

Translation Folio

RUMA MODAK

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Translator's Introduction

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RUMA MODAK BEGAN AS A young poet, is a stalwart in theater (over the last two decades she has written, directed and acted in at least twenty stage productions), and now writes fiction as well—her third short story collection came out in 2018. She has won awards for her pioneering role in theater (she and her husband, both theater activists, continue to play a seminal role in rejuvenating the local theater world in their region), as well as for her fiction.

She also happens to be that rare creature in the Bangladeshi literary sphere: someone whose creative life is centered away from Dhaka, the capital not only of the nation, but also assumed to be the hub of all significant creative output and activity. To this world, Modak brings a creative vision that is rooted in “outsider” sensibility—because she is a woman, because she is Hindu (a religious minority in a Muslim majority nation), and because she chooses to make her creative home in the periphery, rather than the center.

Modak prefers to tell the truth the Emily Dickinson way: aslant. In her essay “Tell It Slant” the poet Camille Dungy writes that “good poems weird the truth, rearrange it, re-present it, cause us to re-envision the past, to rememory (to borrow Toni Morrison’s word) our own history.” Modak takes themes that aren’t uncommon (a girl trying to figure out where and how she fits in the world of the boy she likes in this instance), adds a complication (it’s an interfaith relationship) and then makes the situation a little more awry, layering on topics of shame, culture, dominance, etc.

In a recent interview, Modak spoke of how essential it is for the writer to be more than a “loyal commentator,” arguing that storytelling that must move beyond mere reportage. In this, she is one of a newer generation of Bangladeshi women writers, who have moved away from defining femaleness with victimhood; or perhaps a better way to state it is that they’ve not moved away (because in a highly patriarchal culture such as that of Bangladesh’s, gender shapes destiny for many if not for most), but that they have moved beyond, that they have—finally—moved towards capturing the messiness of what it means to be a woman when one’s sense of self is cut through with the realities of gender, faith, ethnicity, class.

This story is a bright example of being aslant—while the reader is lulled into considering cultural differences between two young people brought up in different faith traditions and also inhabiting a rural/urban divide, through a minor character’s actions, she deftly inserts the larger question of what it means to exist as a minority woman in a world that is communal and patriarchal in how it dominates. The main

character, an urban, educated woman, and the minor character are twisted reflections of each other. A tale that is about an intercultural romance becomes inextricably tied to the story of the violence that is routinely visited upon religious minorities in Bangladesh, because that is the reality that religious minorities exist within. But in Modak's world, this complicated, complex, untidy world, a single question gets explored from a multitude of angles: which one is a more embarrassing topic?

When I read this story the first time, I was left to ponder: how much story can a single story hold?

One of the delights of being a literary translator is the privilege of introducing writers to a different language readership for the first time; this story is the first time Ruma Modak has been translated into English. I have a sense that it won't be the last.

RUMA MODAK : A Story

An Embarrassing Topic

THAT TIME THE VOTE HAPPENED. That time? Which time was that time? Well, why do they need to know all these dates and times anyway? Year after year goes by, they feel no need to make sure precisely when the elections will take place. But when the elections are close, the ‘candidates’ visit the village more frequently, canvassers flock everywhere, and even though they don’t really need to, they still know that voting day is coming up.

That time, on election day, they bathed early in the communal pond, decked themselves up in oils-*sindoor*-creams-powders and, with their toddlers in tow, queued up to cast their votes at *Temunia Government Primary School*. The men in one line, the women in another. When their toddlers thrashed about on the ground, bawling to be allowed to vote, they took them to the polling officers to get their thumbs inked and told them, “There, that’s a vote.” And, after buying them bags of chips from the nearby store, they left. Back home, the women turned their television sets on straightaway, and only then did they begin their cooking on the coal- and wood-fired stoves, and because it was election day, the television station broadcast movies and song numbers all day, and they watched until their lentils burned in the pots, but what could be done, after all, it wasn’t every day that the television station showed movies and song numbers. The fathers of their children ate the burnt lentils while their eyes too remained glued to the screen. The day went well up to that point; the trouble began in the evening. Who knows who won the election, or who lost, but the young men raised a din as they entered the neighborhood and first they set fire to Montu’s home, and then they smashed the black and white television set and the mango-wood kitchen safe at Gonsha’s to smithereens, and then they grabbed Niyoti by the hair and, dragging her behind them, they clambered onto the stoop of the Radha Madhab temple and chopped off the deity’s hair and split open its head as they hollered and whooped . . . the racket continued throughout the night.

