

Tathagata Som

The Lascar

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At twenty-six, Hemen had ordered his days into neat slots of activities. He woke up at seven thirty. Then he had tea and toast. After that, he ran in the local park. At nine, he bathed, dressed, and by ten, he had reached his place of work. He really did not have much to do in his office. Mostly, he sat in his yellow chair, looking out from the windows into the opposite building. Sometimes, his Boss sent him articles to proof-read. Sometimes, he was asked to move files from one office to another. But there was never much work to do, and his public life left only a small footprint. Apart from looking out through the window and observing the men and women of the windows in the opposite building, sometimes he read books.

Since he was eleven, Hemen developed a “bad habit,” as his mother called it, of reading books that had nothing to do with his surroundings, and that in no way, again according to his mother, helped better his circumstances. His mother used to call a neighbour to look after him when she went to work. That woman was twenty-six, some five feet eight, with dark hair rolling down her shoulders right down to her breasts. Hemen was too old to be babysat, but in his mother’s mind, he was still a baby. And this is how Samina came into his life. It was not long before Hemen became completely enchanted. He would spy on her when she went to the bathroom. From a little hole in the door, of whose existence only he was aware, he saw her in her private activities. He saw her under the shower, her wet skin responding to the rhythm of the jets of water coming from the shower-head above. He would then shiver outside the door, alone in imaginary intimacies that would survive his childhood and fuel the dreams of his adult life. In a word, he was in love. Or for an eleven-year-old, he was somewhere in that murky zone between pathological obsession and unconditional love. He was aware of a new world, so far that he could only peep into it through the keyholes of locked doors, yet so close he could smell its aroma. It was Samina who introduced him to the many pleasures of reading.

She was then a graduate student in art history. She read biographies of painters, books on the 1857 mutiny, on Plassey, on the last Mughal nawabs, the Indian Ocean slave trades—books she often brought to Hemen’s home and talked to him about. To while away the hours, she told him stories from mythologies and history. It was she who told him of lascars, one day. Hemen recalled the day in some vividness. Samina was reclining on the bed while he sat next to her, as she explained: “The term

lascar refers to all non-European sailors in the European navy from the second half of the eighteenth to the first half of the twentieth century. Most of them were Indian. They were more skilful than any European, and they charged less. So no wonder when the first world war broke out, seventeen percent of British navy was made up of lascars.” In Hemen's mind, lascars became synonymous with brave men at sea. Of course, all of this was tied greatly to Samina herself. Hemen was mesmerised by her mien, brows knit in attention, her fingers moving up and down the page as if upon his naked skin. He picked up books from his school library and pretended to read them the way she did. His mother was pleased at first by her son's sudden interest in books. But it did not take long for her to realise that her son's fascination with books had little to do with the actual act of reading them. As Hemen grew older, the complex signs on the pages took shape, and meaning erupted from the two-dimensional lines. A world started to open up before him, a world unrestrained by the phenomena of the present. And there were many things to escape from in his present. When he was in class seven, his parents separated. Two years later, he started to have spells when the world became a blur, and he could hear his heart beating loudly against his ears. As to a reason for these spells, the doctors were in a quandary, but they all agreed that the origin of this strange malaise lay in his heart. They advised him not to venture out of his home alone and to avoid stressful work. Hemen was condemned to a life of passivity so alien to boys his age. While these new restrictions affected his social life and made him homebound, they also allowed him unlimited hours of engagement with various kinds of books. As his social circumstances degraded, his escape into the world of secondhand paperbacks seemed inevitable.

On this particular day, Hemen came out of his office. His work-load had been unusually high. He had had to read and respond to lengthy, important emails and run up and down the stairs a few times. He thought he needed a break to clear his head, and so he went to College Street looking for a new book to read. Here it should be noted that though he liked reading books, Hemen had an aversion to book-readers. He did not like those sly, calculating, judgmental heads that flocked College Street looking for fashionable reads. If anything, they reinforced his sense of alienation. He had the opportunity to talk to some of the graduate students on various occasions, and he often came away disappointed. They seemed to him dry, incurious beings, who were merely doing what was expected of them.

