

MONGA CARAVAN

MASKWAITH AHSAN

Monga Caravan

By Maskwaith Ahsan

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A quick about turn

No one could have imagined a primitive world order in the 21st century. After the Renaissance we had dreamt of life based on equality, humanity and aesthetics. But now an unfamiliar darkness of religion-political chaos confounds us. Racism, terrorism, radicalism, conservatism, ruthless alienation and cannibalism are astonishingly active all over the world in an attempt to pull back the clock of civilization.

I am certainly not a good writer but, by profession and passion, definitely a very confident observer. In my teens I decided to store my observations in short-stories, novels or essays, abandoning the rat race of bestsellers I

stubbornly archived my thoughts in Bengali, my mother tongue, my first love. But during my expatriate life in Europe I formed immense multi-cultural friendships that impelled me to write for my passionate inmates in the planet of grey. They share the same concerns, same dreams of a lovable dawn and live the same despair and melancholy. So this is my first work in English, no doubt an unavoidable language for colonial discourse. I don't mind so much now, as I always write to communicate with my in-group, my friends. Whether you are empathetic or reactionary about my thoughts, do feel free to write to me.

Maskwaith Ahsan

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Dhaka, Bangladesh

maskwaith@gmail.com

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Monga Caravan

It's a tiny flower shop. Set along the footpath it offers the cheapest deals for the vagabond Romeos who are cash strapped but full of courage to shower flowers on their Juliets. This floating shop doesn't expect affluent customers who only wander into plush caged boutiques for the same kind of flowers. There is no neon sign to announce the destiny of this floating shop, nevertheless let's give it a name: Julekha's Megalomania. The name might seem

Monga Caravan

heavyweight to those who are not acquainted with Julekha, but she is perhaps the only street hawker who opens shop every morning on the dot, all dolled up with lipstick and the works. The other vendors can feel her presence even before they set eyes on her. The first glance of the day is enough to allure their whorish minds. Hoping for more than just a glimpse of her voluptuous body they try to stash away as much as they can to buy a flower or two from her everyday. That is all they ever get; leaving the place heartbroken after every little purchase.

As the afternoon heat bears down, Julekha takes out her shabby harmonium from its case and sings filmy songs. It definitely evokes images and passions of a cheap mujra but for Julekha it's also an attempt to further her flower career. Her small business centre has quite an interesting location. Right opposite to her streetshop rests the sprawling parliament building built by famous architect Louis Kahn,

who believed that even a brick has a soul, and behind her shop lie spacious apartment blocks constructed by some party or the other in power for lawmakers. For Julekha they are not just apartments but lavish urban palaces for those who prefer the plush flower boutiques to her floating shop.

As the evening sets in Julekha starts wrapping up her goods. Both her sons rejoin her from their sojourn into the nearby streets where they try to window-sell the same flowers throughout the day. Red traffic lights are the most favourite signal for these kids: they get to hit windscreens with red roses and pester flower-haters into buying their roses. If the mood and the weather strike well, even the traffic policeman sides with these kids to facilitate Julekha's business; keeping the signal red for a wee bit longer time so that car-owners are forced to buy flowers, if only to get rid of these children.

No dinner is ever free. So why does he do this

for a flower-woman? Throughout the day Julekha glances at him through half-closed eyes; this man in uniform who holds a stick and whistles away mayhem into order is mesmerized by her indecent proposal, voluptuous looks and carelessly worn sari giving better details of all her hypnotic angles. He knows that all he has to do to win over her affections is to act chivalrously at his post, praying constantly that his boss doesn't find out and transfer him from his favourite Julekha signal point.

Seeing her wrapping up her shop, the traffic-lover with rope-shaped mustaches hastily calls out to her:

“Hey whore, where are you going without paying me.”

“How much?”

“You know how much, my night queen.”

“Don't you see that my sons are around!”

“Send those bastards home.”

“Don't ever badmouth my kids. I'll kill you.”

“That’s what I want, to be killed by my snake-charmer.”

He holds two threats over her: first that he will inform the police and have her illegal shop removed from the footpath, and second that he will no longer delay the red signal by even a second. Julekha gives some money to her sons and packs them off home. She then collects her shop and glares at this mustached man with hatred.

“You bastard, can’t you see how tired and exhausted I am.”

“Whole day long you stare at me that at times I forget to clear the traffic jam. You smile at me, blink your eyes, pout and bite the tip of your lips for me but when I approach you, you take a U-turn. Well, a traffic policeman can never let you off with a U-turn. “Streets glowing with dim yellow lights, naked palm trees devoid to shadows, the parliament house with its bright, silver hues and shades sleeps sessionless. He

crosses over the fence of national leaders’ graveyard, roughly grabs Julekha’s hand and pulls her up like an uncouth dog. Julekha is raped by him almost every night only to make sure that every morning she is allowed to spread her tiny shop along the tiny footpath. By the time she walks back home, her cute little children are all done with the cooking. It’s a slum hut but the smell of hot rice, bits of smashed potatoes and barely-drinkable water overpowers all but happiness. Nothing seems more delicious than dinner and their shared moments. Her sons go off to sleep in her arms with their heavenly smells, their little hands tucked into their mother’s back, mosquitoes singing lullabies to these small princes and the queen holding them with the megalomaniac arrogance of a mother.

Dream or Reality

She was the only daughter of a modest farming family. Her father used to pamper her like a doll,

but her mother would always try to be realistic:

“Don’t pamper her so much. You’ll do nothing but spoil her.”

“She is my princess, my land, crops, dreams, all belong to her. She was born with a fortune-feeding silver spoon.”

She can still recall her father taking her to a Baisakhi Fest on every Bengali New Year. Riding on a toy horse she used to cry out in fear, wanting to identify his hazy face amongst the crowd. Sitting on a *Nagar Dola* marry-go-round she would strongly hold on to his hand. He would scold:

“Don’t be nervous. Be courageous. You are my only daughter, and you’ll have to protect my land and my glory.”

She used to buy colourful bangles, dolls made of clay, animal shaped sugar cookies and mouth watering, coiled *Jilapis*. Once she had peeped through the blinds of a puppet show where the puppet master was narrating a tragic story of a

pretty gypsy daughter who was raised like a queen by her wandering father but had to go through immense misery later in her life. She had cried at this tragedy and her father had hugged her warmly, sheltering all her worries in a big bearly hug.

“It’s only a puppet; this is merely a fabricated story.” None of them knew any better.

That night they came home quite late after the fest; her mother scolded the fun-loving father and daughter. After all it was a stormy night; the river had madly tried to swallow their small boat. She was thrilled and not scared a bit, because her father had told her not to worry, that he knew how to beat those waves. Stubborn as they are, the waves got aggressive, splashing and hitting the boat like snakes. Clouds thundered around them. She covered her ears to block away the sounds: “Close your eyes. I’ll turn this boat into a flying peacock that will soon take you home safely.”

And that's what happened. They entered their home smiling, her mother worriedly awaiting their arrival with hot rice, fish curry, pulse smoking off the fragrance of onions, brinjals sliced in the shape of full moons and fried with sharp mustard oil. "I'll stop cooking food for you people and today, too, you will get nothing to eat."

Father smiled with utmost romanticism in his eyes and cracked a curved joke. "Storms and waves we could survive but not hunger. I can smell the delicious dinner you have made for us." And that was all it took mother to smile in the cover of her green sari.

Allegory of a fairytale

There had been no rain for months together. Father would discuss with his friends that perhaps a newly built barrage somewhere far was responsible for the drought. There was no water in the canals to quench the thirst of dried, cracked lands. Day after day the much known

soft soil turned stone hard. Her stubborn father broke the iron wedge of his plough, their buffaloes refused to walk against the thirsty land. Struggling till death their land, trees, buffaloes and her strong father gradually began to surrender to fate. Life changed within a year, night after sleepless night her father finally died, his last few months used up in fighting off the micro-credit lenders.

"Your father took loan from us. Either you pay it back or we'll have no choice but to take over all your land and house."

Mother was so helpless that she went into stone shock, lost the ability to shed tears and would sit by her husband's grave all day long. Every evening she would carry her mother back home. Nothing left to live on, she started begging from door to door for food. As time slipped every door turned into a beggar's door. A procession of these beggars left for the highway, not knowing where to go and whom to ask for

food. Micro-credit lenders had grabbed their lands. She begged them for a year to save the house which had been a witness to their fairytale happiness. She promised her mother: “Wait for me. I’ll come back in a year.”

Running towards the highway, she joined the beggars’ procession, ran even faster when it turned into a joyous Monga Carnival. Every eye started glittering with the hope of food. Maybe somewhere there is a land of rice, potatoes and a little water. Sitting on a bus roof she dreamt of a plate full of flower-white rice. Can anyone smell anything in dreams? She could, at that time: the scent of boiled rice hit her nostrils; she could see her mother pouring hot smoky rice into a red clay *shanki* and her father praising her cooking. “No one can make such corn-white rice. None but your mother has magical hands.”

From then onwards that was the only dream Julekha pursued, of rice. But no longer does rice look like white flowers. It’s become a plate full

of little monsters. This monga daughter keeps on fighting against them. Every morning she throws around some rice and cracks out a winning laughter: “Go monster go. Black crows will finish you up.”

