

Rashid Askari

A Slice of Sky

Selina understood nothing on the wedding night. She was overjoyed at the marriage. The event was a pleasure itself. She was married to the man who loved her and so did she. She could not believe her eyes. By a strange twist of fate, the man came into her life. This was beyond her wildest imagination to win him out right as her husband. But it turned into a tangible reality. A thing to see and be seen. The man was lying by her on the same bed. Her good man! Although little oldish, he was strong. A man of square build. Fairly tall and muscular, he had plump arms like a pair of rolling pins. His stubby fingers had tactile powers and Selina felt warm to their touch. When he would run them through hers and suddenly halted with a gentle press, she used to get electrified and shivered in an uncanny excitement. That man came into her possession. A lawful possession. Rightly registered and solemnized. Then was the turn of love-making. She was not feeling that shy with him like the coy village brides. She had known him for about a couple of years.

It was a winter month. Selina had just passed the secondary school certificate exam with 'Grade A+' from their village school. On a fresher's reception ceremony at their school, she received a medal from the hands of the chief guest. The chief guest stared at her with unblinking eyes. Selina felt a little bit uncomfortable under his gaze. She averted her eyes and hurriedly left the stage. But she could not escape the man. After the occasion, she was called back by her headmaster at his office room. She saw the man sitting on the

headmaster's chair with a placid smile. He had clean-shaven face and back-brushed wavy hair, dyed black. He was dressed in neat *khadi panjabi* with prominent ironed creases.

'You're Selina, right?' The man was all eyes.

Selina nodded.

'Do you know me?'

She shook her head.

The headmaster went pale with embarrassment and gave her a soft scolding.

'You're a fool. Haven't you heard of it on the mike?'

'No, no, she is never a fool.' The man tried to spare her blushes.

'A girl with 'Grade A+' cannot be a fool.' He turned towards Selina.

'You're far too intelligent. A lotus on the dunghill! Go ahead and make it. You must get to the top. You see, our premier is a woman. The opposition leader is a woman. There's no holding the women anymore.'

The man made a pregnant pause and resumed:

'By the way, I'm one of your well-wishers. If you happen to need my help any time, please let me know. I would be obliged.'

The man took a visiting card out of his wallet and stretched his hand towards Selina to give it.

Selina hung on his every word. Her face lit up. She had never heard such sweet words of advice in her life. But she did not know who the man was. What a howling shame! She felt like kicking herself. She did not know their MP. A young, smart, and public-spirited leader. Mr. Alamgir Hussain.

Selina saw Alamgir for the second time at their house on a dirty night. He appeared like a knight in shining armour to rescue the damsel in distress. The time was really critical for their family.

There were only twenty-four hours left. Either Selina would marry a local hoodlum in next twenty four hours or she would receive acid burns on her pretty face right away. Selina knew it was a Hobson's choice for her. This was the unwritten rule of the *char* (a sandy strip of land rising from a river bed). A tract of the jungle law and pecking order. The local people would live in daily fear of violence from hooligans. Her widow-mother did not want to quarrel with the crocodile living in water. But Selina opposed. She was not willing to suffer the consequence lying down. She could not kiss a goodbye to her 'Golden A +' so early. She made a call to Alamgir. No sooner said than done. Alamgir rushed to the spot before the situation reached bottom, and waved a magic wand. The hooligan turned so tame overnight that he knelt in supplication to Selina for unconditional pardon, and promised her full protection against other teases and flirts of the *char*. But he did not have to do that. In the wake of the incident, Selina was taken to the college hostel in the town.

Selina could not say 'no' to Alamgir's proposal for marriage. In fact, she was growing sadder when she came to know that such a good man was deserted by his wife. Before one year completely passed after their marriage, she had gone off with one of his friends. How did she have the heart to do that? A real bitch! And to prove that the man was not one to be thrown over, Selina agreed to marry him with gay abandon. Alamgir, however, reminded her of his unsuitability for a virgin like her. But she remained adamant. She would dedicate her life to the ministrations of the love-forsaken man. She felt she had achieved her heart's desire.

That long-awaited night fell on Selina at her mother's. She had heard many piquant stories about the bridal night. How the bridegrooms look for opportunities to prove their manhood by tearing the skin; how they beat a record for intimacy game, and how the pair drain themselves completely dry and sleep tight until next midday. But nothing like that happened to Selina. Alamgir seemed lost in some far-off world. He gave her a soft kiss on the forehead. Selina buried

her face in his broad chest. Two bodies cuddled up together under the same blanket.

‘Selina.’ Alamgir clasped her to his breast.

‘Umm!’ Selina closed her eyes in deep absorbedness.

