

ADAPTATIONOriginal story: *Avijon* (in Bengali)

by

Tamal BandyopadhyayTranslation: *Adaptation*

by

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As I grew older, I came to know that they call my father mad. He lives in a corner house. From under the pale, shabby curtain hanging from the door, a light not more than sixty watt bulb spreads all over the premises. Truly, I do not have any other connection with my father except that strip of light. Deep at night, in the thick darkness that little ray of light becomes more manifest and then I come down to stand in that lighted part of the premises. At best the light could touch my knees only. Then it feels that standing in knee-deep water I am waiting for someone. I was unable to move any further because I did not know swimming. Moving farther than this might drown me. So long at night the bulb burns, so long its light lies with face on the premises, a belief gets a reliable support out of looking at it during that time----- behind that pale shabby curtain lives a man who is told to be my father. So long I became conscious about it that blackish yellow light came to be synonymous with my father. The touch of that lukewarm piteous light gives me goose bumps; fascinated, I stand motionless until a low, wet voice of my mother touches my ears. Since my childhood my mother has been telling me not to go into that room. Why? In the process of turning these values over, sometimes I really become very curious. Just then, softly pulling aside the curtain with a mild stroke of my fingers I mop my eyes all around the room. When the two eyes return to me again after cleaning the room quickly like floor mops, they seem to be so much unclean, filthy and pale. My eyes get tired of touching the paleness smeared all around the room. Now I let my eyelids sink down. And again I let my eyes go around the room. The man sitting in that easy chair at the corner of the room is my father. That calm lonely deserted creature did not get the slightest indication when his movement ceased in these sultry bounds of the room. I do not have any kind of respect towards this man. No invisible thread of attraction; never ever took him as my own. So whenever I see this man the thought of a grey spider comes into my mind----such elaborate webs are woven around it .Is it the spider that creates the webs with its spittle or is it that it loves living in these webs of soot and dirt? That I do not know. These thoughts never permitted me to cross the door step. Because, I do not know why, I was overcome with the thought that I would be stolen into the web like the tiniest weak creature as soon as I enter the room. And that indifferent, wanton spider would head towards me on its two greyish front legs. The more I try to extricate myself the more I will get trapped into the nets. In this way an unbearable grey fear gets growing in me ----folds me tight, wraps me round, I struggle to breathe. Instantly I drop the curtain down. Again I see the same pale light from that sixty watt bulb scattered on the premises. In fact the grey of that room that touched the bulb has created a huge gap between our minds. Like a hill far off. It looks near but how much one may walk up the road seems unending.

That is not at all a light. As if it is a face of darkness. If the face of darkness was moulded by darkness itself, then the word 'face' would have no meaning at all. The way an idle, unwanted cat lies on its soft belly in the premises, the pale light, in the same way, spreads its soft, slothful body with the fall of night. At day time that unbearable light is not visible anymore and then when I am a little lost in my thought, I forget all about that room, or, force