I Wanted to be like him

He committed suicide, perhaps, or I don't know how he died, really. Two years senior to me, he was a student of English literature. Hated our boring poetry classes, always believed that capitalism has stolen the soul of our poetry. What's the point in attending an inert class of Robert Frost. With the exception of the fact that he didn't like the footnotes used by T.S.Eliot, he was a great fan of the writer. "Those who need these footnotes have no

business reading Eliot," he would often qualify.

The campus under the threat of the military junta was nothing but a wasteland to him. Politics was not his life, neither was he in active politics. His real politik was writing poetry, composing songs, publishing little magazine, directing street theatre, drawing extraordinary pieces of art on faculty walls or romancing with a leftist cultural activist. A short, thin, unattractive guy experiencing everyday hardships but , alas, one who dared to dream of an equal society. Must have been crazy. Yes, definitely not normal.

A dream hawker in the corridors of the English department, he once told me to look at the boys and girls gathered in the seminar library engrossed in Cliff's notes to ensure A-plus in tutorials. "They look like students of medicine, memorizing quotes for distinction." He was introvert and shy, so requested me to do what he couldn't. "Tell them to study business

administration if they want to be corporate managers, play golf and take up economics if top banks are their destination. But for God's sake don't study any literature for a job."

I never followed through his request but always told him otherwise, simply letting go off the whole thing. Introvert, though, he was, he would argue over literary theories for hours together. Most of the teachers lacked either patience or wisdom to spar with him for too long. I could see the great master of art in him, he excelled in whatever he chose to do. I could never recognize the genius in front of me until it was too late. Our teachers, friends and the seemingly bright crowd around us neither had the time nor the inclination to discover this falling star. No one made any attempt to catch him, no one had the time to feel the agonies of that young man.

The leftist diva always adorned in a beautiful sari, easily sharing rickshaw rides with him and

holding his poetry scripts could, perhaps, perceive him. But who knows how much. I can't recall her name as I have no nostalgic memories of any such name, but I have a vivid imagination of her resembling Tagore's short-story heroines with poetic eyes, eighteenth century hair-do and strong arms to embrace clay-soft male chauvinists. I would often see the couple, sitting under a coconut tree, sharing effusions of love near the British Council. Their romantic escapades would remind me of the black-and-white movies of 70's Calcutta. No one remembers if they got married or simply lived together. Whatever they did, they certainly broke the taboos of our expired society, or at the very least managed to ply away a couple of bricks from the foundation of our panoptic institutions.

Why not give her the name, Anamica. She was fond of blue saris and this dreamer. Let's give this man a name too, Masud Ali Khan. I

dared this dreamer to sit for competitive examination. The written exam went perfectly well, but he returned from viva voce with despair. The pedagogues sitting in the board didn't appreciate this dreamer; he didn't have the physique to prove his smartness. One of them even asked him a silly question: "Why have you kept your pen hanging from your pocket." If I could have just met that old haggard lying in a graveyard or jogging in a park to control his sugar level, I would have asked him exactly how he defines smartness. Anyway, in retrospect it was a relief that Masud didn't get caged in the civil service.

He, instead, joined the group theatre movement. Within short time he was identified as a threat by some giant directors and actors, as he refused to succumb to cliché. Masud die-heartedly objected to old directors exploiting teenage girls who wanted to enter the world of TV soap through stage of dramas. Masud

formed a theatre group; Anamica supported him with all her desperation. The Neros of TV couldn't allure her, repeatedly prompting her to tell them what she got out of opting for a defeated hero.

The Little Magazine corner at the Ekushey Book Fair one year could be seen decorated with Anamica trying to sell Masud's publication. It was a dazzling evening; baul songs being played somewhere in the background, the crowd, the dust, the fog, the smell of new books and the laughter of vibrant young people all providing the perfect ambience to the grand fair: lucid poets flirting with adolescent poetry-lovers, TV soap writers hawkishly giving autographs to their mob-readers, intellectuals discussing post-modernism in Latin literature, and TV cameras capturing bookcovers along with grey-haired writers and their voluptuous admirers. In this facade of an urban circus Masud and Anamica sat near the age-old banyan tree, he reciting his

latest poems and she sitting with a slight smile and a cute dimple listening and gazing at his tired but not-defeated face. Masud reads on and on to her when the uproar of the fish market dampens the romanticism of their evening. Taking a rickshaw, Masud and Anamica, disappeared.

They turned up at the Nirob Restaurant. Cynicism aside, there actually is a restaurant by this name in old Dhaka. It serves traditional Bengali vegetable cuisines at low price, and if you are lucky you get silence. That is what Masud always ordered: one piece of soothing silence away from the hideous metropolitan. After a hearty meal Masud and Anamica left for a small apartment nearby. No furniture, no crockery, the place used to be full of books, musical instruments and insufficient light. “I will read for you, and you sing for me,” was what Masud would often say to her.

Anamica had the desire to sing, to laugh, to

wail, to murmur and to play peeping game with the penniless days and nights. But she couldn't. They had to keep the place in darkness, not to create an atmosphere for love making but to hide their presence, so that their house master would not knock incessantly for unpaid rent. Anamica tried to brighten up the room by occasionally humming softly, hiding her voice like a Jewish girl living in fear of the Nazis. That night Masud couldn't take this repression anymore.

“Anamica, please sing loudly and I will play the music,” he burst out in a courage-filled voice.

The penniless and shabby apartment suddenly turned into a musical palace. Anamica couldn't resist dancing once Masud started on his tabla, his love lorn head and hair waving around like that of Zakir Hussain's. The dual and duet between them kept the place charged for long. Nothingness and boredom was refused access to this loony couple's world.

Soon afterwards, I lost track of both of them. Almost ten years later, I suddenly came across Masud Ali Khan one day. Wearing a threadbare coat and faded trousers, he appeared thinner than before. With eyes devoid of any remnant of life he was talking and laughing to himself, hurrying along the footpath to nowhere. I called out to him but he couldn't recognize me. I let him pass by. I didn't want to spoil his mood, if at all he was in any mood. Day by day I slowly forgot him, the way we forget those poets and artists who don't click, dazzle or shine, or those who refuse to sell themselves out. Then, one day shortly afterwards while collecting my boarding pass at an airline counter, I heard a familiar voice:

“Heathrow bound.”

“Yes.”

“May I see your passport, please.”

I looked up to see her smiling at me. “How are you?” I couldn't recognize the corporate

makeup that makes every face look the same. It could have been anyone: Anila, Shaoli, Tumpa, Babi or even Anamica. “How is Masud?” Her smile froze. She couldn't answer. She didn't have the answer, and I didn't wait for one.

The myth of Nine Eleven

Rasheed get uneasy at the suspicious glances of his fellow-passengers as he boards the underground tram. He has gone through this agony so many times before. At times he feels as if the clock has been pushed back to yesterday. The same crowd accompanies him every day, yet the stern glances of his fellow-passengers never fade. In the beginning he tried to exchange smiles with them. After all it is expected of the natives to welcome the others. But no one

reciprocates the friendly approaches of this German-born Bangladeshi boy. Rasheed picks a lonely seat, puts on his headphones and listening to Bollywood songs opens up his geometry book. It's been almost 20 years that he has been trying to integrate into the German society; a boy born in Bad Godesberg and raised amongst German lights and winds. Initially, it was a pleasant kindergarten for him. He picked up the language and German kids took him to be one of them. His friend Mathias would, at times, come to his house for sleep-overs. Mathias became a great fan of Bangladeshi food and picked up a few Bengali expressions from Rasheed's mother.

One day Mathias' father took them both to Koblenz on a bicycle ride along the tracks of River Rhein. That day everything changed. Mathias stopped inviting Rasheed to his birthday parties and even Christmas gatherings. This was the same Mathias who had once long

before snapped at an old German woman when she asked him why he was so friendly with an auslander. He had retorted angrily: “He is German. Why do you call him a foreigner?” These were the same boys whose families never forgot each other on their special occasions; Rasheed’s mother used to cook biryani for Mathias and Mathias’ mother never neglected to bake extra cookies for Rasheed.

All that has changed now, their bonds have fallen apart. By a recent law Rasheed has lost his right to privacy. He can avoid the policing by being extra careful, but the lonely journey every morning and all those suspicious glances seem to be getting on his nerves. At this time, a torch bearer pops in.... Like any other day Rasheed is sitting alone for U-bahn No.16 when a bearded man sits beside him, scrutinizes Rasheed’s eyes as if looking for something special. The uneasiness increases. The bearded man suddenly takes over Rasheed’s hands.

“I see you are a Muslim like me. Do you know that we are part of the Muslim brotherhood. So why do you wear jeans and T-shirt. Our religion does not allow for this. Tell me, do you say your prayers five times a day?”

“No.”

“What! You don’t. Hell will be your destination. Anyway, I see you sitting sadly in the tram every day. No one talks to you. You do realize that you can never be accepted as a German here. You are a Muslim, a stranger and an enemy to them.”

“But why? What did I do?”

“Because the west is conspiring against the Muslim Ummah; it’s scared of our power, wants to destroy us. We are going through a new crusade by the big and small Bush.”

Rasheed is drawn into the sincere tone of the stranger. The sympathy moves him, giving his lonely mind an alibi.

“So what should I do?”