(Although the connection between this topic and that other, embarrassing topic may seem irrelevant on the face of it, perhaps the reader will comprehend how relevant it is by the end of this story.)

MONA OVERHEARD THE conversation between the two unwittingly. She had not meant to eavesdrop. That she did, was just a coincidence. Mona wasn’t supposed to be home when the maidservant Parbati was talking to the mistress of the house Rajlakkhi Debi. Nishi, Duti and Mona had gone out earlier to visit the Christian Mission that

stood within walking distance of the house. Built during the British era, the Mission boasted superb architecture. Mona had left Nishi and Duti and hurried back, cutting her visit short, because she really needed to go to the bathroom. But neither Parbati nor Rajlakkhi Debi knew that. Mona was sure that if they had known she could hear them, they wouldn't have discussed the issue at that moment. No, her certainty didn't bank on the traits of the residents of this still-unfamiliar household. Instead it relied on the fact that the topic of their conversation was so embarrassing, common sense dictated that no one would have the poor taste to have Mona overhear the discussion.

She had met the inhabitants of this household for the first time just two days ago; except for one person. That one person was the thread that had pulled her to this house and its denizens.

Parbati was leaving no gaps in her attempts to explain to the octogenarian Rajlakkhi Debi just how deep ran the relationship between Mona and that one person. Which is why, when Parbati was mixing truth and lies, adding a smudge of lewdness, Mona's face burned in that stifling room. From what she overheard, it hadn't seemed to her that Rajlakkhi Debi, the elderly matriarch of this household after whom the house itself was named, was encouraging Parbati with questions. But because she couldn't see her at that moment, Mona couldn't gauge her true reaction.

The girl Parbati was clever, truly clever. But her cleverness came with a provincial, indecent curiosity and unbearable garrulity. Mona had realized this as soon as she reached *Rajlakkhi* and tried to be as careful as possible in her behavior and her speech. She barely spoke directly or one-on-one to Shomeer. Even if she was chatting with others and he was there, she kept herself at a distance, at times more so than her friends Nishi or Duti. Even though she had yearned to listen to the song "On this moonlit night, everyone has gone to the forest," while sitting on the moonlight-drenched roof of Shomeer's centuries old home, she had curbed her desire. She curbed her longing to clasp Shomeer's hand and get her feet wet in the waterfall flowing right beside the house. Still, when Shomeer's sister-in-law showed up bearing fluffy *luchis* and milk-curd *dalna* for afternoon tea, and they were all so excited—"Look, look, these aren't your Aziz Market luchis, just see how soft and tasty they are! *Arrey*, these are the real deal! Those things that we eat at Aziz Market are clones, luchi clones!"—Shomeer had smiled with pursed lips and said, "Come on, eat! Think of this as your own house!" and placed more luchis on Mona's plate. Even if no one else noticed it, Mona didn't miss triumph overwhelm suspicion in Parbati's eyes at that moment. She even discussed it with Nishi and Duti. They pooh-poohed her. "Forget about her, an s-e-r-v-a-n-t! Why give her so much importance?" Mona hadn't wanted to grant her such importance. But the mysterious smile glued to her face, her darting gaze, her uninvited curiosity and sidling up too close—all of it seemed calculated. There was no way to not grant her importance. At one point she even told Shomeer, "That maidservant of yours is too clever by half . . ."

Shomeer took the chance to deliver a little jab. “What, you’ve already started complaining about your in-laws?”

Although the issue resolved itself in jokes for the moment, it didn’t end there. Like scaling a mountain but stumbling on a lump of earth, her whole visit became complicated because of Parbati.