myself to forget it. Because in the world of this part lives my mother----austere, mild, calm like the marble slabs forsaken on the ghats of the Ganges at Haridwar. There is an awfully stone hard appearance on the layer of her facial skin ----expressionless, grave. The least trace of crinkle needed for the mildest of smiles was never seen on her face. The way the little raindrops thrashing down in momentum from the breast of a highly saturated cloud becomes a humble stream, in the same way all my uneven peaks of excitements soften down to a tranquil plain as soon as I look up my mother. As soon as my spiralling thoughts start spinning, they all move into the centre after coming near my mother. Obviously there are reasons for this submission. In fact I draw all my circle of thoughts keeping that point at the centre. The more the radius widens the more the circumference expands. With the circle enlarging, frightened, I rush back to the very centre again. But as time advances, I quite feel that I am slowly moving out of the centre. The tiny melodic particles of the Purbi raga played on the gramophone laid at the corner house are scattered in the air. I quite understand that slowly I am moving out of the centre towards that room. As the *ustaad* sang full throat, the heavy melodic molecules of the raga *Purbi* were mixing with the comparatively lighter air in this room. Slowly the air is growing thicker. As soon as I hear the very tune, it feels that, all the nerve cells are scattered in the air, opening the lid of my skull, very much like the seeds of *shimul* fruits as they burst across the belly. Blown in the air ...I could not catch them at all. The predominance of *meer* notes in the raga pricks me like the sharper ends of the broken glasses. The shabby gramophone makes scratching sound. That awkward sound, mixing ceaselessly with the tune, seems to be indispensable to such weird atmosphere. As the *alaap* is born out of some materials of that room, it would sound abnormal had it not some bother been mixed with. As the bulb burns at night, as the music of that *alaap* plays in the day, we three live in this big red brick house. If they were not there, my father would have never been existent to me. My father exists because these things exist. I find a pale man in that vapid light; in that *alaap* of raga purbi, I discover a lonely pitiable introvert detached person. My forefather left me nothing except this tumbling red brick house, this *poita*, sticky holy thread worn by the Brahmin, this title of Chattopadhyay at the tail of my name and an Aryan trace in the pigmentation of my skin. Oftentimes as I distribute my palm over my thin chest, it feels that my ribs are like those two noisy window shutters of this house. The white part of my eyes has no brilliance left, nor do I possess any flamboyance natural to a teenager. My nature is as grave as that of my mother. I do not quite feel laughing. There is no beating of drums in any corner of my brain. I hear a ceaseless chirping of crickets from the shrubs of a winter evening. Unagitated, forlorn excitements load my head. With stooping head I walk. No repentance if days pass like this. I have adapted with the environment of the room. I have adapted with the eternal silence, the darkness and this grave atmosphere of this room. Loneliness has got a veritable beauty of its own ---it's delightful sitting in one's own self. To sink deep into the water bed and sit there for long is a matter of hard practice. At first people fail, so also me. But, now, I can. I can sit in the same way for a long time together. It has been a hell of a game for me. I can vouch for me that few my age can play this game as deftly as me. The most important thing is I never complain against all this. But, very often, when I catch sight of the life beyond the window, the blood in the artery starts surging more powerfully than ever. Beyond the window there is tender yellow sunlight, a tar coated road running busily, a green stretch of playground not far off, by the margin of it rises the proud two storey house of Koustav's, in the railing hangs colourful clothes, downstairs stands their blue colour scooter so boastfully, and moreover he has got the reflection of the sun against his hugely confident and glamorous skin. This self composed life of mine has somehow got

adapted. But in an instant I think, if I were not me but someone else, say, I was Dr. Mukherji's son Kaustav. Quite possible. I do not like to go to play in the evening. Rather I sit myself on the cement slab by the park and see others play. My friends, having grabbed my heart like a football, jump across the field. And I most indifferently sit on the cement slab with my legs cradling down.

The fact is I am very lean, very timid, and scared to hit a shot at the football. Sometimes when people laugh at some incidents, even then, only to show courtesy, there might be a little changes in my facial lines. If someone happens to ask me: how are you? How is your mother? Father...? I just press a chuckle and say 'quite well'. There are some social advantages of being average. I know that there is no bright future awaiting me ahead. As I grow older I will achieve no glory. No scholar cared to make comments on my future as a student of serial number thirty two. I am just lucky enough that my mother has bet no big claim on me. She is not at all concerned about my studies nor does she put me under any pressure unnecessarily. Never put me on oath---you have to be like someone, say doctor engineer and the like. And if she at all dwells with any of such hopes, nothing can be done now. Since my childhood I have been an inmate of such dark and dumb surroundings or have learnt moving my limbs here, I do not have perhaps any ambition in life. In escaping myself from all kinds of worldly worries, I cannot explain how much happiness I find.

Answers, in fact kill the questions. So I do not try to find out any answer at all. The sharp headed pins teething out of the question prick me. But I never grope for the answer lest the question should be harmed.

My mother has a very thin voice. Unless she is loud enough, it is hard to get her. Necessity, generally gives birth to a process. Nobody in this house feels it necessary to speak out. In fact there is no potent fact here to speak of. Often I heard my mother sing a few lines like, *bela gelo tomar patho cheye/ sunya ghate eka ami* (time passes looking at your path/waiting alone on the forlorn river bank) and so on. She could sing only that much. All other things on earth might not be as essential, as that song to her. Maybe that white clad sage poet composed the song in *purbi* raga keeping in mind of such a situation. Whenever she is busy with her cooking, a worn out radio set plays on very softly beside her. The radio halts playing in between. One or two slap upon it will run it again.

There was a time when my mother used to sing. Now her harmonium is kept aloft on the wall rake. Covered with an off white wrapper. I, more than often, have taken down the harmonium and found one or two reeds missing. Dust gathered for not being used since long. The hollow of the harmonium where music is born, where with each press of the reeds sounds blend to create the lyric, is now covered with cobwebs.

