

SHAGUFTA SHARMEEN TANIA

An Artist's Ego

Translated from Bengali by Torsa Ghosal

I.

“WHEN YOU WERE in my belly, it stuck out so much that people would call me and ask—twin daughters, is it? A fakir told my mother, if it is twins, name them Hasna and Hena. Afterward, one baby girl popped out, chubby, beautiful, and from then on called Hasnahena—night-blooming jasmine. Now, who would call a girl by such a name in our house? Naming was your grandmother's duty. She gave you the name Pāyārā, our little pigeon.”

Ma speaks with her eyes focused on some faint mark on the table's oilcloth. Hasnahena or Pāyārā listens to the history of her naming again, after a long time. She has known it since her childhood. But, somehow, it is as though a festival celebrating her inconsequential human birth is still going on in this house. She listens to the dogs bark in the dusty streets of the night. As if rousing herself from a quick nap, she asks, “So, who lives in grandma's house now?”

“Shaheen.”

“Which Shaheen? The mad one?”

“Yes, mad Shaheen lives there. But don't call him mad, dear. He isn't mad. You see, he rented out his own place to live in your grandma's old house. Lives properly. Planted a few Himsagar mango trees on the roof terrace. When we visited, he fed us fish cooked with ivy-gourd leaves from his terrace. Later he sliced mangoes. So sweet, sweet even with the rinds left on.”

Pāyārā chats for a while more. The alley between the Baitul Aman Mosque and Citadel was known to them as the goat-owner's alley. . . . On a large plot of vacant land at the mouth of the alley, goats the color of brown paper grazed. Further back there was a tin-roof hut; the tin was a deep oxblood red, the interiors of the tin hut as dark as an ox's body. A petticoat, dull red as an ox's gums, always hung in the courtyard. In place of a fence, plum trees stood on the border. Ma corrects her. “Yes, so that was Motahar's father's house. They sold their property and moved abroad together.”

“Wasn’t Ranjita’s music school in front of a biscuit factory where you could buy Danish biscuits?”

“Just Danish, says she! Dry cake, Bela biscuit, Tipa biscuit, two types of toast biscuit, chili biscuit, Anarkali biscuit . . .” Ma looks listless as she dictates the list, staring at a lizard on the wall. Ranjita does not teach music anymore. Pāyārā’s younger sister Nandita was good at needlework. There is a small tailor shop in front of their house now, Muntaha Boutiques; a few loose kameezes hang there—their yellow, pink, and blue dyes are so strong that they continue to glow even after the shop lights have been turned off. Because of the shop the street in front has gotten the name “Bedir Duhan Lane”—dame’s shop lane. Pāyārā’s mother’s favorite color was orange, Pāyārā’s was yellow. None of them wear yellow or orange anymore. Ma’s complexion was bright once, like the bronze made from mixing tin with copper. It has turned into corroded bronze from grinding bones doing the myriad chores of the world. Like a piece of khaddar cloth, her skin has innumerable wrinkles now. Hasnahena’s complexion matched her name, the greenish pale white of night jasmines on a full-moon night. Doughy soft. Ma gets up to wipe the oilcloth on the table with a wet rag and says, “Your granny from the eastern homestead made kheer, adding a lot of pounded date palm jaggery into it. Want to have some now?” She answers her own question, “They call it mishtanno in that house . . . remember the way they used to simmer and thicken a mound of milk for it?” Ma’s voice trails off as she reminisces. “This won’t have the same taste though.”

“I had too much rice, Ma. If only you served a handful less.”

A black-and-white picture hangs on the wall in front of her. A naked boy sits with a Philips transistor next to him in the picture. He has a large globule-sized kohl mark on his forehead, a bunch of amulets around his neck. His expression is ominous, as if he is about to cry. The boy was Pāyārā’s only brother. He would ride on his father’s shoulder and say, “Giddy up, you bald-headed horse!” And the father who lost his hair running the poor family would smile. Blissful days lay ahead of him—his son would save him from the hellfire of Punnama, grandmother had explained. When they were failing to have a boy child, Ma quietly accompanied grandmother to a shrine and swore to offer golden grains. Pāyārā thought, how will they get so much money? Later she saw that it was gold-plated rice. Faux gold. She also saw that Ma had sold Pāyārā’s silver anklet long ago to do all this.