It would be inaccurate to say that Shomeer had told her just before they came here, rather it was from the very beginning of their relationship that he had given her an idea about the issue. It wasn’t exactly conservatism. These were customs—rural, aristocratic Hindu families had to observe certain customs. Mona had prodded him. “*Eish*, now you’re trying to lessen your culpability by labeling it aristocracy! Just call it what it is—conservative.” Mona had known even before they had arrived that they couldn’t tell his family about her relationship with Shomeer yet. Yes, she had had an inkling; but no matter what you called it, whether conservatism or orthodoxy, she hadn’t been able to imagine just how deep and how far those roots spread.

If one didn’t look for it though, those roots were hard to see from outside. Nishi and Duti hadn’t. From outside, everything was neat and tidy. There was no lack in the hospitality or affection or sincerity offered to them. His family said, “Who knows what they feed these poor girls in those dorms!” And Shomeer’s elder brother brought home a whole *khashi*-goat, while his sister-in-law made *patishapta*, stuffed sweet crepes. His mother sent out for all the ingredients needed to make *bilsa* fish *polao*. But because of her relationship with Shomeer and her intense desire to take that relationship toward a conclusion, Mona’s probing eyes had placed the atmosphere and the people of *Rajlakkhi* under scrutiny ever since her arrival. Father, mother, brother, sister-in-law, the various uncles and aunts, the cousins scattered all over Europe and America—Mona had tried to get to know them, had tried to get an idea, without letting anyone guess, just how unsuitable, or perhaps suitable, she was for Shomeer whose roots dug so deep here, in *Rajlakkhi*.

The closer and deeper Mona observed the place, the more dispirited she felt. Again and again, her love of three years lost itself in waves of indecision, hesitation, and diffidence. Although Shomeer had laughed it off. “Forget about it! Everything will turn out fine once we’re married.” What would turn out fine? The *pooja* platform was set out in the yard; every day the priest came to light the ghee-drenched wick of the five-flamed lamp to perform the *aarti*; the surroundings were permeated with the fragrance and fumes of incense; the women of *Rajlakkhi* sat in a long line spanning the veranda, even Parbati in a corner; and the other day when Mona stepped foot on the veranda every single one of them had shouted at her, even Shomeer—Mona had been mortified. If Mona entered this Hindu household as a daughter-in-law, would that situation change overnight? Would Mona be able to climb onto the veranda without hesitating? If her stepping foot on the veranda made them lose caste now, wouldn’t their loss of caste continue to be a problem later?

After that experience, Mona's gaze became even more probing, searching for cracks. She noticed that the leftover food in the bowls that were so carefully arranged for them on the table never made it back to the kitchen. In the dying afternoon, Parbati tossed the leftovers into the pond, cleansed the plates and bowls, and bathed before she reentered the house. Mona still hadn't been able to figure out exactly where the kitchen was. Their comings and goings were limited to the two or three rooms in the outer part of the house. As if an invisible wall separated the rest of the rooms within the inner quarter. Rajlakkhi Debi herself never entered the room they were staying in; she stood outside and talked to them. No matter how many times they invited her, they had failed to get her to step foot in their room.

Neither Nishi nor Duti took Mona seriously when she mentioned these things. Instead, they had saddled her with the blame. "Oh my, just look at how sincere these people are! What's the point of stirring the pot looking for bad smells!" Mona couldn't quite explain her need to look for bad smells. Just as her relationship with Shomeer was entirely personal, the plan to take that relationship to a conclusion was also very much her own. So why not keep the need to stir the pot also to herself, if only to reach an understanding with herself?

But how could it remain private and personal after what happened today? Initially, Mona hadn't wanted to tell anyone. But when she couldn't find the things even after she looked, she was forced to tell Nishi and Duti. And, later, even Shomeer. She couldn't find either of the two pairs of panties she had brought with her.

Mona remembered quite clearly that she had spread them out to dry on the veranda clothesline and covered them with her blue scarf. She searched inside their room, the bathroom, their bags, the veranda, every nook and cranny, and finally, when she still couldn't find her panties, Mona had to tell them. Because they still had two more days here. The panties were an essential element of her urban habits, almost impossible to go without. She had no choice but to tell Shomeer; who knew where the shops or marketplaces were located in this small town that was more like a village? And now it was this act of telling Shomeer that Parbati was presenting to Rajlakkhi Debi as indisputable evidence of the relationship between the two of them. "Oh, *Didima!* Does a woman share such shameful talk with a man, unless he's her husband! I saw it with my own eyes, she was falling all over *Cbhoti Dada*, touching him and whatnot as she told him about it!" Although she had gone on secret dates with Shomeer on campus, Mona hadn't spoken to him with any intimacy since their arrival here. She had been so careful and restrained, and now, listening to the prurience in Parbati's description, she felt so ashamed she wanted to hide.

