



**NEKE** The New Zealand Journal  
of Translation Studies

## **Striptease**

**Translated from the Bengali (Bangla) of Parashuram (Rajshekhhar Basu)**

Srinjay Chakravarti



## **Abstract**

Parashuram's short story 'Striptease', titled 'Nirmok Nritya' in Bengali (Bangla), is rather popular for its novel treatment of the female body vis-à-vis the male gaze. In this story, Parashuram (alias Rajshekhar Basu) spotlights the objectification of the female body, but with a wicked twist. However, the dynamics of gender and the binaries of female/male sexuality are expressed in a matrix of Hindu mythology, which initially make the story, especially some of its referents, somewhat inaccessible to not just Western readers but anyone unfamiliar with the Indian milieu. Yet, given Basu's genius, his treatment of the theme is such that the appeal of the short story is universal, irrespective of the culture the reader belongs to. The gentleness of his satire—without being titillating or obscene—is especially alluring. The Bengali title can be literally translated as 'The Dance of the Shedding of Shells', or 'The Dance in which Skins are Sloughed Off'. This is typical of Parashuram's understated, elliptical, implicit sense of humour. The Bengali title does contribute to the overall impact of the original story, but it would not be an appropriate one in an English translation. Ergo, the title that naturally suggested itself was 'Striptease'.



## Biographical notes

### The Author

Rajshekhhar Basu (1880–1960), who wrote under the pseudonym of Parashuram, was a Bengali writer, lexicographer and scientist. Basu was famous for his comic and satirical short stories. He was also a renowned chemist and a pioneer of linotype printing in Bengal.

He received the Rabindra Puraskar, the highest honorary literary award in West Bengal, in 1955 and the Padma Bhushan, India's third-highest civilian award, in 1956. He received the Sahitya Akademi Puraskar (Award of the National Academy of Literature) in 1958 for *Anandibai Ityadi Galpa* (*Anandibai and Other Stories*), the 1957 collection which contains this short story, 'Striptease'.

### The Translator

Srinjay Chakravarti is a writer, editor and translator based in Salt Lake City, Calcutta, India. He was educated at St Xavier's College, Calcutta and at universities based in Calcutta and New Delhi. University degrees: BSc (Economics honours), MA (English).

A former journalist with The *Financial Times* Group, his creative writing has appeared in over 150 publications in 30-odd countries. His first poetry collection *Occam's Razor* (Writers Workshop, Calcutta: 1994) received the Salt Literary Award in 1995 from John Kinsella. He has won one of the top prizes (\$7,500) in the Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Memorial Poetry Competition 2007–08.



## Striptease

Indra, the king of the gods, said to the apsara Urvashi, ‘Just what are you up to? In paradise you live in great comfort, with an excellent residence, a beautiful pleasure-garden, priceless jewellery and clothes, and a humungous salary. Why do you want to leave and descend to earth? The last time you went there, King Pururava fell in love with you and crowned you his queen. But Pururava is no longer alive. Who’ll keep you there now? In heaven you’re eternally youthful, unrivalled in your beauty and charm, all the gods are enamoured of you. If you go down to earth, you’ll grow old within a few years. Even if you put on all the makeup in the world, no one will even glance at you then.’

Urvashi bowed low. ‘Your Majesty, I’m fed up with paradise. All the men have fallen at my feet, I’ve conquered them all, and I no longer care for their flattery. If I’m born on earth, I’ll have countless fans. I’ll earn a great deal, too! When I grow old, I’ll return at once.’

‘I can see you’ve become very arrogant. What does paradise lack? Who doesn’t love you here?’

‘Among mortals I’ll get much more love and adulation. A mortal poet has written: “Sages and saints/ surrender themselves at your feet,/ and a glance from your eyes/ makes the three worlds/ lust for you...” Which celestial poet can write like this?’

‘Poets write lots of lies. If you can prove you’ve conquered every male here, then I can let you go. Have all the divine sages fallen at your feet?’

‘I conquered them all long back!’

‘Very well, I’ll test you. Have you heard of the divine savants? They can travel between heaven and earth at will. Sanatkumar, Sanatan, Sanak and Sadananda. They were born from the mind of Brahma, the great Creator. I wouldn’t dare bother them, though—they’re rather irascible folks. But three others are visiting us—the divine sages Kutuk, Parvat



and Kardam. They're peaceful, peaceable beings, unaffected by joy or sorrow, pleasure or pain. Can you subjugate them?'

'If they're males, why can't I make them drool before me?'

'They're not just men, they're great men!'

'Then my victory will be equally great!'

'Excellent. I'll ask their friend, the great rishi Narada, to invite them to my court.'

#

The three sages were pleased to receive King Indra's invitation through Narada. They said, 'We've seen peacocks and other birds dance, we've seen monkeys and bears dance—but we've never seen a human female dance. We're rather curious to watch such a dance. But Urvashi is a nymph, a cloud-nymph—is she actually a woman?'

Narada said, 'She is such a woman that "when men see her/ they feel a sudden tumult/ in their hearts/ and their blood dances/ in their veins", to quote a mortal poet. You'll be delighted to watch her dance. Now please get ready to visit the court of the king of the gods.'

The sage Parvat had a beard as long as his throat, while Kardam's was till his chest, and Kutuk's was till his knees. They dressed appropriately for the trip to the royal court.