The night is cool and still like the water for ablution. While shutting the open windowpane, Pāyārā sees the old algae-laden brick wall that has innumerable *B*'s and *S*'s on it, Bibhuranjan Saha's bricks. The bricks came from Saha babu's kiln. A light breeze blows, as if to dispel the winter chill. Sniffing the air, Pāyārā remembers her childhood friend Dilara running across the fields, the tip of her mustard-flower-colored dupatta fanning out like wings behind her shoulders. They bathed in the water of the shallow machine used for irrigation. Pāyārā and Dilara, radiant white girl-birds, green crop fields on either side, and the sky a boundless blue, a flock of somersaulting pigeons in it, looking like scraps of torn paper; and Dilara would tell her, "You're the one pigeon on land and the rest are in the sky!" The sedimented riverbeds of Faraizi Kandi and Nishinda lay on the other side of Baidyer Bazar. They would venture there during their precious childhood. No auto-rickshaws went there, no cars. Farmers sat in rows, picked potatoes, plucked thorny brinjals. Their wives caught fish with small nets. Shola taki and bhola taki swarmed in the fish market. Kingfishers dove into the water. There, the two of them took quick dips, in bottomless silence.

But the still water of silence is disturbed when stones fall on the roof with a clattering noise. Ma shouts, "Who is it? Who is it?" And in response a madman shouts, "Won't you wed your daughter to me? Won't you marry your daughter to me? Come on, won't you, dear?"

Ma goes to grab the thick stick, but Pāyārā stops her. The madman will get tired of repeatedly proposing marriage. Even after so many years, this madman has a dog's sense of smell. Pāyārā shudders internally.

The noise, however, does go down a notch after a while. The madman groans and moans, "Tear the scraps of paper and hand them to me, I'll make money from it. If you blow away the money, I'll turn it into dark red roses. Seven years of practice, you see, Ma, won't you let me have your daughter's hand?" As if in response to the babbling, street dogs start to bark loudly. Ma squints, watching Pāyārā. Hanging her head, Pāyārā continues to fold the zari border of the sari on her lap. Ma moves toward the door of the enclosed verandah, raises her voice, and says, "Good son, please leave now. If I were to wed my daughter, I would wed her to you. But I did not even give birth to a daughter!" Who knows what the madman says in answer—possibly he says he will give gold nose pins and carbobs. Cries. Begins again, "Won't you let me have your daughter's hand?"

“Why did you come here, dear?” Ma asks regretfully, almost in a whisper.

“I came to see you. Who knew that I would have to hear of marrying the madman yet again?” Pāyārā says, annoyed. There is something resolute in her voice, along with the annoyance.

Some people pass through the street with torches in their hands, wearing half sweaters, their heads-ears-necks wrapped in argyle mufflers. They walk rapidly, as people do in neighborhood streets at night. Some chase the madman and the dog. Others say in a low voice, “Granny wants to marry. Go to her house, Abdul Halim.”

“Yes, yes, Chapala-Rani granny from the eastern homestead wants to get married. Run along now!” They stifle a laugh, and one of them remarks, “Heaven knows how this fellow went mad!”

The madman leaves, rambling on the way. He will sleep in front of the remains of the old indigo plantation they call Neel Kuthi—either on the cemented porch or in the shade of the mango tree—until tomorrow afternoon. Clothed in rags of gunny sacks. Matted hair. A crotchety man; when awake, he keeps his mouth downturned like an inverse U. Here, even afternoons are not quiet. “Rats will line up to eat, then die one by one,” yells the rat poison seller from a cycle rickshaw. The noise of crying comes from one of the households as someone obstinately flogs the children one by one. But even all that commotion does not wake up the madman. The sun-scorched white walls of Mahmudabad Madrasa can be seen from the highways of the District Board. Propped by slender pillars, the pucca Madrasa building oversees the paddy field. The humming sound of Arabic lessons rise far away.

Tomorrow is another day.

Tomorrow, looking at this high bed through the iron-barred window, someone will inquire, “Hey, Aunty, I say, didn’t your daughter come? Where does she work now?”

Wiping the light sweat of the wintry afternoon from her neck, Ma will say with deep-seated pride in her voice, “In the municipality.”

