

Ragged Clouds

Soaked Words of Crosswalks

SHUBHAMOY SARKAR



LIBER FIERI

FORWARD

The Literary world of Bengal knows him over the last three decades as a poet, a columnist, as an article writer, but most importantly as the chief editor of the popular literary magazine “Mallar” and as a short story writer. Shubhamoy Sarkar’s anthology of short stories “Ragged Clouds” is his first collection of stories in English translation. Ten favourites chosen by the author that have been transcreated by five different translators unfold the inner world of the complex urban life which is the compelling focus of this anthology. While the stories delve into the characters in love, in relationship, in loneliness, in rejection, in acceptance, in apathy, moments of epiphany are captured brilliantly through narration in direct and plain language. The 21st century looks like an unending string of disasters. It is the prerogative of the writer to focus on the nature of people with sympathy and sincerity for human condition, at the same time with a positive outlook on the potential of life. Characters like Suman, Nimai, Badal, Devi, Jhimli or Nilanjan, the generation that is born into a fractured time, shows the readers right away how far one could be from the romantic world of wishful endings. Shubhamoy is not the writer who lives on his own in the wilderness. He belongs to a literary genre set in city landscape defined by socio-economic realities and culture of its characters as the urban setting. Rather than being a simple backdrop against which the stories unfold, every location and setting

has the potential to become a conduit for conveying emotion and providing scopes for deep point of view by revealing significant backstories. Thus making the readers care and feel like they are part of the tales which seems to be the number one goal of the storyteller. Stories just like ragged clouds break off with strong winds of words, with irregular patterns they change constantly, often forming and dissipating, like a game of gain and loss, hope and despair, leaving the readers in clearing conditions with the only breeze with a forward speed...moist,warm and humid tales unfurl from the crosswalks of life.

A good short story is hard to beat, but harder to write. These glittering yet subversive stories written by Shubhamoy are ripe to seduce a new generation of readers.

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A MORNING STORY

The neighbourhood knows him as Badal Bose. The residents are familiar with his habitual time of getting back home at late nights. This area is inhabited mostly by old residents. The locality has changed a lot since older times. Old houses got dismantled to make space for new apartment complex. Those who were once the owners of the land, are now confined to the square spaces of new flats. Some with their bargain-amount have left and shifted elsewhere. Old bondings, acquaintances, attachments are now missing. A concoction of a cosmopolitan mixed culture prevails now. Only the other day local people used to crack jokes about Badal and his mannerisms while returning home. Now those seem to be stories of past. Nights still witness his inebriated steps, but Badal no more knocks the wrong doors. As traditional door-rings are now obsolete and rarely found these days, hence no hard and desperate knocking at night. One still can find a few humble, lonely, outcast single-storied old houses peeping through the highrise buildings, still bearing memories of past. Even Badal's tipsy steps can mark them easily. Usually Badal returns home late at night. From the Railway Station while moving along DumDum Road, one can find a number of by-lanes on the right hand side. This area once used to shelter number of refugees coming from East Bengal after the Partition. Starting from the Immigration Movement down to the smellof gun-powder during Seventies—this place has

witnessed all. And then there was the premature death of all their dreams. Like many other people who suffered the loss of dreams and hopes, Badal too found his peace and last resort at Sadhu Khan's Country Liquor Shop.

Much time has passed since then. Those broken-hearted people mostly have passed away. Their progeny no more intended to live an unstable life. They decided now to hand over their inherited lands to the promoters. Birth of a new generation, a new era has taken shape gradually. The entire past scenario changed yielding place to new. But still now the old residents here can recognize Badal's knocking on their doors at late nights. What is notable is that none of them ever turns him down. Badal surely knocks, but never enters any household. He would stop at every entrance only to greet and to exchange a few words relating to politics and current affairs and then would move on. Following his customary routine, the other night Badal was returning home. Same old street, known lamp-posts as if were welcoming him, even the street-dogs started wagging tails having seen a known pedestrian. A group of rowdy ruffians even stopped conversing among themselves and nodded at him. Nothing escaped Badal's eyes. He wasn't feeling good actually and didn't feel like knocking at any door. What's the use of knocking, could anyone explain it to him now? Same greetings, exchange of same stale words, no more interested him. The telephone Booth still was open. A few last crowd could be seen in the last trading hours, reluctantly adjourning meetings for the next day and preparing to retreat home. Badal got really upset today especially after his cell-phone started ringing in the

NILANJAN HAS BEEN SURVIVING THIS WAY!