Parvat garbed himself in a tree-bark but Kardam didn't have any garment at all; he perforce put on just a thong. The great Kutuk had nothing at all in this world or the next, his renunciation was complete and eternal. So he went a step further, and remained completely naked. The divine sage Narada said, 'Kutuk, can't you put on a grass robe at least?' Kutuk said, 'No need! My beard—which comes down to my knees—is more than enough to clad me.'

When the three sages reached Indra's court, the celestial king gave them a warm welcome, and said, 'You're great divine sages, you have conquered every fleshly passion of



the body with your austere devotion. My chief nymph Urvashi will perform a wonderful dance for your entertainment—“the dance of the sloughing off of the shell”, popularly known as the “striptease”. All the gods have congregated here, including the deities of fire, air and water; Narada, Agastya and all the other great and divine sages and savants; Menoka, Ghritachi, Tilottama, Rambha, Mishrakeshi and the other apsaras have also gathered. We’re all grateful that you’ve come. Now, if you’ll permit her, Urvashi will begin her dance.’

Kutuk, the spokesman of the trio, said, ‘Yes, yes, why delay? We’re all eager to see the dance.’

Urvashi had concealed her dancing dress and jewels beneath a long robe. She bowed low before all and said with folded hands, ‘I should inform all the gods and sages that while performing my Dance of the Sloughing Off of the Shell, I shall discard my clothes piece by piece. My body will be exposed by degrees. Does anyone have any objection?’

Kutuk shook his head and massive beard. ‘Why should we object? Like all creatures, your body is composed of flesh and blood. We want to see how and where the essential femininity of your body is concealed.’

Urvashi said, ‘If you think that my dance is in any way indecorous or offensive, please let me know—and I’ll cease at once.’

#

Urvashi cast aside her robe and displayed her dazzling golden garment, studded with precious gems and covered with jewels. After dancing for a few moments, she cast aside her stole, revealing her cleavage.

Parvat raised his hand and said, ‘Urvashi, please stop! I can see that your dance is in extremely poor taste—it’s quite obscene. We don’t want to see such a dance that offends our sensibilities.’



Kutuk said to his friend, ‘If your sensibilities are offended, what’s that to us? You keep your eyes closed, let the dance continue.’

Urvashi said to Indra, *sotto voce*, ‘Your Majesty, the great Parvat has succumbed to my charms.’

The dance continued. Parvat covered his eyes with both hands, but couldn’t suppress his curiosity; he continued to watch through the gaps of his fingers.

Urvashi continued to disrobe herself, till at last she uncovered her breasts. At this point, Kardam covered his eyes. He said, ‘Please stop, Urvashi! If we continue to watch your prurient dance, our austerities will be ruined. Please stop!’

Kutuk said, his voice dripping sarcasm, ‘Why should she stop? If you can’t bear to watch, leave the room.’

Urvashi indicated to Indra with a glance that Kardam, too, had been conquered. Urvashi then took off all her clothes and jewellery and cast them aside—till at last she stood still like a statue, naked as the day she was born.

All the gods and sages cheered her on seeing her jasmine-white nakedness. ‘Excellent, Urvashi, excellent!’

Except Kutuk. He said, ‘Why did you stop, Urvashi? Please take off the rest of your shell.’

Narada said, ‘What shell? Urvashi has taken off all her coverings!’

Kutuk said, ‘Can’t you see, there’s a smooth pinkish white covering on her entire body.’

‘But that’s her skin!’

‘Ask her to take it off!’

‘Have you gone mad, Kutuk? The skin is part of her body. It’s not a garment!’



‘Even if it isn’t a garment, it’s certainly an outer covering. Ask her to take off that shell—I want to see what’s beneath it.’

‘I’ll tell you what lies beneath,’ said Narada. ‘Beneath the skin is her fat, underneath is her flesh, and beneath that is her skeleton.’

‘And what’s beneath that?’

‘Nothing else.’

‘That which ‘makes men feel a tumult in their hearts, and makes the blood dance in their veins’—where’s that essential femininity of the woman?’

‘Her femininity is in her garments, her jewels, the motion of her limbs, the glances from her eyes, the smile on her lips—and in the hearts of her admirers. You’ve set your senses ablaze long ago, how can you feel or experience it?’

Now Kutuk became enraged. ‘Have you brought me here to be duped? This Urvashi is nothing but a hollow creature, with nothing inside her—how’s her body different from that of a goat’s? Come on Parvat, come on Kardam! Let’s leave at once. We’ve nothing else to see here.’

The other apsaras were delighted at Urvashi’s discomfiture and cheered lustily.

#

Kutuk, Parvat and Kardam left the court. Urvashi began to shed silent tears.

Indra said, ‘Urvashi, please calm down. No one can win every time. Even I was defeated by Vritra the Ogre.’

Urvashi said, ‘Can this be considered defeat, Your Majesty? Kutuk Rishi is nothing but a lunatic, a useless, neuter man who has burned his senses to nothingness. What did you gain by having me insulted like this in front of the entire court? I’ll neither go down to earth nor remain in paradise; I’ll devote myself to the worship of the Deity.’





**NEKE** The New Zealand Journal  
of Translation Studies

Urvashi then tonsured her head, cast aside her expensive jewels and clothes for a nun's habit, and immersed herself in austere devotion.

THE END