When Shomeer's father returned from the market that evening, a huge meeting convened in the living area, with Shomeer at its center. Such meetings around the television set were regular events in this household. It was nothing out of the ordinary. But, unerringly, Mona observed the deep shadow darkening everyone's faces on this

particular evening. Nishi and Dutti were busy with Facebook, uploading photos from their morning's jaunt to the Christian Mission. It was pointless to try and explain it to them. These truly intimate, personal problems were never as important to others as they were to oneself. Mona noticed Shomeer was sitting there with his head bowed, as if he was at fault. It pricked her inside, more because of the issue itself than for Shomeer. So, among those comments and the rejoinders, none of which Mona could hear from over here, was the shameful topic of Mona's lost panties rearing up again and again? Perhaps not. But by now everyone must know that the reason behind this sudden change of atmosphere was that embarrassing topic. How humiliating!

The remaining time Mona spent at *Rajlakkhi* felt joyless, miserable, lifeless, unbearable. Apart from Shomeer's *Bou-di*, his sister-in-law, no one came outside to bid them farewell. As she walked them to the gate, *Bou-di* continued to sing that old song of what an aristocratic lineage her in-laws held, how they had preserved that pedigree and distinction through the generations. Because a daughter of this family had married a *Shudra*, a low-caste man, her father had invited guests over and held her funeral. Mona understood why she was telling them these stories at this moment.

As Shomeer walked them to the station, the dour expression on his usually radiant face seemed unfamiliar to her. In her head she tried to tally it up: just what kind of existential crisis would this family be plunged into by welcoming a Muslim girl as their daughter-in-law, just how would the fear of public disgrace break them? Shomeer was a sapling that had sprung from the deepest roots of their customs and traditions. No matter how irrational their orthodoxy, just how far could Shomeer be separated from it? And would that even be right? Without the joy of family, friends, celebrations, gatherings, what need was there to bind a person within the social ritual of 'marriage'? How long could a person remain immersed in the infatuation of love—an emotion whose hidden truth was carnality. This conflict between her feelings for Shomeer and the culture she had just witnessed so closely distressed her. She placed her hand on Shomeer's and he covered it with his. He said, "You know, last night my mother clasped my feet and wept; she begged me not to destroy our beautiful family." Mona remained silent, while in Shomeer's tearful eyes, the shadows of devotion and distress could be read quite clearly. Overnight, an embarrassing topic had laid bare reality, had exposed the brutality of truth. A brutality that Mona had had no inkling of while watching theater at the Shilpakala Academy or eating luchis at Aziz Super Market.

WHEN EVERYONE HAD left, utter silence descended all across the house. As if it was a neighborhood devastated by a sudden tornado. Rajlakkhi Debi paced from one room to another by herself. The guest room had just been scrubbed clean and tidied up. As she entered, she spotted Parbati examining something with her back towards the door. "What's that in your hands, eh? Show me, come on, show it!" Rajlakkhi Debi's voice contained a familiar displeasure. Parbati knew that although most people tolerated her

habit of pilfering small things now and then, Rajlakkhi Debi couldn't stomach it. No matter how Parbati tried to hide it, Rajlakkhi Debi caught her out. "This—this is what you stole? You slut, how dare you!" Blinded by rage, the old, long-unused obscenity slid out of her mouth. Parbati began weeping helplessly. There would be no saving her today. She began pleading in desperate tones to try and extricate herself from this trouble, "Oh, *Didima*, you know that time when the votes were done and they kidnapped Niyoti and another girl from the *Nama Shudra* neighborhood, my mother ripped my father's *lungi* into rags and she wrapped me down there, under my pants before she hid me in the jute fields, oh, *Didima*. If the elections happen again, this time, *Didima*, I'll wear these before I hide . . ."