But how difficult it is to swim through the night! Ma notices the wakeful moon of fatigue on Pāyārā’s forehead. She gets up and pounds the medicinal pill to break it into four uneven pieces. At that moment, Ma looks like a quack from a forgotten tribe, a witch in a full-sleeved flannel blouse and orange-bordered sari, and an old blackening gold chain in the crook of her neck. Handing her daughter a bit of the broken pill, Ma says, “Take it, dear. You’ll get some sleep, then wake up refreshed!”

2.

AT THE JEWELRY SHOP in the market here, she used to take sips of cold drinks, wriggling her little body demurely. Ma would take out her jewelry that was carefully wrapped in cotton and melt it to make something new. While the items made of gold were broken and remade, the goldsmith uncle brought her a bottle of Mirinda, and Pāyārā used to think the process of breaking and making tasted like cold drinks, fizzy but sweet.

Dulari aunty and Chandana aunty made small paper sachets for Sureshwar Homeo Hall in a room of their house. On a low stool, the TV was left on constantly —there, someone could always be heard either crying or conspiring. Rebati Mohan uncle called to remind them that he would bring someone on his way back from the pharmacy. So one of the aunts made a stockpot of stew with cauliflower-carrot-bean-papaya-sweet pumpkin, tempered with bay leaves and five spices. The other quickly flipped chapatis on the heated skillet. Pāyārā also ate with them, sitting on a wicker stool. Being a fine-looking child, she was used to receiving a lot of attention. She had the explorer's right to frequent all houses in the neighborhood. Many a time the aunts sat on the broken ghat to mash the leaves of the sugar-apple tree and daub the paste on Pāyārā's head to kill lice! Dulari aunty would almost sprint over whenever Rebati uncle burped—"Chewing young mango leaves cures gastric pain, take some." Many other colorful dramas played out with the beautiful little girl as their witness. Rebati uncle used to say, "You know dear lice queen, your Dulari aunty loves me more than I love her."

On hearing this, Dulari aunty would roll her eyes, scan a few walls, and say with a little embarrassment, "As if!"

"Just as Lord Shiva could not rest without seeing Sati, it is the same with us. I mean, in this case, I, Rebati Mohan, happen to be Sati and your Dulari aunty is Lord Shiva. Only clothed in tiger skin," Rebati Mohan Das said, nearly falling down with uncontrollable laughter. Dulari aunty adorned her ears with gold kanpashas with chains. Her face turned a brighter shade than the color of those when she said with a smile, "This man is such a fraud!"

Rebati uncle would answer, "Go roam around the world and see if you find another one like me!"

"Didn't you say just yesterday that we loved equally?"

“Did you know your aunty ran into the mango tree the other day because her eyes were on me? Ask her!”

Gazing at the beams, today’s Pāyārā looks at the Pāyārā of those years. Past events are playing like a film on a thin screen over those beams. Shoving the toddler into the crook of her lap to sleep and nursing another baby on her breast, Dulari aunty would wave her hands and tell stories: “Parashuram wriggled to set his hands free and throw his axe into the sea. He killed his mother, so no one would take his weapon, and even the sea receded . . . didn’t I tell you, the axe stuck to Parashuram’s hand for the sin of killing his mother and couldn’t be removed!”

On a Phalgun’s night, the buds of morning light slowly bloom in the dark sky. That light feels like the other sister of darkness lying under the same mosquito net. Pāyārā turns to lie on her stomach, as though turning over her life. She sees her golden childhood, her rag dolls, her toy tea sets and her mother-of-pearl buttons all arranged in the way she used to arrange her doll’s family under the high bed. She sees Manik uncle at the fair pick up yellow dalda from the aluminum pot with a spoon and pour it into earthen lamps, saying, “I am lighting the lamps with dalda instead of ghee . . . otherwise how will I give it to you for five rupees only? If you won’t buy anything, step aside, dear. They are frying jilapis from molasses, shiny like God’s entrails. Go, see.” She sees the aunts—Dulari and Chandana, Rebati uncle, the goldsmith uncle—arranged neatly before her like her toy pots and pans. She can still hear them admire her beauty: “God sent you to us silver-plated. How you shine, dear!” Their youths have long gone cold; yet, facing an empty wall they calculate who loves whom more, Dulari or Rebati. And the beautiful child watching them thinks the kheer of love must be stored in numerous painted pots across the world.

