve the same effect with fewer words, if they're the right ones. I like using descriptive verbs instead of adjectives, like using the word 'scuttled' instead of 'ran hurriedly/ran like a cockroach', or 'squinted' instead of saying 'narrowed her eyes'. A well-paced verb or adjective can reduce the need for longer descriptions.

What can I take out?

One trick that has never failed me is that I always read aloud what I've just written. If the words are crowding my mouth, or if I'm running out of breath, I ask myself, 'what can I take out to make this go down easier?' Trust your ears—they'll tell you what is essential.

Sabrina Fatma Ahmad is a writer, journalist, and the founder of Sehri Tales.