In the dawn, having slightly increased the speed of the fan, Pari fell asleep silently. Except for the stretching sound of the bed, one can call it silently! Nilanjan, in his half-sleep sensed it. *Rogi* (the sick), *Bhogi* (the ones with desires) and *Yogi* (meditative ones) sleep during dawn, and so does Nilanjan, because he cannot sleep till two, two-thirty. It is not because of any anxiety, but sleep doesn't come to him in the first phase of the night. Apart from the little unhappiness that arises from being childless in an eight-year married life, Nilanjan has no other major reason to be unhappy; then there's a bit of luxury in sadness just like other people have. Pari consoles, "That's a mark of your happiness!" In their conjugal life, childlessness has been a hindrance sometimes, but the desire for death never crossed the minds of either Nilanjan or Pari. He has taken Pari to renowned singers in the city. Starting from Thyroid, several other tests have been done, but nothing much has come out from the tests. Whatever little was diagnosed in the thyroid test, it is more or less the case for eighty out of hundred Bengali women. Nilanjan was so confident with himself that he never felt the necessity to undergo any tests inspite of the doctor's advices, "You too go for a test, the count may be low. If it's so, it's simple; oral drugs will cure..."

The phone's ring in this third floor was somewhat

loud, a kind of a hissing sound. The window at the south was open but there was no wind blowing. If this window is kept open, the wind blows directly towards the bed, but it cannot be kept open in the afternoons even if it's hot because the room is still visible from the fourth floor of the opposite side. Pari never allows the window to be kept open. Last night's sleeplessness differed from that of the other days. Different, as in, while returning from the doctor's yesterday, Nilanjan had fallen into a strange trouble.

Dr. Maji had asked to visit him with all the test reports of Pari.

Mr. Mitra, everything seems fine with madam; reports don't suggest anything problematic.

Then? Nilanjan frowned.

I have told you before; go for your tests once. I'm prescribing them...

While Dr. Maji was busy writing the tests for him with his head/shoulders bent down, Nilanjan smiled and said— Not required *daktar babu*; everything is fine with me, I think. Those tests...

—How can you be so sure? The doctor said with a smile. Even if for a moment, Nilanjan had blushed. Having sensed the issue, Dr. Maji smilingly said— Go ahead, it happens with many people. This isn't a serious abnormality. And if the count is ok, will suggest another test for madam, a little expensive one. But before that I want to see yours.

While returning home, Nilanjan was looking out of the bus, unaware. Today, the blue sky in the month of *sharat* appeared a little brighter than usual. There was

GITIMOY, JHIMLI AND THE TALE OF AN APARTMENT

I don't know if cows can climb trees, but the dogs in this alley actually climb the new flat and have settled there. Their 'household chores' include eating, sleeping and masturbation. Jhimli sort of likes this affair. Mounting up and getting down the flat throughout the day just like the residents; no hesitation, no stress. This flat probably won't see the light of completion. There are a few complexities involved and the promoter is also not showing interest. He has understood that even after taking care of the hazards that come in the way of completion of the flat, and the expenses related to it thereof, there would not be much profit; hence the best way was to delay. There's no hurry. Sudip Debnath, the promoter belongs to this para and is known to Jhimli; and owing to this acquaintance, a mango tree growing at the boundary wall, could be saved. Jhimli informed about it with a satisfying smile, and the face lighted up. Happiness couldn't be hidden. Jhimli's arrival is always like this. Joy, sorrow, happiness, depression, anxiety—Jhimli cannot keep anything concealed. What in English may be called deceptive was never an adjective to be applied to Jhimli. Despite the household chores throughout the day and in her thoughts regarding general good, she had a

natural rhythm in her smile which had been appealing to Gitimoy from the beginning.