My mother is very fair. She is immaculate from head to toe. The two eyes are as placid as a silent village pond in the evening. There is no other colour in her shabby *saree* except for a few blue threads in the yarn. No colour to be found from her vermilion spot, along the margin of her *saree* to her wrist ---no trace of colour. My mother wraps up the black shawl quickly to go to open door when there is a knock on it. There is no alternative of that black shawl to cover up her threadbare *saree*. And black sucks up all other colour. She was reluctant to wear a white shawl because white reflects all colours, whereas black sucks up instead.

No photographs of my parents' conjugal life are there on the walls of our house. So I have never seen them young. As I kept on growing, my mother had been the same and my father..... I heard from my mother that my father once taught English at a Higher Secondary school. He was grave by nature, a chain smoker, loved being lonely---things like these about him. Nothing more than this I knew about him. Perhaps my mother too-----not much. The

reason might be that my mother had no relation with him at all. Who is to be held responsible for such a situation? I got no answer from my mother. It might be possible that she knew a lot, some hard facts. Perhaps my mother thinks that I am not old enough to face those grave truths.

However, as there is no near solution at my disposal to this very prominent and distinctly visible situation, it is better for me to remain inactive and immature as far possible. Sometimes I feel I could snatch up the root of this life of stupor, inertia and motionlessness. It's not that I have not tried at all. But, soon it has outstretched its root work very deep into the earth. Carried by emotion, when I try to pull those roots hard, I feel exhausted, heavily sweat through the pores. A vain attempt.

Some stories do not mature to an ending. No rising point or climax. Some stories may mean nothing or may mean a lot.

One day I had a small conversation with my mother. But my mother's brief but impenetrable answers were so heavy compared to my tender queries that they could never put their heads up over the water level. I asked her ---ma, do you like all these?

What all these?

This...! that we have nothing at all.

What is that we do not have?

I could answer back, I could make more queries. But I stopped dragging the conversation for I got the answer I expected. Some questions are themselves the proper answers. So it is foolish to grope for any answers out of them. And I in particular never ever try to find out any answer. Because every answer kills the question finally. Truly, these are no question at all. I can never fathom the depth of my mother's thought. Sometimes, dive into the curiosity, but land beneath the feet is shifting. Run short of breath; throat gets choked. Out of water I settle on dry land.

My mother said, "Do not enter that room". Why? The reason maybe I was very young. Perhaps I was not old enough to face that ruthless, grave question. Now I am fifteen years and one month old. The eleventh of the last month that is on 11 September I had my birthday. My birthday is no "happy birthday". Just a date of birth. Fifteen years back I was born on that date. Since that date now, my mother has been placing her quiet and kind hand on my head at least fifteen times on this 11 September at about 10:30 before noon. Putting her cold hand on my head for about one minute, she murmurs something inaudible. Some mantras? No, she never believed in mantras. Then why at all she would choose that particular figure of blessing. But that very moment I feel her hand heavier than ever. Especially last time I felt that I will be flattened under the pressure of her hand; I might get swallowed deep into the earth, my body crumpled. And just then, as expected, I become bloodless in fear, start crouching in, find an escape.

But as a kite in the remotest corner of the sky is tied to its spool, in the same way I am inevitably fastened to this bond. Because my story is not a story of the kite cut off from its thread. It is rather a story of indifferent flying while tied to its spool. Somewhat a monotonous unchallenged flight in a stark blank sky. Tired, I will wind back to the spool again or to my centre.

Some stories are of square shape or of a pencil not sharpened. The two ends of a pencil connect in a parallel line. The pencil having sharpened, the end converges into a tip. If those two parallel lines, in the same way, could converge to a meeting point, all my problems would have been solved. But it's better to let you know that the two parallel lines of this story

found no such apt point worth meeting at. Perhaps I do not have that extreme self belief to become such a worthy and flawless point; I do have, perhaps.

Really I do not know what I am capable of and what I am not. As I look at my reflection in the mirror, I feel that I won't be able to do anything. I am a little crookback; the bones beneath my eyes sliding a little away, my eyes are a bit dug in. Near the thin wrist onwards, on the top of the palm, two veins mauve in colour severally touched the fingers like the five tributaries of the river Sindh.

