

Assassinator

Bitan Chakraborty

(Translated from its original Bengali by Pranab Ghosh)

I have never been to this area before. Even in the middle of this half-darkness, the exterior lighting of this house seems to be interesting, but as you enter you get a feel of a foreign restaurant and not of an office. Some of us were sitting on a light sponge-fitted bench, and as we sat in the semi darkness for sometime our eyes got accustomed to it. Now I could make out the faces around. We were there in a way as if we all knew each other, but as the moment was not a joyous one we failed to recognize each other. There was an elderly man unaffected by everything around. It seemed there might be something that was bugging him more than anything else. The man was showing signs of irritation. In itself, to stay calm appeared to be a problem to him. He came as close to me as possible and asked in a hushed tone,

“Sir, do you know?”

I lifted my eyes to look at him.

“A murderer is roaming in this area. He looks like a gentleman, but he kills in a very ungentle way. I have been so afraid! Even I thought a couple of times whether to come here or not!”

I couldn't get what he meant, but the man did not notice. He continued on his own ...

“The bastard rips the veins with glass, it seems! Aren't you noticing how quiet everybody here is out of fear?”

I carefully ran my eyes all around. I could not measure the expression of the faces around, but what if it is true! I had butterflies in my underbelly the moment I thought that. I was curious and inquired:

“How many have gone by now?”

“Twelve!”

The lady seated beside me unobtrusively threw in the word.

“No, no! Not that many. Six persons have gone. Of these two had been killed in such a way that no one could identify them.”

The man rectified the faulty information like a competent news reporter.

“I told you about the number of people who had gone inside.”

It appeared that the lady was a bit disgusted.

“Oh! Tell me that.”

I felt desperate for a smoke. I have heard in these big offices smoking is strictly prohibited. The wooden door was kept closed from inside. Those who had entered were not coming out. It seemed there was another way for their exit. As a result not even one secret was coming out. These were really clever people! And for the first time the door parted. A boy, wearing a knee-length pant came out. I would not be able to describe him, for his face was not clearly visible. The moment he came out he questioned,

“Has Biplab¹ come? Has anyone seen him”?

The very gentleman seated next to me replied like an idiot,

“No! Nothing of that sort has come as yet! Why? Are we expecting it to appear?”

The boy did not respond to the man; he only raised his finger and beckoned me in.

Inside, there was a blue light pervading across the entire room. The light overflowed from the table and in a series of small waves was reaching everywhere in the room. I was not aware of the name of the man who was seated just opposite to me. Neither did I have any intention to know. People look like outlines in light, I have noticed. He was constantly asking questions. The attitude was such that he had no interest in listening to the answers, but he was listening to every reply attentively. The questions were ordinary. Almost like some biography. After answering one question I was promptly forgetting the previous one. In the meanwhile my mind was egging me on to do some mischief.

“What is your favorite work?”

“To change the lines in a poem.”

“Like?”

“Let there be rain here round the year / Let the clouds graze here like cows...”²

“You are a dangerous man, it seems! I think you are not apt for this job.”

“I agree, but I badly need the job.”

“There are certain rules for our job, I mean certain conditions.”

“Like?”

“For example we will make the rules here and if needed we will ourselves break the rules. No interference of the people outside will be entertained.”

“There is no one to shout for me, because I also do not do it for anyone.”

“Next rule, you cannot do politics here, and we control the politics of one’s personal life, rather!”

“This is a bit taxing. One worker each trailing so many workers and another following them ... no, I can think no more. You carry on.”

“There’s nothing much to think of. We are here to think, you got it? Rule number three. You have to sit for a test to exit the organization as you have to undergo a test to enter it, this unless we are sure that you are no longer controlled by your brain. And if you try to break any of these rules, we will take action. I have a special responsibility – you may say, I’m especially trained for this duty. Have you heard that some people from this area have gone missing for a few days now?”

“Yes, but the word is not perhaps ‘missing’ but ‘murder,’”

“No, it’s missing. Does anyone know the destination of men after their death?”