“I can take you to a place where you will find a lot of others like us who will be your friends and who never ignore you.”

As if abducted by affection, Rasheed follows the stranger spellbound. His mystic eyes and spiritual conversation shakes Rasheed to the core. Religion was never important to him, yet now he can't help but oscillate between his German identity and Muslim existence. There was a time when even the words of the priest at Mathias' grandmother's funeral impressed him. But all that changed in the last 15-minutes. His whole world shifted like it does on the anesthesia table at an operation theatre. The man leading him on in broad daylight was walking with bare hands. For Rasheed it was a walk amid darkness; the only light he could see was coming out of the stranger's hands. So he followed him towards the unknown.

Veiling Rebecca

Rasheed's parents appreciate the change in him:

getting up early in the morning, praying, gazing solemnly at the earth, reading religious books while trying to be cool about all this. They even accept his long robe-like dress and beard without mustache. But the crowd becomes more suspicious than ever. Maybe he is even being branded as a radical cleric or a conspiring jihadi off-shoot of some terrorist wing. Rasheed stops going through his geometry book on the tram every morning. Instead he reads spiritual essays, convincing himself that this change in him is beyond his control, getting more and more conservative and possessive about his sister Rebecca.

Rebecca with her tight jeans, plunging necklines, smoky eye-make and regular visits to discos has to be stopped at once. Rasheed has reached the stage where his mind conjures up his nightmares. He believes his sister in the other room is busy sms-ing her male friends. Fuming with anger, he enters her room and announces:

“I need to talk to you.” She didn’t hear him enter; she had headphones plugged to her ears. Rasheed tries to draw her attention... fails and then slaps her. It was a bolt from the blue; stunned by this unwarranted behavior Rebecca has no idea how to react.

“Stop this shameless nonsense, or else you will be sentenced to hell. Do you even know that?”

Rasheed delivers a long sermon to his sister on the rights and wrongs of life. A harmless, young girl born in Germany, like him, Rebecca has no clue as to what’s wrong with her brother. Soon afterwards, she is sentenced to home-jail. Rasheed collects a long piece of cloth from their mother, and throwing it towards the poor girl orders her to keep herself covered: “No one should even see your hair,” he barks out, pointing at hair that have been recently highlighted with mahogany streaks. Her cell phone and DVD player are confiscated, and she

is grounded at home unless she surrenders to the rule of her brother.

Their mother tries to confront him, so does their father but in vain. Life has already taken Rasheed to the point of no return; his desperation has crossed over to the realm of western resistance. His father tries to argue against it: “Not everyone here has resisted you or given you reasons to become an extremist.”

Rasheed counter argues with his haunted red eyes: “I tried my best to integrate. You should know that I had secular beliefs. What did I get in return? They looked at me through the eyes of religion and skin-color. I was born here, raised here, tried to make friends here, but at the end of the day I was still an outsider for them.”

Understanding all this, his father tries to appease his wrath: “This is just a temporary phase, perhaps one day everything will be fine. Both sides will get over misunderstandings and confusions. Till then try to restore faith in

humanity and cool down son.”

But the battle rages on. Rasheed’s mother asks him to release his sister from house-arrest and let her have a normal life. Rebecca’s on hunger strike, wailing tediously under the shock of her brother’s radicalism. Oblivious to the havoc he has created, Rasheed stands firm and unbreakable, taking refuge on the prayer carpet in his room. The whole house reverberates with his recitation from scriptures; his loud murmurs turn into huge waves of praises for his Creator, anchoring strong faith in His directives.

“Please don’t be so loud,” his mother interrupts.

“I am showing gratitude to my Creator. What’s wrong in that,” he retorts.

“The neighbors might suspect you and call the police. You know that now under new security rules the authorities can arrest you and we’ll all be in trouble,” Rasheed’s father dejectedly tries to reason out with him.

“For Heaven’s sake, why? I’ve never been to Afghanistan, was never part of any training camp, I am not even a pilot that I will attack the Statue of Liberty. I am not a suicide bomber. So what will they arrest me for: uttering words of peace! This is my way of out letting all the pent up frustration and everyday insults this very society has given me.

Unveiling a bullfight

A hazy night with profounded pathos envelopes this household. Rebecca goes to sleep hungry; salty tears drying up on her cheeks, her mother warms up dinner in the microwave and requests the others to gather at the dining table and her father watches CNN’s breaking new: Suicide bomb attack on Ashura rally, 70 killed in Iraq. Watching any news channel these days means counting bodies. The culling of flu-infected birds is competing with human casualties of suicide attacks. For all we know, it could be same virus of suspicion, hatred, inequality, ego

and intolerance.

Rings of matadors are forming around us: Osama rushing like a ferocious bull and Bush trying to beacon him with his red flag and bragging for those in the gallery. Laura cheers for him from the VIP box as Osama surges forward with his angry horns and Bush gets ready to tackle him. With every pull and push oil prices hit the bull, US economy staggers, jobless Americans sitting at the wooden benches have no idea who to clap for. With each shove of the horns, people die in Karachi and Kabul, with every wave of the red flag security tightens at Heathrow and Tegel International. With every fuming look of the bull a new iron curtain is raised somewhere. And with every smile of the flag-owner the republican vote bank is shuffled, even though most of them prefer not to interfere in the matters of the ring. After all it's a choice between a mad bull and a psychopath bull-fighter. Rasheed, Rebecca and Mathias are all

spectators in this Spanish tragedy, sitting on wooden benches, whispering in their hearts for the blind bull-fight to end. It is a rare lucky day for them. Laura screams out: "Give it a break honey. Let's go home. I have to bake cookies for Larry King."

The Daily BlackBerry

A long short-story

Lucifera walks as if he is swimming in the wind. An old-fashioned man always suited & booted, his Chaucerian English resounding Beowulf, Luci is fond of talking. But he is a tedious talker of the empty-vessel genre. Now you may ask who is Lucifera and why am I talking about him. Is he a character out of Dr Faustus?

Good question.

Our Luci is a sleep-walker still haunted by the colonial century. A man, who missed the ride out on our time-machine. Hairstyle that reminds us of Joseph Conrad's anti-heroes, and a fetish for African food, Commonwealth women and BlackBerry. He boasts of his BlackBerry as Moses' stick — a 24-hour-schizophrenia to rule his colony. Till the age of 50, Luci's character was as good as that of Mr Bush: the only monogamic man in the world of Laura. Past 50 Luci tries to add some romanticism to his failing humours: he follows Gordon Brown's hairdo, memorises toxic paras from Don Juan and forgets his lunch-hour if there is a young Commonwealth girl sitting across him.

But don't mistake. Luci is a self-made man, started from big zero and approaching an even bigger one. Fishing was always his favourite past-time, but now he doesn't need to visit Scotland or North Sea resorts; colourful fish are easily catchable in his dry office room, his neo-

colony, the daily BlackBerry. Check out Luci's list of catch for the day.

Dialogue with Islam

A four-foot-eight girl, secular, forward-looking and an emancipated Muslim. Naina alias Nanny, wearing a tight white T-shirt with President Musharraf ambushed on the chest and hipster jeans for the rest. She is a bold campaigner of the war against terrorism, a great admirer of Musharraf because he played a major role in dismantling Taliban hangover in Pakistan.

Lucifera stares at this young star, spellbound and motionless — short height but what a long sight into politics!

“I have good news for you Nanny. You will get the job.”

Nanny waves her eyes from behind specs, not knowing how to thank this pre-old man.

“But how? I can't write.”

“Leave that to me darling. You can think, that's enough for us.”

“Luci, I know a lot about honour killing too.”

Nanny appears almost in tears, “Do you know how badly subjugated are they? Our male-dominated Muslim society treats them like slaves. An inch across the social borderline and the mullah's spell out *fatwa* to kill them publicly by stoning.”

Nanny bursts out in tears. She wails and murmurs for Muslim women. Luci holds her hand, sympathises on her shoulder and promises: “Nanny, you are our symbol. You will break the silence. BlackBerry will offer you a strong platform.”

Gandhi Ji Seeks Appointment

Luci hates when the phone rings in the middle of his absorbed discussions on honour killings or the war on terror. His secretary reminds him of Rakesh's appointment.

“Tell him to wait.”

Rakesh, a senior journalist, has to wait for goddo. Busy with Nanny, Goddo was trying to

make her laugh at old Readers' Digest jokes. The door suddenly opens. Out comes Nanny looking like a happy bride with a smiling Goddo smiling beside her.

"Nanny, come to me anytime you like."

With the same wave of his head Luci changes the geography of his jaws, swallowing his smile before turning to Rakesh.

"You have got only 10 minutes."

A tribute to the 60th year of Indian Independence, Rakesh is working on Gandhi Ji's philosophy. Why not? After all, Rakesh boasts of an uncanny resemblance to the great leader: semi-bald-headed, round specs and the simplicity of proletariats.

"You have prepared a story on 1946?," asks Luci.

"That's 1947, the year of Indian Independence."

"I know, my grandfather was a British soldier stationed in Delhi at that time."

"Will you take a look at what I have written?"

"I am busy right now. Don't get so emotional about the half-naked leader. Make the article short and dry. Is that clear?"