‘Open your eyes. Look at me. Would you give me your word for one thing on this night?’ Alamgir asked yearningly.

Selina could not guess at what he meant. But she saw utter helplessness in his eyes.

‘I’ve already given you all my word.’ She wanted to reassure him.

‘No, no. There’s one thing more. The final oath you’ve to make and carry on.’ Alamgir wanted to settle something on the very first night.

‘I can do everything for you.’ Selina reaffirmed her loyalty to her husband.

‘Promise me, you won’t leave me. Never ever! Whatever happens!’ His body started shaking with sobs.

Selina could not make head or tail of what Alamgir said. Why the question of leaving had come before they well started. Maybe Alamgir was once bitten twice shy. He could not forget his first wife. But Selina stood no comparison with her. She held his head to her bosom with signs of consent. Alamgir heaved a sigh of release. A huge load was taken off his mind. He started rubbing his face across the deep valley of her large breasts like a pair of bowls upside down. Selina’s whole body caught fire. A quiver of excitement ran through it. She felt as if she were taking wings through the downy soft clouds like reed flowers flickering in the gentle breeze. That was an exquisite feeling she never had before. It multiplied at geometric progression while Alamgir’s crafty fingers were crumbling downwards along the graceful swells and curves of her body raising biological rhythms. Selina was soaking wet and greasy inside. But that was not enough. She wanted something more. She needed a spear to pierce her to the core. She required a hefty shove.

A big bang .That would sweep the high wave down the sea. But how? How to row out to the sea? Who is the rower? Where is the oar? Selina was waiting to get the feel of a stiff oar in Alamgir. But she did not have any. She was a boat without a rudder; a yacht without a mast floating on vast wanton waters. She could not sleep, and kept tossing and turning in bed all night. Unfed, the hungry tide was on the ebb.

Selina was brought to Dhaka. She got a flat to her name. A small flat on the top floor of a tall building. She could never think of her place of abode like this. Surely her mother would be very happy to see her in here. But she would not like her daughter to stay unaccompanied. A part-time maidservant did the housework everyday for a couple of hours. Then she was left alone. Alamgir stayed here two days a week. On Saturdays and Fridays. The other days were busy days he had to pass in the MP hostel. But it did not feel that bad to Selina. She never wanted a public figure to remain tied to her apron's strings. Besides, she had been a bit used to this semi-single life. She busied herself in sleeping, cooking, watching TV, listening to music, wearing make-up, and trotting from one room to another in bare feet. Sometimes she talked to her maid. The maid too chattered away happily. She was married with three children. Although her rickshaw-puller husband was a little lazy, he could make love to her heart's content. She wanted to go into detail, but Selina stopped her. At night when silence reigned, she sat in her armchair at the balcony for hours gazing space.

These days Selina would feel a sense of misgiving about Alamgir. He seemed to have changed his spots. He would arrive home late. His breath would smell of alcohol. Selina asked him the reason. Alamgir made a quick excuse on medical grounds, and to skirt around the matter gave her a smack on the lips. He moved forward. Selina did not resist. Nor did she take an active part. She did not want to be on heat without a cooler. She kept lying like an insensate log. Alamgir used up all his energy to kill the itch of his wife. But his power flagged in the mid-stream. His forehead was beaded with

sweat. The sound of the speedily moving fan seemed to be mocking at his repeated tries and failures. But he did not give up. He kept trying to fill it out with his trusted fingers. Selina felt turned off. That had become far more unbearable. She did not want them any longer. She wanted to swallow up the real thing and feel its predatory movement inside her. She wanted to be drenched by a strong volcanic eruption which would make her heavy with a sweet little life.

But Alamgir did not admit that he was not a good stayer. He rather tried to justify their mode of love-making. He argued that hundreds of thousands of couples across the world make congress the same way. He sang the praises of her purity and compared her with the ancient mythical women of sexual fidelity who had sacrificed their womanhood at the altar of their husband's happiness. Selina believed his flattering remarks for a long time. But flattery could not get him everywhere. Now Selina realized all this was a thumping great lie! She had a hundred and one ways to prove this. But Alamgir was the last man to let them be out. It made no difference whether he was present at or absent from his flat. Round the clock Selina was kept under prying eyes. Everything she did – from getting up from bed to going to it – was as it were, monitored by a close-circuit camera. Whatever she should do was bossed about by frequent cellular instructions. Nowhere did she feel private, even in the bathroom. Selina was sick of all this regimentation. She knew the reason for this. She was a bird with wings clipped. She had nothing to fly into except for her husband.