That was long ago! Who knew that a lot of breaking-and-making does not have the fizz of Mirinda, how instead they fill the mouth with the bitter darkness of leaf paste? In the dark, Pāyārā wants to make out if the axe is still stuck to the hand of her hunter! Rebati uncle’s lice queen also came from the mythic mother’s tribe, didn’t she?

3.

WHO IS GOING down the street?

Dulari’s effeminate husband, isn’t it?

Or is it Mujibur wearing an embroidered topi on his head?

People who squat in someone's house and cook ivy-gourd soup—are they the ones passing by?

Or is it old Chapala-Rani, the old woman who tells the tales of ancient queens?

To whom does she tell stories now? Her three queens were sister-wives. Is there any other relation that carries a more potent sting the world over? One's own, more than one's own was one's own sister ... an "other" like no other was one's husband's other wife. Sister-wives they were—the queens called Akuti-Kakuti-Minoti—the Ardent, the Bent, and the Fervent. Ah, names as doleful as their moods. Why wouldn't they cry!

An intoxicating air blows from the canal-side mango-pine trees to the rasuinna tree beside the eastern homestead—it emits a whistling sound, a broken-hearted sigh, but it does not wake up the black-headed oriole on the tree. "O Chaitar Bou, won't you get up? The snakes are gobbling up your eggs!"

The lime-washed walls of Mahmudabad Madrasa glisten so brightly in the moonlight that angels can target them from the sky and descend in the dark.

Who plays football on the windy field in the moonlit night?

Who watches that game, who gets up with a jolt when there is a dispute and yells, hey hey hey?

Who walks along the rural road that looks like the white parting between dark hair?

Who wades into the water making splashing noises? Who gives a push with an oar? Who does the muddy canal water begin to creep around?

Who left what for water-retting in the canal? Was it a treasured son cut from the umbilical cord? Whose tossa jute? Whose indigo plants?

Gulcheara Begum's pupils dilate, tired of peering at the ancient darkness . . . but does she get any answers? She chants, "our fermented rice / that you wanted / then unwanted / oh you canted, and then never came home!" When the power goes out, the madman sleeps in Neel Kuthi's ancient, indigo-drenched, bottomless earthen trough, curled up like a fetus in someone's womb. One who gets to go mad gets Him. One who does not get to go mad must sit in the dark and listen to the noises from the canal. In the dark, this life feels like a knotted thread at the tip of a finger, Ardent-Bent-Fervent. The weav-

ing could have been simple and straightforward . . . who played with it like a deranged cat?

4.

GULCHEARA BEGUM'S REAL NAME was Gol Chehara, or round-faced. But how many people will she stop to explain that she didn't always look this decrepit. Once her face was round like the figures etched in scroll paintings. Just as the Amodi Masjid's name has become Hamdi on people's tongues, the old village's name Baag-e-Musa (Garden of Moses) has turned into Baghmusa (Mop the Tiger), as if a wet rag can wipe out a tiger. Before everyone's eyes, the timid and tearful villages have put on coquettish bodices of cement and plastic . . . the soft shade of water-spinach no longer blossoms on their faces. Everything changes, everything transforms. Then why not names also?

She was almost flying by Neel Kuthi in her flip-flops. Why, then, after so long, did the madman cuss, "Bat will piss in your packet of puri!"? She creeps toward the murky Neel Kuthi, sees the Badshahi nooks on its walls, birds' nests in them. The roof is bent like an up-turned boat. Behind the Kuthi, Montu's father keeps cows and goats. Immersed in the smell of goats' poop pellets, under the shade of the sugar-apple tree, the madman sits silently. Gulcheera Begum goes to sit beside him and extends her packet of puri. "Eat if you want to!"

Does the madman care to eat the bread! He says, "The real name of jilapi is bilapi!" *Wailing.*

"So, you want jilapis?"

The madman suppresses a grin, looking at her with his mischievous eyes. His gaze is like a thinly veiled mirror. Gulcheera Begum sighs. The sapid smell of daalpuris is churning her stomach. Even in all this hunger a song whirls through her mind: "you wanted / then unwanted / oh you canted, and then never came home!"