Rakesh has no choice but to understand, as Tahmida, another Commonwealth young girl, is already hanging by Luci's door. Walking through Lucifera's long corridor Rakesh has a smile of a son who never had a father, just like that of Gandhi Ji's.

Aborted Journalism

Nobel Laureate Prof. Yunus, the banker to the poor, thinks that poverty is the Third World's capital. Indeed, the poor look on Tahmida's face, a lower middle-class helplessness enveloping her body, relay her capability of drawing the attention of the World Bank or IMF. Our own World Bank chief, Wolfowitz, read Lucifera, anxiously asks Tahmida, "What ails you, why do you look shaken and dazed?"

"I can't do night-shift. I am ill. The doctor

says I need an operation.”

Tahmida starts to cry, shaking and sobbing with the fear of the illness-monster. Luci doesn't know how to cry but he gives it a try, sincerely. “Don't worry, have patience, have faith on me. Now give me a smile. The same dazzling smile you gave me on the piano evening.”

The compliment alone appeases Tahmida's pain.

“Luci, there is a mobbing structure in my section. I was scolded by my section-chief for coming late to work. You know we got home late after that piano evening.”

“Don't worry, I'll take care of that old hagger. Media scenario is changing fast and there's no room for the oldies here. You are young, I will crown you darling. You are such a gem. If I could clone you, BlackBerry could topple the Tribune.

Poor eyes glittering like marbles, Tahmida laughs. The room shivers with the echoes of a

running horse. Lucifera's warm hug engulfs her in a closeness of a demi-god.

“My mentor, my Luci.”

On her way out Tahmida feels her forehead for the heaviness of the promised crown. It was a bird-twittering summer evening. She pinched an SOS SMS: “Will you not visit me at the hospital?”

Lucifera's classroom

Luci would have been a very good kindergarten teacher. His instincts to be just that haunt him to the extent that his monthly meetings with fellow journalists reflect a playgroup classroom. Holding court, he feels like none other than Larry King. Point of emphasis being the 'king' who owns a harem full of Commonwealth probation girls.

Colonial bureaucracy has a parallel system of gradual promotion of clerks to officers, who are affectionately called 'promotees'. Even non-commissioned soldiers, at times, get

commission-braided as second lieutenants at the twilight of their career. Lucifera's heading the BlackBerry is something similar to that. One fine morning when he unexpectedly finds himself sitting on the king's chair his euphoric disbelief is a sight for all. God has sent him to this earth to run such a big circus. Why not? I came, I saw, I conquered.

So he enters the classroom like a hero of a mock epic. The biggest gimmick of Luci's classroom is a power-point presentation. Showing off the tools of journalism, he stands in front of the big screen with the orgasmic smile of Bill Gates' half-brother. Remember Dr Faustus who believed he was Mr Know All. Luci's antique English, horde of age-old proverbs and stubborn attempts at proving his intellectual height leave a similar impression. For experienced journalists this classroom is a gas-chamber, whereas the on-probation Commonwealth girls eagerly await the Q&A

sessions to show their ability at asking stupid questions and put forward laughter-provoking suggestions. Luci's world order is definitely incomplete without them.

Nanny over and again raises questions and concerns at women emancipation. Tahmida cannot frame questions but her shivering-horse laughter compensates for that. Rakesh is fond of discussions on post-modernism. Towards the end of the class Luci shows his BlackBerry.

"Write me an e-mail anytime. I'll will be right there for you."

Confusing. Is he expecting an e-mail or a fe-mail?

Megalomania

The mail department is run by a pre-old woman, Naira. Of Luci's age group, she wears dozens of pink butterfly clips on her dyed hair, puts on red foundation to hide the geometrical revenge of age and is politically fond of cooking for Luci. Hot, spicy South Asian food that is a regular

concern for all those with delicate stomachs and minds. That's not all. She is a photograph freak, likes the constant flashes standing next to the boss. She longs to become a journalist and so lobbies for her friend Iqbal's promotion.

Naira, like those crooked typical mothers-in-law characters in Hindi soap opera's, and Iqbal, carrying the legacy of those native Brutes-type collaborators who helped East India Company rulers, are both ideal for Luci. He likes to have a bunch of clowns to work as informers in different departments, so that he, Luci, can ensure a colony without fear of revolt.

Iqbal tries hard to win his master's stone-cold soul; butters and repeats Luci's proverbs like a parrot. Waiting for the master to phone him, Iqbal practises to talk to the invisible crown.

Luci supports another parasite, Gobi, a good-looking, good-for-nothing Indianized Casanova. Gobi's aptitude for Indological fantasies is seriously recognized by Luci. Gobi follows him

around like a shadow in red tie, roaming around the office like a ping pong ball. His actual assignment remains unknown till date. A universal cigarette-seeker, especially from girls, Gobi claims to be a social democrat but, really, he stares at Asians the way a neo-conservative does. Luci doesn't like unofficial social gatherings. So, from time to time, Gobi is assigned to keep an eye on coffee tables for intra-office dynamics.

This is not an era of alienation, but Luci believes otherwise. No one but the chosen few should have friends in the office. He walks alone, all alone, towards the cafeteria; in desperate times accompanied by Gobi, not a friend but a mere Charlie. Sometimes during lunch hour Gobi is sent for snap checking. To find out if anyone has brought spicy South Asian food to share with colleagues. Gobi tries to smell like a German Shepherd, food as well as any inner politics against his master.

The tragic part of Gobi's life is when he has to make do with a dry sausage with his nostrils still trickled by the alluring fragrance of hot Indian food.

Gobi ignites his own sense of importance by feeding Luci with imaginary conspiracy theories. He tries to cash in on Luci's sense of insecurity inherited from his ancestors regarding Indians. When Luci gets to learn from Gobi of the 1857 armed struggle of Indian soldiers against the East India Raj, he suffers many sleepless nights. Once during a cigarette-seeking attempt, Gobi came to know of some details of that struggle from Rakesh. Later, he collected a bollywood movie, *Mangal Panday*, to impress Luci with his knowledge of Indian history of independence.

Contract on the table

Atmosphere inside the BlackBerry is reminiscent of Alex Haley's *Roots*; the way black slaves were brought from Africa, the way

they were treated, the life and humiliation of Kunta Kinte, desperate attempts to crush down Kunta's black identity, in short, the saga of human existence. Those days of hatred and racial discrimination are legally over. But Luci's colonial hangover refuses to wipe out the past. Hiring a South Asian journalist genetically prompts him to convert euros into rupees. For Luci, that's the vantage point of human identity. For a brown South Asian the lowest of salary package should be enough, he believes. And why not? Think of Mr Bush: either you are with me or against me.

Remember when Gulliver visited Brobdignag and saw an uncouth huge woman, Diya. Now a days she works at the BlackBerry as a section chief. A half-German, she knows everything except journalism. Another insecure woman resembling her master, Lucifera. Diya informs him about a girl in her section, Rodela Singh, who doesn't show sufficient subordination.

Rodela is a Rajput, so blind subordination is the last thing one should expect from her. Luci doesn't want to miss the chance to fence with Rodela's defences.

"Ms. Singh I have heard that you don't cooperate with your colleagues."

"That's not true, Mr. Luci. I think I have optimum communication skills and I know my job well."

"Don't you think you sound over-confident."

"Look Mr. Luci, I didn't get any holidays in the last six months. I requested Ms. Diya to at least approve a few days as my mother is visiting. But she refused to do so."

"You should know Ms. Singh that your contract is on my table and I may not extend it if the management is unhappy with your performance."

Rodela cannot comprehend the type of performance Luci is expecting from her. Is it that of Nanny and Tahmida who perform in his crazy

office room or on those tantalizing piano evenings to satisfy his mid-fifties masculine ego. Much as she wants, Rodela cannot tell Luci that she joined the BlackBerry as a journalist, not an entertainer.

Kunta Kinte at home

Mrs. Luci is about to throw away her husband's BlackBerry for she is suspicious of his receiving and sending fe-mails all the time. Weekends are especially bad as he is then supposed to clean the windows, mow the grass, remove snow from the porch and help with other household chores. This issue has been bothering Luci for quite sometime. One day while going through family photographs he sees one in which his grandparents are sitting on chairs with two maid servants at their feet. The photograph dated Nov 16, 1946 — Delhi. He jumps up and runs out half-naked like Archimedes and yelling 'Eureka, Eureka.'

He calls up Tahmida to find out if she knows

anyone who could be of domestic help; a post-modern coinage for maid servants. She tells him that her best friend Jarina is jobless and hoping to work as a journalist at the BlackBerry. Luci tells Tahmida that Jarina can start her probation at his house under the direct supervision of Mrs. Luci and later in case of vacancy she can join the BlackBerry.

Jarina arrives at Luci's house one day for an interview. Mrs. Luci dislikes this thin, black Ethiopian-looking girl with large specs on her nose and headphones glued to her ears. Jarina's heavily accented wrong English jars Mrs. Luci out of her senses. Catching the tail end of Jarina's monotone chattering she realizes that this girl refuses to work on weekends because of her swimming and dance lessons. Mrs. Luci is not at all happy but she has to accept the fact that times have indeed changed. Finding colonial-style full-time helping hands can only remain a dream.