So, keeping his distance from the regular crowd, Hemen slipped inside a second-hand bookstore that kept all kinds of books—from *Iron in the Soul* by Sartre to *Koyeler Kaache* by Guha. The shop was dark and damp. The old shop owner, his face crisscrossed by age, was smoking a

bidi. Hemen liked the smell of old books mixed up with the damp and *bidi* smoke.

“What new books have come, Gopal *da*?” Hemen asked.

“All the books on the left shelf are new,” answered the old man. Then he added, “but have a look at this one. I will give it at fifty percent.”

It was an old book—an 1872 autobiography, titled *Memoirs of the Sea*. Written by someone called Moidul Rahman and published by an obscure publisher from England. What attracted Hemen was the painting on the cover that depicted a lonely ship in a tumultuous sea. The sky, an angry white and red. From the frothing sea, you could make out, just barely, many desperate hands. His mind was carried back to a rain-drenched evening in 2008.

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“Look at this painting,” said Samina, lolling on the sofa in Hemen’s living room, her wet hair spread in waves around her shoulders. She handed Hemen a book full of paintings. On the cover he read *Paintings by Turner*. The painting she pointed out to him depicted a red, angry sky, and a lonely ship far out behind columns of waves that rose to dare the clouds that hung oppressively low. Small hands stuck out of the waves in fear and desperation. Samina’s voice guided him. “This is a famous painting by the English artist J. M. W. Turner. He was this maverick genius, eccentric and ill-humoured, but stern and studious. Look at the colour! This painting is based on a real incident that took place in the eighteenth century. A slave ship, carrying many ill and dying slaves, was caught in a typhoon. What to do?” She paused, and waited for a reply, building suspense. He shook his head, indicating he had no idea as to what should be done in a situation like this. “The captain and the mates threw the ill and dying slaves into the water!”

Hemen’s mind, caught up in the injustice of the whole situation, invoked a world of its own. The ship of Turner’s painting transformed into another ship in an indeterminate time and place. That ship was caught in a storm. The captain and the crew—all horrible slave traders—decided to throw the slaves, including women, overboard. Samina, her hands and legs shackled in iron chains, was among those condemned. One by one, in accordance with the captain’s orders, the slaves are thrown into the hungry sea, whose innumerable thirsty tongues rise up to lick the cheeks of the creaking ship and devour the falling bodies.

Then, at a crucial moment when Samina's turn comes, on the murky horizon appeared another ship, a bigger one, and full of brave men. "It's a lascar ship!" screamed one of the crewmen of the slave ship. Hemen, who is the leader of the lascar ship, jumps into the raging waves, swims underwater, and gets up on board the slave ship, alone. Now he is surrounded by innumerable faceless men, but to his sword, no obstacle is too great. He swings his sword right and left, cutting off heads, chopping off hands, and mutilating bodies. Bathed in blood, when Hemen finally stands in front of the trembling captain, the slaves break out in unison. In this vision, Hemen is no child, but a grown man, with a beard and a long braid that runs down to his waist. Rescued and grateful, Samina comes to him and kisses him on his lips. But suddenly, she says, "To me the painting stands, contrary to popular interpretation, not for the dominance of nature over man—though that too is there—but as a testimony to man's cruelty towards fellow men." And just like that, the child's vision shattered.

Later, Hemen would complete the narrative of his daydream. In his fantasy, Hemen let the captain of the slave ship live, out of the piety that comes quickly to the brave and the powerful. But on that day, Hemen remembers being quite overcome by it all. "There there, what makes you quiver so?" Samina's voice broke his trance and he felt his palms sweat and his body tremble in nervous agitation. She came closer and bowed down to hug him. He could hold back no longer, as hot tears started to stream down his face. He longed for one chance to go out into the sea with Samina. He wanted to prove that he was no coward, that only if he were born in a different time period, he would have been a lascar, a fighter, a brave commander of the sea. And she would have been his and his alone. He hugged her back, his arms tight, his neck on her shoulders, and suddenly, his groin grazed against her. Samina gave out a startled little scream and stood up, her eyes wide and wild with disbelief.