A rickshaw passes through the street playing a song: "My lines become crooked, my handwriting is poor. . . ." Forgetting to stay in the lines, cities zigzag into villages, plastic bags enter eutrophic lakes. She also once joined a troupe of puppet-dance performers. Microphone in hand she would sing loudly in the beginning: "You are my poetry, you are my flute's melody." She could sing any song, smile shamelessly, and say, "Yet I don't know how to read and write, I am Charu master's student!" Abdul Halim was very talkative back then. Whenever he

heard her saying “I don’t know how to read and write!” he would fly off the handle and scream, “Can’t you say, whore, that I am an artist! King of all Kings!” Today he is quiet, Abdul Halim; he learned magic in Kamrup Kamakhya’s Kaltanipara neighborhood—for seven years! Oh, how he would ramble on . . .

“You have to go there via the Tamabil border, you know. What can I say about that magical world! It is a world of women, the world of naked temptresses who wear single leaves on their hips—nothing else. Complexion like raw turmeric, soft like the swim bladder of a fish, hair so long that it covers those leaves. How can I describe the voluptuousness of the whores there, enough to spoil your clothes. They are crazy for men; they also make men crazy, like dogs in heat! For seven years, they didn’t let me leave, do you understand? Eight of them stayed in one thatched hut. They had buffalo farms. They would have buffalo milk and buffalo meat, and roti made of wheat flour. I didn’t have trouble finding food. On one side, there was the Neelkantha hill . . . a real blue-colored hill, where I grazed buffaloes. That is, I just let the buffaloes loose over there and sat in the shade. The women wouldn’t leave me alone even then, they would start humping under the tree . . . who can satisfy such harlots day and night? Still, you have to do it as you don’t have an option, what if they’re not pleased and turn you into a cow or a goat and keep you tied to a pole? I wouldn’t be able to break that spell and come back! When I actually got a break from shagging, I would untangle their long tresses with a buffalo-horn comb. I was there for seven years, you see. Is mastering the art of magic child’s play?

“There the ustadh in whose house I learned magic was called Bhagabati. Human bones were tied to his locks—you see, my ustadh taught me nine hundred and nineteen tricks in seven years. The tantra of getting people to obey me, sickening people with the shot of an invisible arrow, other magic tricks like making money from paper, flowers from cards. My father was also a magician. There was a monkey in our house, along with snakes and mongooses. They all followed his orders. Our house had drowned in a flood. Repairs were going on when I went back. By then my father had read an absentee funeral prayer in my honor. When I returned home, I was in such rough health and had such long hair that my father jumped up thinking, it’s a dacoit’s son! No matter how many times I said ‘I am the magician Abdul Halim!’ nobody was ready to listen to me! My birth mother veiled herself in

front of me and pleaded, ‘Let go of my husband, please! You look like a good man’s son!’ While massaging me with oil, my mother used to sing, ‘A mother had him / she named him Abdul Halim.’ In the end, I sang that childhood song to convince them that I was their son. Sounds like something from the movies, doesn’t it?”

Gulcheera Begum has grown tired of chewing the thick daal puri. The maker of the puri—the son of Mojaffor Miyan from the bazaar—does not have his father’s lightness of touch. If it were an earlier time, Abdul Halim would brashly say, “You bought a mattress to chew, you whore!” Now he says nothing. He doesn’t even extend his hand for food easily. Today, at least, he took the food. Her chest trembled with hope. But the madman just wiped his face with the puri, as though it were a handkerchief. She was angered by the waste of her money, but what is the use of being mad at a madman? She will not be able to win against him. An intense clarity occasionally appears on the madman’s face, the clarity of a pond in the early morning of the wintry Poush month, before the first hand muddies it. At other times, the eyes of the madman are like a black looking glass. Gulcheera Begum takes a peek at it often but sees nothing.

They used to travel from village to village. That was the coveted life of artists. They thought they wouldn’t get bogged down in the trivial matters of domestic life. Abdul Halim used to bring snow cream for her winter-damaged hands and face. Like a grinding stone, he would throw her against his chest and crush her like pepper. Stories from long ago! Abdul Halim no longer remembers the life he led before the black looking glass trapped him. . . still, she lays her pained hand on the madman’s and pulls him toward her, “Let’s go, let’s leave this village and go to ours.” The madman stares blankly. He cannot be set free—Gulcheera Begum knows that. Their lives became entwined during a wet Bhadro month. Their salvation, too, remains locked up. Gulcheera Begum composes the tune for a line on her mind. She thinks of the line often. It is her own line—*Wrapped in my stitched quilt, who do you sleep with?*

On the other side of the mango orchard, some guests arrive in a small taxi. “Oi, come to my lap right now. Remember I gave you five-hundred-taka eidi last Eid!” With this claim, someone forcibly takes a reluctant child in his arms, and the tormented child bursts into tears. At that sound, the madman laughs distractedly. Gulcheera Begum softly asks, “Do you remember, Abdul Halim, an angel descended into our tent that night?”