Jarina misses no chance to impress Luci with her accented wrong English, while Luci relishes this true offspring of colonial discourse. Luci has no idea of South Asian politics, so Jarina fills him in on issues that are actually non-issues. In a short time Luci's living room turns into a fools' paradise. Jarina's chattering earns her a free-lance job at the BlackBerry but on the condition that she continues to visit the Luci House thrice a week. Mrs. Luci requests her to drop her MP3 player at least when she is helping with household chores. With long-term prospects in mind Jarina has no choice but to accept this tough condition.

Jungle Game Theory

Lucifera suffers from acute paranoia; he feels threatened by experienced journalists in the house and annoyed at those who are not willing to be part of his puppetry. He plants Nanny, Diya and Tahmida in different sections as informers. To establish his uni-polar system he creates a

cold and tense environment. Taking control of everything under his umbrella he diligently sits in front of the computer to prepare duty charts, a typical promotee psyche. His duty charts favour his favourites: the Commonwealth girls. Depriving senior freelancers, Nanny is offered regular work and money. When confronted on this issue, Luci shrugs off the responsibility by claiming huge budget shortage.

“I am lying down overturned with tied arms and legs.”

But when it comes to paying nanny and Jarina his arms and legs are as free as those of a demi-god, with a Don Juan smile to top it off.

With senior journalists becoming a pain for Luci, Gobi suggests ethnic cleansing by fabricating charges against them. Diya is assigned to collect false charges of sexual harassment from the Commonwealth girls. Girls who are not even worthy of any sexual destination.

Lucifera holds absolute power when it comes to recruiting puppets. According to the Luci doctrine everyone can do everything. Indeed, when a promotee can run a media house, then Nanny, Tahmida, Diya and Jarina, too, can claim to be journalists.

So eliminate Rakesh, a journalist with passion, who occupies himself with intensive research for his articles and talks too much in meetings on content-improvement. Rakesh takes all the insults from Luci because of his faith on Gandhi Ji's non-violent teachings. Even in an age of great dictators like Bush, Putin, Kim Yong Il, Mugabe or Lucifera, Rakesh waits for the dawn when truth shall rise like a phoenix from ashes.

Animal Farm – Part 2

We should pursue our readers the way a cat chases a mouse, Lucifera briefs his neo-journalists. But budget deficit is a constant hiccup.

“I am in a desperate situation, the way a cat chases its own tail,” bemoans Luci, but not for too long. He is confident of making a three-piece suit out of a cloth small enough for an underwear. From his lot of Commonwealth girls he is sure of finding horses for the courses.

After all, in his words, print media has gone antique and the future is on-line. Rakesh tries to tell him that as BlackBerry targets third world countries not many readers have access to internet. Luci rejects this fact: “If we don’t go on-line our situation will soon be that of a cat among pigeons.

Budget shortage has forced Luci to suggest reprinting of good articles: “Give new shape to old articles, whitewash a crow and present it as a peacock.” All wonder if this is Luci’s basic theory in life too. Rolling his eyes, Luci acts like he is going to disclose Pentagon’s biggest secret. Let the cat out of the bag: “We have received the highest telephone bills this month. Please stop

making personal calls.” The fact that his commonwealth girls top the list of those who keep the lines busy with long-distance tele-sex calls is conveniently ignored.

“I can take the horse to the water but can’t make it drink”. Iqbal repeats the animal proverb like a parrot and tries to apply it in support of Luci’s reprinting suggestion: “As Mr Luci says, less is more.” Little does Iqbal know that Luci plagiarized this theory from Melvin Mencher’s ‘*Basic News Writing*’.

The way Luci’s meetings are jinxed with childish theories of journalism and budget shortage, it seems that perhaps his would-be book will carry the title ‘Save Money Rape Journalism’.

The Pianist

This is not about Roman Polanski’s *Pianist*, but a 60-plus youthful German and former head of the BlackBerry. An Indology expert, secular at heart, humane by nature and a very good pianist,

it was Dr Mueller who encouraged Rakesh into the world of BlackBerry. Rakesh remembers the days when the house was a Whiteberry. Integration, peace and tolerance were Dr Mueller's strengths. In sharp contrast to Lucifera he was a great admirer of above-average journalists. He believed in freedom of expression and association. Censorship was the most disliked word in his dictionary.

Sitting alone at the coffee corner Rakesh cherishes the golden days gone by. Compared to Lucifera's iron curtain Mueller's was a regime of happiness. He was not a demi-god but a true human being who would take journalists out on tours to places like Lorelei where nature and vineyards are at their best. Those were trips with a beautiful mind.

In the name of gender balance Lucifera promotes unprofessional Commonwealth entertainers and dislikes good female journalists who are indifferent to his advances. Dr Mueller,

on the other hand, was a fatherly figure, equally affectionate to both men and women. From politics to horizontal range of music and art, Mueller could discuss on everything worth discussing. Rakesh could never impress him with his index knowledge but sometimes his discourse on *Upanishads* really caught Dr Mueller's attention.

The happiest moments of life are often the shortest. When Dr Mueller decided to leave BlackBerry, the dusk of freedom also decided to scroll into the dungeons of darkness. Luci's take-over was a cruel sunset; one without a Battle of Plassey. Rakesh sits dejectedly like an orphan. Luci's Commonwealth girls are scared to share a table with him, as they have been instructed to stay away from those who refuse to show unconditional subordination. It's tough on these weak-at-work girls. But they have to ensure contracts for themselves before they reach their menopause twilight.

Luci's Bonfire

While I write the last chapter of my long short story *Lucifera* is celebrating the anniversary of the Sub-continent's independence in the colony of his BlackBerry. An Indian island still ruled by Lord Clive. The irony of the evening is that Luci gets to cherish his own little colony where Naira cooks Indian food, Iqbal refills his wine glass, Nanny dances in his grasp, Tahmida ensures an environment filled with horse-laughter, Jarina cleans up after dinner, Gobi accompanies him like a psychophant-shadow and at least five interns playing music for the ball. These are the five puppets who have all been promised the same single available post. The perfect doctrine of cannibalism. A fight till death.

Those good journalists recruited by Dr Mueller stand in a corner. Luci keeps an eye on them. Diya's eyes roll like surveillance cameras. I feel sorry for the likes of Rakesh and Rodela, caught up in Luci's Guantanamo. But that's not

all. Luci is also celebrating the departure of a colonizer from West India Company, who could lure the minds of both the good and the bad. August 9: the day Quit India Movement started is also the day Luci's invisible colonizer left BlackBerry. But there is a difference: that of the hungry beggar and the fasting monk.

The colonizer has departed but Luci still suffers from hallucinations. As if the Mask of Zorro cannot be removed. Dear Luci, look at me. I am the DJ now. Tonight you and your troupe will have to do *mujra* for me. Hold on. Stop. Let me ignite my cigarette. Don't worry. It's not your pyre. I will give you more time...

Tale of a little Casanova

I came to Dhaka at the age of 18 to see, to live and to love it. The desire to discover the wonders of a cosmopolitan city and to wear the warmth of generous neon lights took me up skyscrapers. As a child I believed that I would have a better view of the sky from a high-rise apartment. My earlier visits to Dhaka had attracted me with a fascinating kids' park, its colorful rides and the zoo with its caged Royal Bengal Tiger and comic monkeys. Every trip

would end in tears as every memorable moment would be dashed to oblivion by the impending journey home. At that age nothing was more boring than home and hometown. Back from every dream-visit to Dhaka, I would sit at my cruel study table and peep through the window above it. Staring at the sky I would dream of riding the clouds all the way to Dhaka.

This school-boy narration of Dhaka must come as a surprise to you. I am at an age neither to write such a paragraph nor to sketch an autobiography. I am writing this because, in contrast, little boy Midrah considers his grandfather's small town of Ishwardi as his heaven. I often wonder how he could realize at the age of seven what I could only perceive at 27. Midrah was born in Dhaka but started to dislike the city the moment he learnt to walk. Out-letting this dislike by wailing, shouting and disapproving of plastic guests in the living room, he easily discovered that urbaners were

not at all attentive to a child, whereas a small town like Ishwardi covered up for all the lack of attention. Even an unknown rickshaw-puller had time for Midrah. He was obviously too young to have read the theories of alienation but surprisingly enough he could readily identify patients of alienation in Dhaka.

Life can be cruel. It kept him in Dhaka, handing him only sprinkled moments to bond with and inhale the intensity of his dream town. Thus started his search for warm people who would pay attention to his loneliness. People like drivers, gate-keepers and domestic assistants. He preferred to be with the proletariats hanging around his apartment block. It was an uncomfortable alliance for the Dhaka bourgeois, who were fearful of this strange kid getting declassified and bringing some unknown skin diseases into their elite apartments. There must be something wrong with this child, they would think loudly. The civil society would

summon roundtable discussions on the subaltern behavior of the boy who refused to eat, sit or smile, like other urban English medium kids. This rowdy child showed no signs of growing up to be a polished, measured, urban humpty dumpty; one who would sit on a sofa like a robot, watch cartoon channels and have kitkat or strawberry ice-cream with the explicit permission of his patrons.