“No.”

“Right! After death everyone goes missing. And the people who have gone missing have been our workers.”

I screamed in ecstasy. That serial killer was sitting in front of me! I could ask for his autograph, if I wanted to get it. And I can startle the talkative man sitting outside by showing him that. I was, in fact, shouting out of joy. Perhaps this was not right. It was not proper to sit in an office and break its rules! I might be punished for this. What could be the outcome? I had butterflies in my underbelly. The specially trained man to handle such things, who was seated in front suddenly broke a glass into pieces. His intention was not proper, I guessed. I would rather come later to ask for his autograph! It seemed idiotic to stay sitting there for nothing. The lady, who sat by my side outside also said, “Run away!” But I failed to understand what kind of escape would fit the scene. Would I say a great dialogue that might appear partly to be a riddle and a joke? Could I unnerve the man by kissing him? However, finally, I pushed the chair back and rose. I considered this suitable for this scene. If needed I would probably ask some director later on to find if this was right or wrong!

When I came out in the verandah outside I could not decide which side to go. I felt like going for a toss. I was confused and decided to run to the left. Here ‘run’ meant the fast-paced walk that I was accustomed to. But I got exhausted pretty soon. There were rows of rooms that had their doors shut. There was no time to check the number of the rooms. I realized that it was important to stay alive. I had, until now, seen nothing in life. At least I would see these rooms for once.

The rooms appeared to be a bit darker from the outside. Or was it not! Those were completely dark.

In reality my eyes were out of the tune. This was the reason I failed to notice the difference between darkness and not-that-darkness. I failed to realize what all were there inside the room. I felt that something moved away very close to my back. As if I heard the sound of his moving body! Did it arrive before I managed? How did it enter into the room? Was there a door in each room? But, how would it know about my arrival? My mind was gradually getting tired. I felt thirsty, and the tremors of a body within my body. Like something that a man feels before waking up from a dream.

It's dead into the night now. But my sleep has broken. The doors and windows became a bit alert seeing me waking up at an odd hour. They are looking at me without fluttering their eyelashes. But they were afraid of asking me any question. In the morning I had broken one side of the window following a fight with my mother.

As if the unemployed had no value! "Why do you sleep so much?"

"Oh God! What will I do if there aren't any job? Even the unemployed have to pass their time. We cannot even go for a cinema."

"Tomorrow is the last day to draw the ration. There isn't any money. The ration card might expire now."

"Let it lapse. Let them round up all the non-citizens. For how long one can live after being chased?"

I stepped on the floor after leaving the bed. The floor was as cold as ice.

"Have you got the job?"

Someone asked the question. It was perhaps the south-facing window.

"No."

"Oh! Your dad has exhausted his inhaler. He is suffering from breathlessness since evening."

At the corner of the room my mother always keeps a stick to ward off the cats. I will sleep with the stick by my bedside tonight. If the murderer comes after I fall asleep, I will injure his limbs this time.

1 Biplab is a common male-name and it is a Bengali word that means revolution.

2 Derived from the famous poem "Abani Bari Acho" by the legendary Bengali poet Shakti Chattopadhyay.

About the author:

Born in the year 1984, Bitan Chakraborty studied Software Development from Jadavpur University, Calcutta, and later he spent eight years learning and actively participating in Theater under the auspices of the esteemed Jangam. Bitan does not quite like to be marked as an Engineer, and he dreams to live a life of a theater artiste. He is the founder of Hawakaal Publisher. He has authored two books in the Bengali language. “Assassinator” belongs to his first collection of Bengali short stories under the title *Santiram-er Cha* (Shambhabi Imprint, 2016).

About the translator:

Pranab Ghosh is a journalist, blogger and writer. He writes both in English and Bengali. He specializes in short stories, but also writes poetry. He has worked in media organizations like HT and Eenadu India. Now he is working as a freelance writer. He lives in Kolkata with his wife, daughter and mother.