5.

AN ANGEL REALLY DESCENDED into the tent of their New Hashikhushi Puppet Theatre. Her complexion was like that of hasnahena, the night-blooming jasmine. Her wings spread like silvery moonlight. Tota and Motahar, Ajmat and Dhan Miya plucked the angel down from the sky. Tota's gang came to the fair after murdering a mother's only son and abducting his sister. Nobody uttered a word in Tota's presence. Upon entering, he ordered, "The show must go on! Play the music!" The short and stubby Gulcheera Begum began full-throatedly, "You are my poetryyy"; then followed the spectacle of the puppet dance—Dil to pagal hain . . . "The heart is mad." "Come and snatch my dupatta, beloved." Abdul Halim made the discolored puppets dance with flair and flourish in front of the hand-drawn scenery, their sequined ghaghra whirling like waves of mirrors.

The puppet master was in charge of tickets. He was also the magician who showed the game of stick puppets, shuffled the cards in his hands like fountain water, and brought out a lovely bunch of red plastic flowers from inside a hat. The drummer played drums at the back, very loudly. So loud that Gulcheera Begum's ears rang for a few days. It was the last day of the fair. No one came to see the bioscope, no one bought Ashutosh Malakar's sola-flower garlands. Not a single ticket sold at the puppet theater. Tota's gang had entered the tent with the angel. That's why no one else entered the theater. Outside, the village fair's Ferris wheel made creaking noises—or were those cries of pain, or was it the sound of an angel falling from the sky? No one could hear anything. As if those three in the tent were playing background music. Like something from the movies, wasn't it?

Later Tota's gang ran away, leaving the broken puppet—the broken angel—behind. But behind the scenes of a gang rape, artist Abdul Halim told jokes to the ventriloquist puppet. All that time, he played a puppet-farmer lifting the spirits of his puppet-wife! Where will he flee? Where is his salvation? It was he who carried the unconscious angel on his shoulders to the UNFPO. He waited to find out whether a man or a woman would examine his bleeding angel. How will the police confront the fearsome Tota gang? So the artist was the first to be beaten to a pulp by the police. Then, one day, he came to sit under this sugar-apple tree, on the porch of the Neel Kuthi from Warren Hastings's time. He did not speak again, did not perform any more

magic tricks, but he didn't leave either. The madman was oblivious to the fact that the proverbial crow ate up the milk-rice kept for the angel. . . kheer parched into a thick leather in the houses she frequented. The houses where she was loved now turned her away. The madman didn't know any of this.

Even so, the madman did not go anywhere else—isn't he an artist? Isn't he the one who repaints the discolored puppets? Stitches laces into a printed skirt? Wraps broken chests of dolls in sponge and glues the broken wings? Gulcheara Begum has pulled him by the arm so many times, saying "Let's go"—but he doesn't go. Rickshaws pass through the darkened street. The man renting Motahar's house gropes in the dark to hold his wife's hand while crossing the street. In his childhood, the madman had learned that every fairytale ends in marriage, all demons are punished. He remembers that. He will marry the angel with the complexion of hasnahena, and they will live happily ever after. That is why he still proposes marriage. Making the country fog quiver, he hollers at the angel's mother, "Won't you marry your daughter to me, won't you!" The angel with broken wings flew to another district, took the school secondary exam, graduated from college. . . who knows what else she did, who kept track! Her mother keeps saying, "I didn't give birth to a daughter". . . that starts to seem like the truth. Who will search the house to find out whether she is there or not! Her friend Dilara has gone to her in-laws' house. They will never again bathe under the sky, in the shallow machine's white fountain. Those who leave come back secretly from time to time. Their brief returns cannot be described with a drawn-out word like "homecoming."