Midrah didn't have the freedom of choice. So he had to accompany his parents to Europe at the age of two-and-a-half years. At the Bonn-Koln Airport he seemed happy and surprised; repeatedly asking, "Where is Midrah going?" Quite a philosophical question, one a saint would ask of life. It's no doubt a difficult question to answer when you come to think of it logically. Midrah was happy to leave the city of melancholy, Dhaka. He was definitely not at an age to enjoy the colours of Koln but perhaps if he couldn't get his beloved Ishwardi, any other

place was better than Dhaka. His father's friends came to greet him at the airport with a huge balloon. He was too small to hold the extra-large puffed-up mickey mouse. Nevertheless, he held on to it tightly. Passing by the Koln Sud railway station he asked if a passing train would take him to Ishwardi. "I have seen such trains in Ishwardi," he cried out. One of his father's friends could not resist but say, "We, a bunch of clowns, are so happy to be in Koln, whereas this little master is missing Ishwardy." Midrah is like master film-maker Satyajit's hero Apu, they all thought, who could relate only trains to his existence. After a while Midrah started to cry as if he had been abducted from his roots. We had to lie, a never-ending lie.

"Where are my grandparents, my dada, dida."

"Out of the city. They will be back soon."

The car stopped near an unknown apartment, 99 Bruler Strasse. Reluctantly, Midrah got down tightly holding the string of his balloon.

Suddenly, he released the string, letting the balloon fly back to his grandparents' land. Gone with the wind, someone murmured. He entered a strange flat, a strange life of melancholy. Jet-lagged, he immediately slept, only to rise to an equally unknown morning with nothing but a wide window to look at the sky, the clouds and his would-be chariot to Ishwardi. A reverse journey, some would think. I had the same fascination for clouds but my dream destination was different.

Midrah was taken to new-market, the city center of Koln, as an introduction to the grandeur of Europe. Clever beyond age, he refused to show any interest. His parents took him to McDonalds to pique his curiosity, a capitalist trick to fish a child. It worked. Music, chicken nuggets and small gift toys brought a smile to his face. But that too ended soon like the charm of a quickie. There was non-stop bargaining for a deal to go back to Ishwardi,

more specifically not to go to Dhaka at all. He turned into a scary and stubborn bargainer, his parents at a loss to handle this strange little man.

I tried to introduce him to a few kids. For some unknown historical reason most of them didn't welcome him. A few were friendly but Midrah was unhappy by the refusal of a scar-faced boy his age. The boy's mother apologized for her son's rudeness, casually mentioning that he probably took after his boring and racist father. So hurt was Midrah by the scar-faced boy's behavior that he became indifferent to the approaches of other friendly boys.

He was no doubt, troubled by the German language. He did manage to settle to a comfortable routine in his English-medium kindergarten with friends like Peter, Sophia and Daniel... and a crush on his teacher, Yasmin. He would imagine and make drawings of Yasmin and himself going on long drives in a sports car. Once Yasmin came to know of this, she arranged

for such a ride for him. Unfortunately, there was no space at the back to accommodate me. Midrah soon polished his penchant for dating Aunts for their cars. He and his opera-singer Sunanda would sing together during those rides, even though Sunanda frequently objected to his flirtatious looks. Truly fascinated by his musical talent, she put up with the little casanova's smiles.

Casanova he was; finally snatched away my best friend Munazza. They regularly went out for movies and ice-skating, to McDonalds and playgrounds. For someone so young, Midrah seemed proficient in the use of game theory. Lobbying with his Munazza 'Khalamunni', he managed to arrange for his twice-a-year trips to Ishwardi. Every trip would be full of complaints against Emirates for not taking him directly to Ishwardi. He found it hazardous to get down in Dhaka and proceed by train, invariably being forced to spend a few days in the city he disliked

so intensely. Dhaka bourgeois were more unbearable than German elites and Ishwardi dandies. For him there was never any difference between Koln Station or Ishwardi Junction, Niagra Falls or River Padma, Dusseldorf or Iswardi Airport, Safari Park near Toronto or the greenery in Paksey Hardinge. The one place he couldn't tolerate was Dhaka. I don't know why or perhaps I do.

His Dhaka well-wishers suggested disciplining Midrah in their elite dogma. The experiment went on and he was sent to London to check out his former colonial masters. He liked the downtown but preferred the countryside. They looked like Ishwadri or Paksey with their dotting of British buildings. He liked the place so he liked little British girls. Why not? They helped him with his English. On the bank of River Thames facing the London Eye he didn't forget to kiss the pink cheeks of the little Briton in ponytails who held his hand and

danced along the river.

I decided to discipline this mischievous Casanova, but my father burst into laughter upon hearing his escapades. "Your grandpa was fascinated with the mujras of Lucknow, I used to chat with girls in Calcutta Coffee House. I don't know much about the colours of your life but Midra definitely has the spirit to conquer," he said, obviously enjoying my discomfort.

I gave up any hope of bringing order into his life. Once back in Dhaka he refused to be around, went on hunger strikes for study strikes. All my plans to settle him down in Dhaka failed. No bribe worked, neither Fantasy Kingdom nor Star Cineplex at the sprawling tomb, Bashundhara City. At the age of seven he was equipped with the charms of the west and the deep-rooted fascination for his small-town ancestors. We tried to handle this little charmer with the help of my friend's dazzling Dhaka daughter, an English-medium, six-year-old ulala

star, Rodushi. We should have known better. Midra preferred either his wheat-skinned girlfriend Sadia from Ishwardi or the pink-cheeked Margaret. His bold declaration of Independence: "I want to stay in Ishwardi, then I will go to London and quite often visit my grandparents. But no Dhaka, not Dhaka. Dhaka? No way."

Madam Bovary and the secret kite

This time Madam Bovary tried hard to be blindly monogamic and persistent in her holy persuade. Really, it doesn't matter how many times she fell in love at first sight, had a crush at a nexalite, felt

euphoric around handsome university professors, sat through pot-wine romance with her British boss or finally played a hitchhiking game with Arjuna.

Madam Bovary, being the intense person that

she is, has had a long list of admirers. And so was her enormously long hobby: kiting through colourful days and nights.

I never question her romantic ardours and nose-top sinking myths. She is always blue without a man: a man she wants to love or be loved by, to admire or be admired by.

When I saw Madam Bovary at the Bonn railway station in a khajura posture with a Casanova by her side, I instantly felt they were made for each other. With glittering eyes and courtship dreams when they suddenly left Yadav Ji's daughter's wedding reception I prayed heartily for their all-out happiness on earth.

But this Madam Bovary is actually as confused as that Madam Bovary; constantly taking off and putting on her wedding ring that reminds her of her pundit husband. It's not a theory but although pundits can attract girls, they can hardly sustain their charms. Perhaps pundits can't flirt or feel comfortable in discos.

The Madam Bovarys of this world can only visit Guimet museums with them and share the essence of the Frankfurt school of thought or at best go biking and swimming. What this Madam Bovary needed is perhaps an all-in-one like the Arjuna of Mahabharata. Arjuna, by nature a James Bond of mythical times, can hit the eye of a fish with his arrow without failing to win the paragon of beauty, Droupadi. James Bond's attraction lies in not holding his trophy for long but distributing it amongst his in-group. More like Ocean's Eleven co-operative robbery style.

Arjuna shares the glory of Droupadi with his four brothers, Nakul, Sahadev, Vim and Judhisthir. So the Droupadi-Bovary story has a lovable Nakul, cute Sahadev, trustworthy Judhisthir and the unfaithful Arjuna.

Arjuna is practically a capitalist, so theoretically a womanizer. I often saw Nakul drive her to Amsterdam for grass, Sahadev shed emotional tears in sympathy and give laptop

warmth. But it's Vim who could be the best husband to this soft, charming, love-torn Droupadi Bovary. Judhithir as all know could only be expected to give fatherly affection. For Madam Bovary the sole worth-achieving target left was Arjuna.

Let's add allusions and a little complication to the story. There's a huge debate over Ram Mandir and Babri Mosque catastrophe. Now had there been an Arjuna Mandir and a Babri Mosque one after the other, chaos would not have stood a chance. The Arjuna of our story is full of Mughal chivalry that desires subjugation of his Bibi behind layered curtains. Bibi placed on a regal pedestal curtained off from chilman-style mujra. Madam Droupadi could not take this chauvinistic hegemony, and took upon herself the task of toppling Arjuna's arrogant chariot: Begum Sahiba should be informed of his mischieves. Life could not go on all tipsy topsy. Madam Bovary, lying on Nakul's

voluntary lap looked at the full moon, mindlessly haunted by the zeal of lycanthropic revenge.

She called up to consult Lahory Kurratul Bai, who had been recently elevated to Begum Kurra Baerth by a fishing German lovebird. Kurra Bai was quite familiar with the conservative Muslim Bibi types and their possessiveness of their mujra-seeking husbands. Upon Kurra Bai's suggestion Madam Bovary invited her British boss Lucifera for a palace conspiracy over pot-wine moonlit dinner.

Droupadi Bovary spent the night convincing Lucifera and herself of Arjuna's untold heartless escapades.

"Honey, why are you wasting time. Get in touch with Arjuna's tyrant princess and tell her about his black activities."

Nakul used to be the pigeon-carrier of Arjuna's love letters, secretly maintaining a log book throughout. And yes, Madam Bovary had

been flying kites for 32 years. She didn't mind cutting off a few strings at a whim. But one kite she preserved till the last.

"I can show my last kite to the angry princess anytime and bring Tsunami into Arjuna's island of faith."