While returning home in the evening from office, Gitimoy smiles alone seeing the abode of the stray dogs occupying the flat under construction and their doings. Few days ago he was watching a film which he had downloaded. He remembered one of the intimate scenes that was shot on a swinging terrace of an apartment under construction and smiled on his own. Gitimoy entered his room; there was no break in the daily routine, no break in the rhythm of life. Starting from opening the door to him, making tea and organizing the clothes, Jhimli does every routine job like a machine; that too with a smiling face. Dressed in a panjabi and pajama, and seated on the sofa, Gitimoy keeps staring at Jhimli. There's no love lost. At the right of the balcony, could be seen the empire of those four-legged beings. Rainy season was gone, and in the month of bhadra, excitement amongst these animals was prominent in their whereabouts. Jhimli entered the room with tea; toast and omelette on a plate. After returning from office, no other food tastes better for Gitimoy apart from these. Jhimli, however, restricts the meal— egg is not served everyday and the bread is not buttered, only baked. Although Gitimoy doesn't exercise regularly, he has a chiselled physique. Back from office, he spends some time with Jhimli and rests for a while. Jhimli too waits for the time spent together. Their daughter June doesn't get much rest after school as she has tuitions. There is no big discord in their otherwise cosy marital relationship. Happily married, that is how their status can be described; however, a recent issue has slowly entered their happy life and disturbed their

TELLING TALES

Few people in the world cannot rightly be classified as a disappointed lot. They are not exactly frustrated, but like the optimists, they do several things in life, hoping against hope. These people are pretty much inclined towards their professions and their families. But beyond their known domain of work, they are generally identified as short-tempered, “we know it all” kind of people— with little or no thoughts for either failure or success. Suppose you ask one of these persons to organize a blood donation camp in the neighbourhood. He will definitely reply— What’s the use of such a thing? Do the people get blood on time? Futile efforts brother...etc etc and he will definitely go to a third person and remark about you... He is wishing to be a *neta* (political leader) or something I guess.... You may be disgusted with these people but you cannot put them on the same platform as “bad” men. They are not exactly “bad” people. They may not be of any help to you, but they are not likely to cause harm either. Infact they are not even capable of causing any harm. In case someone wants to cause harm to anybody, the person has to devote some time to think of mechanisms to execute his plan; these self-centred people have almost become selfish. The reason for a prelude like this is basically to introduce the arrival of Tridibesh babu. Suman’s initial reaction at his arrival was... Why is the scoundrel here so early in the morning? He must have some motives...

Suman's response could have been worse; mornings generally are not his time of the day. As it is, mornings are considered to be the "busy-hours" and to add to it, Suman has had sleepless nights for the past few days; to make matters worse he was only able to sleep during the early hours of the morning. By the time Suman had been able to put some order to his night-worn clothes and had freshened up a little in about four minutes, Tridibeshbabu had already finished reading the headlines of the newspaper. Honestly speaking it is not a crime to find out the reasons for the arrival of such people as Tridibeshbabu -one who belonged to the clan mentioned earlier-and this holds true for Suman as he is not exactly fond of Tridibeshbabu at all. Even if he was irritated, Suman hid his irritation behind a smile and asked him—So early in the morning? Is there any problem?

—No, No, nothing like that. It is just a regular visit. I was walking, I have taken up morning walks these days, so I walk upto the river for fresh oxygen you see, so while I was returning to this *more* (road bend), I just thought of seeing you.

-Suman yawned and perhaps little ashamed of his initial behaviour, he said— morning walks are obsolete these days; modern consent recommends evening walks instead.

—Is it so?

—Yes, they say that something happens in the blood and in the brain cells if you go out in the morning. I don't know much about these things. Anyway, would you like to have a cup of tea?

—No. I will have it once I get back home. Moreover, my tea calls for special care— no milk, no sugar, moderate