Hemen blushed inside the old book shop. He quickly looked away from the cover and started to read from the blurb to hold together his disintegrating thoughts: *Moidul Rahman, an Indian recruit of British Navy, was born in Dhaka to a fishing family in 1808. In this autobiography, Rahman gives us a view of his life as a lascar on the Indian Ocean. Recruited by the French near Chandernagore at first, and then by the British East India Company during the Opium Wars with China, Rahman led an eventful life that came to an abrupt end when he contracted syphilis and died in 1868.* The editors had decided to use Turner's "Slave Ship" as the cover photo.

Although he did not buy the book in that old book shop that day, the image of the violent sea was seared in his mind. Hemen also recalled Samina's words that echoed repetitively in his head, "there, there what makes you quiver so?" Often in his hot dreams on a crazed May or June night, he saw himself riding the waves that ran along the coasts of the Indian Ocean, from India to the Middle East to Africa to Mauritius to Indo-China. He often wondered how we were made by our past and how our past was made by us. In his delusions, aggravated by his loneliness and his readings, he saw ships full of slaves taken to faraway lands to be bought or sold for money. He could not find any rational explanation for these visions, but that day, in the bookshop, in that particular moment when he saw the book and thought of Samina, a historical spirit entered his body and altered his view on things. It was perhaps a fulfillment, a closure, that was achieved. The next Sunday, Hemen went to the Lascar War Memorial at Prinsep Ghat and sat beneath the Palladian porch, looking at the steady flow of the polluted water of ancient Ganga. He had a notebook in his bag. He started to scribble:

She reclines on the golden couch; her tresses
in waves of ~~dark~~ blue ~~profligacy~~ spread out far
like a marine ~~being~~ nymph, her black eyes
roam ~~about~~ the ~~room~~ deep like pure reason:
an invisible cartographer of the soul.

At this point, he stopped and thought: *cartographer of the soul*? What did that mean? A cold breeze started to blow from the direction of Howrah. He felt a little feverish. As if the breeze coming from the other side of the river, from the crematorium over there, was bringing with it a strain of ancient disease. He resumed his writing, and the world around him seemed to blur and fade:

Have we not in dream and waking
~~worked~~ toiled hard upon her shores?
Have we not slaved to slave the world,
to make her bold?
~~And when she made her wanton thoughts~~
And when she spoke, have we not

~~heard and obeyed~~ run to obey her wanton thoughts?

Have we not fought, and won, and lost?

By now he started to feel very feverish. *I should be moving, he thought. This evening wind is not doing me any good. I have to get rid of this obsession, and start afresh.* But the next lines were upon him before he could move himself from the place:

All of us who once upon
a time lived in glory and in shame
Have we no name? Like lascars
~~roaming round and round from Asia-Afric~~
roaming 'round Asia's bend,
to Afric and Arab ~~worlds~~ sands; like paltry sails
upon endless sea, braving wreck on wreck,
we climbed upon her giant legs to trumpet
~~age-old~~ ancient imperial war. Where are we now,
we men with one thousand scars?

He felt his fingers go weak and lose grip on the pen. A sudden heaviness descended upon him, like the soft beckoning of sleep. But he continued:

Now she shifts, sits on her back. I gently tremble
upon the floor. She bends down like a falling wave,
her breasts warm like the tropical sun.
“Come, and sit upon my lap,” says she,
“and I will sing you a tale of longlongago.”

The pen dropped from Hemen's hand and his head gave in to an old fatigue. It remained a mystery what happened to him. When the first joggers found him lying under the Lascar War Memorial, pen still in hand next to a notebook, they called for an ambulance and took him to the SSKM hospital nearby. The doctor on duty declared him dead. When the

nurse asked what she should write down as the cause of death, the doctor replied, “complexities of the heart.”