Madam Bovary, instead of following the elegant Mahabharata theme, opted for Star Plus-style soap climax. One thing she had not bargained for was the princess' cool demeanor.

"I let my prince fly from time to time, so that I can keep his soul with me. It may sound old-fashioned but if truth be told, a soul can never be polygamic."

Faced with this unexpectedness, Droupadi recovered her elegance. Soap endings are really not her style. At once she went back to the intense canvas of Mahabharata. God bless you, Madam.

Olive Valley

An unusual kind of roundtable discussion is taking place these days in Dhaka. The paper-tigers of government and non-government sectors and civil society cannot digest food without attending these 'barkshops' that are generally high on media's priority lists. Served with fresh coffee and mineral water, such round-or oval-tables are host to discussions on good governance, poverty alleviation, millennium goals, fight against AIDS, women empowerment

and the works. It's all very well on the surface except that such lip-service has produced a huge amount of horses' eggs in the last more than three decades in Bangladesh. The grey line between metropolis and satellite has broadened, the haves have swallowed the dreams of the have-nots and those seated across these round-tables have made fortunes in-between sips of scalding coffee.

So for a change let's call upon discussants that never did nor would ever get a chance to be invited to any table conference: a bereaved father whose son, Asad, died on Jan 19, 1969, during protests against the West Pakistani rulers. Another, whose communist son, Siraj Shikdar, was killed by Bangladeshi rulers a few years after Independence on Jan 2, 1975. Sitting next to him is Col Taher's father. Col Taher was tried by the country's military junta on Jul 21, 1976. Next is a man whose son Noor Hossain's body was found with a slogan written on his chest

"Long Live Democracy, Down with Autocracy". That was on Dec 10, 1987, the time of another military junta. The last on the panel is an aboriginal old man who recently lost his son, Chalesh Richil, on Mar 18, 2007.

These five fathers represent those countless families who have lost their children to various regimes; culled like diseased birds. As environmental concerns gather momentum, modern-day rulers can no longer afford to hunt freely to satisfy their id, ego and super ego. The following discussion is true to form and in no way exaggerated. First, let's give the floor to Asad's father:

"My son was killed while protesting against West Pakistani rulers; rulers who in the name of federation suppressed our rights from the moment the British left this region. When we gained Pakistan in 1947 we believed our dog days to be over. It was a false dream. East Pakistan was again turned into a colony; the

only thing that changed was the face of our colonizer.

Both displayed similar characteristics. Our fate didn't change, so we had to fight back and raise our voice against the West Pakistani military junta. My son was amongst those courageous young Bengalis who came out on the streets. I don't mourn his death because whenever I look at the flag of my country I know that he shed his blood to give radiance to our freedom and identity. I am proud to have fathered a son like Asad."

At this point Shiraj Shikdar's father takes the floor.

"When we achieved our dream delta named Bangladesh in 1971 after a bloody freedom fight, we believed it to be the end of our history of subjugation. But as ill-luck would have it, social inequality didn't die out. A group of emerging money monsters took over the space left by those we drove away to West Pakistan.

My son Shiraj joined an underground resistance movement against these unipolar neo-bourgeois; he wanted to see equal distribution of wealth in society. We all started out with full faith on the new leadership of our burgeoning nation. But day by day our hearts got broken and dreams shattered. Perhaps democracy, too, is nothing but utopia, tolerating no opposition, crushing every voice of dissent. My son Shiraj was killed in broad daylight. I have shed no tears for him because he sacrificed his life for the deserving, for the have-nots and for those who could not fight back. I have no reason to shed tears at his heroic death. "

Taher's father nods his head in familiarity. He, too, fathered a hero.

"My son, Col Taher was a freedom fighter in 1971, yet his dream of freedom, too, was not honoured. Like before, those at the periphery remained at the periphery, at times even pushed further away. Being a true freedom fighter he led

the path to people's revolution. A top to bottom dreamer, he knew what was not right, he even knew what he wanted but it could be that he didn't know how to get there. Summoning civilians and soldiers, he delivered his dream. Surely there can be nothing wrong in that. But his dream was taken to be a revolution and he became victim of a tragic trial, black hole trial. Obviously threatened by his dreams the very military junta that was the anchor of his faith carried out his trial. My son was too naïve to know that power mongers are cream-eaters by nature. He was sentenced to death; not an ordinary one but the death of a dream revolution. I don't regret it because my son has proved to me that dreams have the power to defeat death."

Noor Hossain's father, a very simple man, didn't know till the end that his son was born to be a great man. The realization came when he saw his son's photograph. Written on his chest and back was a slogan for democracy. It was

then that he tried to think hard as to what this much used and abused word 'democracy' really meant: is it food, three times a day, or doctor, in case of illness, simply shelter from sun and rain, or simply protection from the harassment of political mafias, police and army. He was driven over by a lorry of the junta, but the slogan against autocracy written on his chest could not be crushed.

"My son went to a protest rally. I tried in vain to stop him because I knew that a king comes as a king goes but the son of a poor man like me never returns. Politics is game for rich and big; not our piece of cake. So I had begged him not to risk his life, but when I saw his death triggering the downfall of a dictator, my small hut felt like a palace of glory. The dictator is still alive: never say the fallen mighty are not given space to manipulate justice. But when I see ordinary people paying tribute and placing wreaths at the Noor Hossain Square, my chest

worn thin by poverty swells up and I proudly pronounce that I am the father of Noor Hossain THE PATRIOT."

Chalesh Richil's father is an aboriginal son of the soil who still believes that the forest where he was born belongs to his God who has given the ownership of that land to the sons of soil. He is unaware of the colonial masters staking their claim on the land of god. In the garb of rapid urbanization, the state has engulfed their rainforest and red valley, marginalising the natives and ignoring with impunity the blood-rights of ancient dwellers. The state went so far as to attempt money-making by encaging the sons of soil in a zoo named eco-park. Touted as a forward-looking environment-friendly approach towards preservation, this attempt of a modern state, indeed, was nothing but abuse of the right to privacy of a dying race. Chalesh led the movement against the desecration of his people's honour. He tried to explain that ancient

dwellers cannot be subjugated as tourist attraction. Some far eastern or western backpackers on vacation to satisfy their thirst for tranquility would be the last nail on their coffin. Their land cannot be a retreat for those who wish some time off from the maddening crowd and find the natives to be of as much interest for their postcards as the safari park itself, with its exotic greenery, red landscape, birds and animals, --- and their girls.

It was neither 1944 nor Auswitz, yet Chalesh was abducted to a concentration camp. He saw a modern state beating him to death. Using all their muscle and cruelty the powerful agents of the state blindfolded and tied up his hands and legs tied up the way hunters lay claim to a tiger. They put salt into the wounds made by their sharp knives, enjoyed throwing cold and hot water at him, perhaps using an edged olive branch to blind a tiger.

"My son disappeared and then flew towards

the sky to dazzle like a star. On starry nights I sit alone on a small hill to watch Chalesh twinkle from above. That makes me the happiest father on earth."

It's a relief to know that all these five bereaved fathers are content in the glory of their heroes. We were on the verge of concluding this roundtable discussion on a positive note when suddenly an old man stormed into the room wailing and crying for justice from God:

"Recently, my son, a simple and harmless boy, went to a voter registration centre to be part of the historic democratization of Bangladesh. My village was in festivities for being included in this process. In the middle of our joy someone ran into my house to tell me that my son has been killed and his body is lying in the police station. I was given three different versions of his death and then the officer in charge scolded me for fathering a miscreant. I cried and cried and told him that my son was innocent, a law

abiding man, he expected to be a voter, dreamt of getting a national identity card and sometime in future hoped to be able to choose his leader. He had a clean track record, that of a poor young man struggling to collect food for his family. A dead body cannot speak out but even truth didn't stand up for him. If only for truth we could have had the right to give him a crimson burial. All I got was a lift for his dead body in an olive jeep: 'so kind of you sir. You gave me the dead body. God bless you SIR!"

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His whole life pivots around those 30 seconds. How can that be? Does it mean that he was only alive for 30 seconds? Yes, indeed. He was way past my teens, yet one look at those gorgeous green eyes and the huge waves of Queen Mary in them capsized his little boat. He went down and down the ocean, lungs gasping for air but his heart knew that he wanted to follow those green lights into the tunnel of death. Unbelievably, he was happy to enter the

Monga Caravan

dark tunnel as long as he could cherish those silky 30 seconds between life and death.

You knocked the door of Room No. 49, the way an olive-dressed soldier knocks at the door of a lazy cadet for the morning parade. True enough, lazy bone was lying down with a velvet folk blanket covering him. He had come to Europe with this blanket stitched by his mother. Every morning he got up with the feel of his mother's fingers on his forehead. Half asleep, half awake, keeping the 14 inch TV running on some music channel running a collage of hip-hop, jazz, blues, heavy metal and Herbert Grunemeyer's Mensch whispering into his ears: someone is waiting outside. He was angry at this hasty knock; such morning-parade door-punching was the reason he had left military school. Through the eye glass he could see two hazel eyes behind spectacles with trifocal lenses, a round face drawn with a compass by the geometry god, Margaret Thatcher like nose but

with a light blue nose-pin and wheatish complexion complemented by the insufficient corridor light.