Sometimes Selina thought if the problem was with herself. Maybe she could not wake up the man in him. Weren't her parts provocative enough to her partner? She observed herself closely in the large cheval glass. A tall, buxom blonde! The front and behind were plumper, but they are not inclined to hang limp. Although not matched up with the slender figure of the Hollywood heroines with prominent collar bones, these extra large parts tickle the fancy of the

Bengali male and give added kicks. But Selina was a cursed devotee. Her bountiful offerings were going down the drain.

Selina was tired. She felt the yawning gap growing between the two souls under the same roof. With the passage of time, the gap was widening. Nothing more could do her heart any good. She now realized why Alamgir was so possessive about her. He wanted her to always keep her virginity. He had chosen her as his bride only on this ground. While the girls of her age are past master of hugs and kisses, she could not even hold his hands before marriage. If asked she looked down at the ground at her feet and dug holes with her toenails. Her purity was vindicated by her inexperience. It made the marriage safe and inevitable for the powerless man. The venison is the worst enemy of the deer herself. Alamgir did not as such want to take any more risk. His first wife must have had adequate experience.

Nowadays Selina felt betrayed deep down in her soul. She realized that she was playing the part of a helpless heroine in a package play. The hero was the director himself. Selina's role was to dedicate her carnal pleasure to the whims of a modern deity, who like the Olympian gods was playing ducks and drakes with her life. She had to stomach this quite uncomplainingly. She knew if she abandoned his god, she could not endure his wrath. Even then, many times she thought of leaving him. She was sure she would not get from him what she was hungry for. She did not even get the starvation diet for her flesh. She was really luckless. She did not cry for the moon. She longed for something very natural. It was true that Alamgir had raised her from rags to riches. He had given her everything a woman needed to live it up. Posh apartment with fashionable furniture, chauffeured car, ornamental clothing, fancy food -- everything. All what a woman needs to keep herself happy. She could wrap her whole body in sterling gold for the asking. But all these moveable and immovable properties weighed lighter than the load of the aching void in her heart. This agony microbe was eating into her duchy all the time. Day in day out, she felt empty in the pit of her

stomach! Her village-cousin-- who was routinely abused and beaten by her husband, her maid--the rickshaw puller's wife, and even the wife of the legless beggar on the Farmgate Flyover might have countless vacuums in their lives, but they were full.

The country was going through a hard time. The army-backed Caretaker Government had taken its control after the fall of Khaleda regime. The administration was so powerful that it made tigers and buffalos drink water at the same pond. They had taken a solemn vow to make a clean sweep of the country. Law enforcers were put on red alert. All-- from ex premiers to present peons—were on the suspect list. But it lay heaviest on the politicians. The two major party chiefs were under house-arrest. People were calling it 'Minus 2 theory'. Combing operations were going on across the country to nab the criminals. Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and Police were making frequent swoops and netting them in shoals. Some were held in custody with their families. Selina was totally unconcerned with all these state-affairs. All of a sudden, a news bulletin on the satellite TV caught her attention.

“One so-called 'yabaa queen' by the name of Sonia has been arrested from her Gulshan apartment. She is a popular model girl. In police remand she has admitted her involvement in *yabaa* trafficking. She has also mentioned that Alamgir Hossain is her husband who has made a mint of money during their political ascendancy. Sonia and Alamgir are married five years. Police are searching for Alamgir.”

Selina turned a deathly shade of white when she heard the news. The whole flat started swimming before her eyes. She sat down a moment and tried to compose herself. She no longer felt the slightest sympathy for Alamgir. Enough is enough! She resolved to leave him without further delay. It was midnight. Tomorrow morning she would leave the flat. She would directly go to Dublar *char*. Her sweet village! To her affectionate mother! She could easily find work at the local BRAC School. It would not be so difficult to have her fill. Selina breathed a long sigh of relief. She went to the

balcony, and stood by the railings. It was a wonderful moonlit night. She looked upwards. The sky came into her view. A slice of sky! Clear and cloudless!

Dr. Rashid Askari is a bilingual author, fictionist, columnist, media personality and the current vice chancellor of Islamic University, Kushtia Bangladesh.

Askari emerged as a writer in the mid-1990s and by now wrote 7 books and lots of articles/essays *on a* great variety of themes ranging from national to international, colonial to postcolonial, which have been published at home and abroad.

His two Bengali books: *Indo-English Literature and Others* (Dhaka-1996) and *Postmodern Literary and Critical Theory* (Dhaka-2002) and two English books: *The Wounded Land* (Dhaka 2010) and the edited book *English Writings of Tagore* (3 vols) Dhaka 2012, deserve special mention. His short fiction collection *Nineteen Seventy One* (New Delhi--2018) has been translated into Hindi and French. Currently, he is at work on an English fiction.

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