I laugh out loud when I see those legs of mine. They look to a great extent like the legs of a wizened, gallivant, dark brownish horse. Near the knees are unnaturally bulged. When the heels are pulled together, the knees stick fast against each other. The drill teacher in our school would term it, 'medically unfit'. I cannot make eye contact while talking to people. I muddle up arranging a long sentence, start stammering. My eyes get dazzled as I go out of this darkening and sultry room. Little circles here and there burst in fission.

Actually, I myself have created such misconceptions about me. If one thinks it with minimum logic, one can easily find out how baseless these thoughts are. Few have got things what I have. I came of a reputed family and how many are there that have got a mother like me--- my father..., yes I do have a father. A good many do not have one. It is equally true that my father had never carried me on the top tube of his bicycle to school, never bought me a packet full of sweetmeat on his way back home, never taught me reciting Tagore's poems, never took me to the roof on a silent dark moonless night to show me Saptorshimondol, the Great Bear, never checked in my friend's house in anxiety as I was late from school, never sat by my head when I was sick from fever to tell me, "you will get well soon".

I have seen my father many a times from behind the curtain. But from a certain distance. What if I braved my spine out to enter the room? Whatever the matter is, at least he is my father. The red blood cells created by the man in the properties of the liquid flowing in the pockets of my veins, arteries and heart are floating so fatefully that they cannot be separated. It was one of his tiniest cells that created me what 'I am' today. A sculptor can have a definite claim to his art. But when the sculptor forgets whether he is the creator of this sculpture? In that case the onus rests on the sculpture itself to familiarise him with his creation. It was on eleventh September, my last birthday, at around 10:30 in the morning, these thoughts might have been dragging me towards that room. I could feel quite well that I was shifting from my centre bit by bit. I could also feel that the more I was shifting off from the centre the more it was dragging me in. Almost all feel it difficult to step against the centripetal force of life; they are fearful. If I take my mother to be the centre, my compass fails to draw the arc beyond the lintel beam of that room. A compass has its limitation. The farthest curve the compass can draw limits the end of my shielded circle that grew around my mother. I knew if I could step over that beam, I will enter a new circle. The centre here is very apathetic, rough or maybe not. Just like the first astronaut who stepped on the land of the moon in search of life there. But, alas! The moon is totally a dead satellite, a pale, indifferent one.

When with a brave stroke of my finger I took the curtain aside and put my first step on the floor of the room, my father was sitting on the easy chair with his back facing at me. From my point of view, I could only see his head overgrown with pepper and salt hair. A rapid and sultry odour pitch into one's nose as one enters the room. There is no inlet for lights to come into the room except that window to the west. Four almirahs, two on the right side and two on the left of the room, are huddled with books. The titles of the books cannot be read because the glasses on its doors are not transparent enough. By the almirah on the right side was leaning a tanpura—one of the strings is broken, the rests have gone loose. On the wall right in

front of my father hangs a shabby photo frame of Rabindranath Tagore who has otherwise adapted himself with the place.

If I could draw pictures, I would have mixed dark brownish colour into each and every pick of colour for drawing a picture of this room. On the left side of my father's easy chair, one or two steps ahead, there lies that old fashioned gramophone, settled on a table engraved with an old fashioned decoration. From which the melody of *alaap* is wafted outside. Obviously the gramophone was stopped then. On the top of it there was stacked a pack of music records.

By then, while seeing all these things, I already have crossed half way into the room silently from where I could clearly see my father's profile. The lean rays of the light coming through the porous ventilator have gathered on his face. By its reflection on his glossy facial skin one could easily form an idea of his aristocratic background. I have never seen his face from such a close distance. Stubble beards all over his face waved below his chin. While seeing that very nose like the Romans, those thick lips, that broad temple, grim jaws, I smeared my palm across my face for once. I do not take after him much except that nose.

My father would look at the small strip of sunrays oozing through the small holes of the ventilator while pressing the tip of his right thumb with his canine tooth. The dust-specks that are not visible to the bare eyes become prominent in their disorderly business under the thin fillet of sunrays. When light falls in such an apparently calm atmosphere, head whirls; it aches. So turbulent wind can be, I never knew.

I had been totally unmindful. Stirred up by a mild voice, I looked up my father.

--Who you are?

I remained silent. Without making any noise, I was just looking at his face in the front like a stupid boy. With those of his aimless, pale, apathetic look, he beamed me from head to toe, and said,--“why are you in this room?”

No reason.

What no reason?

No reason as such.... just I was looking around.....this room.

Nothing worth looking in here! Where do you stay?

Here only.