"Are you up for coffee," she used the trendy coinage meant for such occasions.

"Would you like to come in for a cup?" For him going out for coffee was nothing but an innocent open air theatre.

She refused to come in and he refused to go out. Opening the door to a mere 30 degree angle he craned his neck out till only his Adam's apple was visible and politely refused to go out with a platonic coffee-mate. You returned, unmoved by his uncouth behavior; perhaps it's for the best. He could be a fishy character typically interested in going out with an occidental fair lady. Back in your Room No. 52, kicking off your shoes you picked up Michael Moore's 'Down Size This' and enjoyed the writer's hilarious lampoon against the statue of capitalism. But much as you wanted you could not help wondering about the

occupant of No. 49. A few hours later you hit his room again with the anguish of a parade commander. This time he did come out in a chocolate coloured shirt, black trousers and careless pair of summer sandals ready to go out with you.

At McDonald's -- Ich liebe es - he sat at a corner table with all his laziness and chauvinism waiting for his cappuccino as any South Asian man would do. You were ok with that. In the spectrum of silence that followed, a man and a woman sat face to face playing an invisible game of chess.

"Do you have nothing to say?" she broke the barrier.

"What is there to say!"

"Anything. We can discuss the weather if you like."

"Actually I am sitting in front of my enemy."

"What!"

"In 1971 Pakistani soldiers killed five of my

uncles during our freedom struggle."

"I apologize for that."

"Should that be enough for me?"

"My father was in the Air Force at that time. He was asked to bomb Dhaka, but he went on sick leave to disobey that order."

Another spell of silence overtook the cubic table: green eyes staring at the busy street through the glass window and black eyes concentrating on the glass pyramid above. This attempt at distraction could not last for long. You started talking about garbage management. He was not interested in listening to this ecological discourse. You raised the issue of urban planning which he again found dry. You proposed joining a German language course but that too was wasted on him. Finally, weather was rolled out, but by that time he had retreated into his own world. Does it mean there was no area of commonness between you both? You had studied International Affairs, while he was an

English Lit major. You hated fiction, he loved it. Reading was your all-time preference, whereas he opted to sleep out his time. You were a confident woman, he a careless man. Slowly walking back to your rooms he couldn't even get through his door lock. After helping him out with that you entered your room right opposite his. The green carpeted corridor became an equator of melancholy.

Dateline Rendezvous

Neither one of you will ever accept it as a rendezvous. It was a restaurant at Clodwigsplatz covered with full-size portraits of Marilyn Monroe and Gregory Peck, a crowded joint full of nicotine emissions. You preferred to sit outside expecting to be interrupted by the cracking noises of U-bahn No 16. He still remembers you wearing an off-white jacket, your long hair falling across the back of the chair. The discussion never reached a rendezvous point as you were busy Bush-

bashing with conspiracy theories abound. On top of your height of imagination you were all praises for General Pervez Musharraf for driving away Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif into much-deserved exile. In your opinion, ruling under the garb of democracy both of them failed to provide any to the people of Pakistan.

How you could burden the light wind with your weird political theories was beyond him, especially when the chance to rush towards the Metropolis Cinema at Ebertplatz to catch *A Beautiful mind* was more tantalizing. You found him to be as autistic as that beautiful mind; alas he took it to be a compliment. Sitting next to him with salty popcorns and a diet coke you stopped him from making a sweeping comment on your weight.

"Kate Winslet, Monica Lewinsky and Sushmita Sen all look more beautiful because of their more than accepted weight," you casually mentioned. As you had the rarest habit of

freezing a light topic into a heavy one, he could never win his teasing match. Certainly you can recall him telling you: "that's a four and that's one's six."

He is not even forty now, yet recollects your memories like a 70-plus retired hunter. Amazing, isn't it? It was a wide windy concrete garden overlooking the U-bahn station where you held a huge Doner Kebap and the usual diet cola, and he a normal one. A Doner Kebap requires a broad mouth to be able to bite into it. With every bite you defied aesthetics. He tried to mention this fact once but you ignored the point of order. It was a clouded night.

The place was filled with the howling of drunken hobos; the welfare state had not been able to stop them from withdrawing from life. He was scared of those drunken dandies but you couldn't care less, referring to your reckless cantonment courage. You took him to your haunts; Galetaria Cafeteria for your favorite

strawberry ice-cream, needless to mention a diet one, and Ital Ice for Wiener Melange.

As I risk turning this story into an obvious food-chart, let me philosophize it to attract the post-modernists.

Revisiting Karl Marx

It was not at all a lucrative proposal for you to revisit Karl Marx, whose order has failed miserably. But you reluctantly agreed to go with him to Trier, Marx's birthplace, and were surprised to know that Karl Marx was not born in the once-communist and part of Germany. But yes, he had opened his eyes in an affluent family that was favored by history. Marx wanted to deconstruct that history in favor of the have-nots.

The tour of Trier was his way of paying tribute to Marx, Cuba his only place of pilgrimage. You made fun of him. He was tolerant:

"How would you feel that pain? You, the

offspring of feudal lords and military bureaucracy, whose father acquired a new piece of land with every posting, have been deprived of understanding the pain of the have-nots."

"Don't try to be unnecessarily reactionary, as if you represent the suppressed class. You have never even poured a glass of water for yourself. Left-leaning is a fashion, to show off that you are intellectually different from others."

Anyway, you didn't really want to break his heart so you offered to collect tickets for Trier. Too lazy to go with you, he believed that paying for them was enough. But you had had enough of male chauvinism, you payed for both.

It was really difficult for him to get up early to catch the Trier-bound train. Getting the promised wakeup call from you he started dilly dallying.

"Can't we go some other day? How about tomorrow morning? It's too cold today; Karl Marx museum could be closed for the day."

You knew how to handle an unwilling, lazy cadet; decided to shout like an army commander: "I was not the one to plan this trip and I am least interested in visiting Karl Marx. But since everything has been planned so just get up and splash water on your face. You are so scared of the cold, how will you and others like you bring about revolution against capitalism."

Reluctantly, he pushed himself out of bed and within 30 minutes knocked at your door. Repeatedly criticized for not even getting a glass of water for himself, he started clumsily making tea for two. You tried to stop him but he got stubborn and while sipping discovered it to be quite a salty cup of tea.

On the inter-city express he was unusually quiet, looking through his side of the window at the hills passing by, winter forests devoid of leaves, smoking chimneys of the countryside, and wide fields covered with blue or white plastic sheets to save baby corns from icy dew.

You were sleeping like a practiced commuter not wasting time in sight-seeing, reddish sunlight reflecting in your long, brown hair and the tiny shadow of your nose-pin resting on your cheeks. He wanted to discuss over Karl Marx, a befitting prologue to the visit but you were sleeping like a capitalist and the dream tycoon had no one to share the romanticism of revisiting the man who had ruled over him since his teenage.

While sleeping your head was slipping over and again. You wanted to offer your shoulder; a communist to a capitalist; no doubt a gesture of great symbolic value. "If it's not a problem you can rest your head on my shoulder..."

He was overwhelmed and speechless at the sight of Trier railway station. You broke his spell: "First Porta Nigara, the oldest Roman gate made from black stone, and then your museum."

"It's not my museum."

"Whatever. It's the same. Yours or Karl's. Don't get too emotional about it. I have been

generous in coming here with you. Try to reciprocate."

You collected the city tour guide, tickets for the tram tour and of course croissants with coffee. Lost in his own world, he walked the grounds of Marx, the old park bench where perhaps Marx used to sit and think about economic equality.

"How long will you remain lost? At least take my picture at this Porta entrance and I'll take yours."

You excitedly bought an ancient Roman coin that was part of the collection excavated at the Porta Nigara site.

"Tourists are the usual victims of such historical gimmickry," he said.

"Let it be a fake. Just don't tell me, I want to believe it's real."

You also bought a postcard, and sitting for diet strawberry pastry and more coffee, wrote animatedly like a school girl to your father:

Dear Dad,

I am in Trier, sitting in front of a Roman gate that is on UNESCO's world heritage list, and a heart-broken communist is hurrying me up into revisiting Karl Marx. I mean his museum.....

The manuscript of Das Kapital in a glass case at the museum stunned him. He wanted to feel it, more than he had ever wanted to touch a beautiful woman. The place was thrilling, mesmerizing. Even the pretty and stubborn capitalist was moved into exclaiming: "Look at the traces of fire that burnt down this place. I am sure an angry bourgeois did that, but the place has been renovated quite impressively."

You bought a poster of Karl Marx to appease his emotions, also to heal the wounds of communism lost. The museum tour had softened your voice: "Maybe Marx ought to be rethought. I think his followers didn't have the head to reshape his philosophy. Have you read that

Timeless skies

Russian short story in which a woman of fishermen's commune cooks fish for an equal society but is not allowed to give a tiny piece of fish fat to her baby crying with hunger. Extremism in every ism is its ultimate downfall."

The day scrolled into evening; talking, walking, smiling, sitting on a bench in front of the pink palace, neither of you got tired. But there was a train to catch. Glancing at the running sky from your window seat, you smiled and thanked him for taking you to Marx. By the way, journeying back you left the Karl Marx poster somewhere in the train; a train that suddenly lost its destination. He will never forgive you for that...