Whose boy are you?

Now I choked myself to silence. Because some questions do not merit any answer.

Are you on a tour here?

No.

Do you know me?

Yes, I mean no, I mean a little bit...

But your face seems quite familiar to me. But cannot call up where I met you. What's your name?

Saswata . saswata Chattopadhyay.

Chattopadhyay? Are you the son of any of our “relatives”? Oh you are the son of Tanu! How is she?

Tanu is my paternal aunt. She is my only aunt. My father must have thought I am the son of Tanu aunty. Tanu aunty lives at Berhampur. Since long I have not heard from her. Extending his right arm, my father pressed against my left elbow. A chill ran through my bones, my veins leaped. As his hard, rough, tough hand touched my lean elbow, something electrifying ran through me. Getting excess power supply, it began pumping blood noisily two times faster into a biological pump machine. A thudding noise fell repeatedly on the eardrums. The word which I never uttered spontaneously, now I wished I could scream out with----“fa-ther”.

But, from my childhood, the gap between the relation and the mind grew so big that the scream failed to make itself heard.

Which class are you in? My father asked me very earnestly.

At class nine.

You listen to music?

A little bit.

What songs?

Almost all types.

Classical or modern songs? Wait, let me play for you Bach's Prelude Fugue of Well-Tempered Clavier.

I had never heard of them before. Who is Bach, I do not know. Driven by a little curiosity, I asked my father:

What is Prelude Fugue?

Prelude is the frame of a window, and Fugue is the scenery outside it. I could not understand the least of it. Now my father raised himself up from the easy chair. Six feet tall, this gentleman, a little bent at the waist, groped the rack for a long play and put it on the gramophone turntable. As the stylus touched the first magnet circle, the disc began rolling slowly and tiredly. Moments passed, a melancholic symphony of hundred violins woke up with the plying of the bows on the strings. I had never listened to Western Classic with so much attention before. Its lingering tune almost matches with my favourite *purbi* raga. Something was missing somewhere. I cannot exactly pinpoint what it was. It seemed that my veins and arteries were wrought tightly to fasten the strings of their violins. And on those strings about hundred violinists were plying their bows. A melancholic tune is rising up. Waving up and down momentarily. My father was nodding his head in a fit of being possessed.

About half an hour passed in this way. My father uttered not a single word. I stood quiet beside him. I thought he would behave in a different way as he saw me. Would talk to me a lot. But this man did not raise his eyes back on me for a second time. He has no responsibility towards me. No sense of duty to me. This ruthless indifference was slicing me crosswise. Again I gathered back that old emotion and uttered in my mind –“tyrannic spider”.

I almost screamed at him and asked –well, you...in such a sultry room...alone...I mean...you really like in here?

Nodding his head with the rhythm of the Western Classic, he replied in an extremely uninterested manner, ‘like it’.

Slowly I was getting angry, feeling monotonous, and growing desperate within. I felt that with its comb like feet of silence that grey tyrannical spider is going to clutch me tight. If I wait there anymore, it will brace me with all its attachments, suck me dry in its tight fold.

Just in need to protect myself, I ran for life out of that room and clasped my mother garlanding her with my arms. I had never been to that room again. All emotions subsided, mind becomes released.

My father remained immovable, mother still, the air grave; I feel like crying. The air is heavy, I felt lighter; I was floating. My feet could not stand still on the ground; they touched the ground beneath the feet, but my body remained afloat in the void. If I hold my father, he is nowhere; when I clasp my mother, I turn into stone. As I am heavier than air, I dash to the ground hard. I bear the wound, I scream out to say---I can... I have to....

END

A FEW WORDS ON THE AUTHOR

Born in 1978 at Krishnanagar, Nadia, Tamal Bandyopadhyay is one of the leading contemporary novelists in Bengali. He has been a regular contributor of novels, short stories and articles to leading magazines like *Desh*, *Sananda*, *Ananadabazar Patrika* and so on. He was awarded 'Barnaparichay Sahitya Samman' for his first novel 'Mayakanch'.

A FEW WORDS ON THE TRANSLATOR

Born in 1974 at Badkulla, Nadia, Santanu Das has proved his claim as an emergent poet who has been contributing poems regularly to number of literary magazines of which mention may be made of 'Natun Krittibas', 'Kobita Campus', 'Darabar Jayga' and so on. He has contributed prose on literature to renowned Daily 'EK DIN'. Now he is working on a novel of his own in English.