

# Arts & Letters

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# Tribute to Quaderi

Page 2 and 3 have been arranged to pay tribute to the poet without whose contribution the modern foundation of our poetry would not be where it is today. Shaheed Quaderi left us forever on August 28. He is not as prolific a poet as his peers. But the ones he has written have given us a picture of Dhaka that will live on for as long as the city lives.

Last Wednesday (August 24), Shawkat Hussain re-posted a translation of a Shaheed Quaderi poem, “Saloon e jabar age”, on his Facebook wall. In a note he explained he had posted it around this time last year as “a belated gift to Shaheed Quaderi on his birthday”. This year he shared it to “remember the poet as he lies critically ill in New York.” “May he recover soon!” Hussain’s note ends.

I reached Hussain out and asked his permission to carry the translation in the pages of Arts & Letters. He consented and said he’d also send in a translation of “Tomake Obhibadon Priyotoma”,

which is perhaps Quaderi’s most-loved poem among his readers.

On Sunday (August 28), Hussain sent in the translation of “Obhibadon” around 4:00pm and Quaderi passed away about an hour later in New York. On Monday, when Hussain posted it on his FB wall, he added this apt note:

“Yesterday, 28th August, I finished translating this poem at 4:00pm, rushing to meet a deadline. I had no idea that Shaheed Quaderi was meeting his own final deadline one hour later in a New York hospital. Rest in peace, SQ.”

**-Rifat Munim**

## Greetings to you, my beloved



Fear not,  
I will take such measures  
That the army will march past you  
With a bunch of flowers  
On their shoulders  
And salute, only you,  
My beloved.

Fear not, I will take such measures  
That crossing forests and thickets,  
Barbed-wire fences and barricades,  
Carrying memories of many battlefields,  
Armoured vehicles will come to your threshold  
Laden with violins,  
Only for you, my beloved.

Fear not, I will take such measures—  
Such measures will I take that  
B-52s and MIG 21s will zoom overhead,  
And like paratroopers,  
Chocolates and toffees and lozenges,  
Will shower on your lawn,  
Only for you, my beloved.

Fear not, fear not,  
Fear not...I will take such measures  
That a poet will command  
All naval fleets in the Bay of Bengal,  
And in the coming election  
A lover will defeat a Minister,  
My beloved.

Know this, all conflicts will end—  
I will take such measures

That a singer will easily  
Become the leader of the Opposition Party,  
Trenches in the borders,  
Will be guarded all-year round  
By red, blue and golden fishes—  
Everything will be banned,  
Except the smuggling of love, my beloved.

Fear not,  
I will take such measures  
That inflation will decrease,  
And production of excellent poetry will increase daily,  
I will take such measures  
That the assassin’s knife will slip from his hand,  
Not through fear of the mob’s fury,  
But through fear of the mob’s kisses,  
Only for you, my beloved.

Fear not  
I will take such measures  
That like the secret attack of Spring  
Upon a wintry park,  
Revolutionaries will invade the city  
With accordions.

Fear not, I will take such measures,  
That when you go to the State Bank  
You can exchange a bunch of roses and chrysanthemums  
For at least four lac Taka,  
Four cardigans for a single jasmine.  
Fear not, fear not

I will take such measures  
That air, naval and artillery battalions  
Will surround only you, night and day,  
And greet you, my beloved.

(Translated by Shawkat Hussain, Head, Department of English, University of Asia Pacific. See the other Quaderi poem in Hussain’s translation in the Arts & Letters page of Dhaka Tribune’s website)

# Salute to the poet of Dhaka

Rifat Munim

I had first read about him in the literature page of a Bangla daily. The article, I remember to this day, had a photo of him sitting alone on a park bench in New York, throwing a look away from the camera, a grave but gloomy look. A college-going HSC student in the late 1990s Bagerhat, I was surprised to learn he was in a self-imposed exile in the US for decades then. That article goaded me into flipping through the books on the poetry shelf at the district public library. None of his poetry volumes were there but several anthologies had three or four of his poems. I sat down with one and started reading “Bristi, bristi” (Rain, rain). I found it a bit too difficult to relate to, and why not? I was still a stranger to the pangs of alienation and the naked truths of existential crises that stare you in the face in big cities.

I grew up in the verdant greenery of the country’s southern region, blessed as it is with rivers and numerous tributaries and hundreds of villages lining their banks. A thin stream of Bhairab flows by my house as silently as a cat. This rich natural setting gave Jibananda, to my teenage consciousness, something of a godly stature. Then there came this early affiliation with leftist student politics which did the rest by sweeping my sensibility with grand ideals. Through this romantic mould could enter Al Mahmud, Rafique Azad, Nirmalendu Goon, Rudro Mohammad Shahidullah, and to some extent, Mohammad Rafique. All of them could be said to have combined nature and the revolutionary or romantic zeal in their poetry. But Quaderi? No, he couldn’t enter until Sumon Chattopadhyay turned his “Tomake Obhibadon, Priyotoma” (Greetings to you, my beloved) into a song. Humming this song was all the rage in the leftist circles.

I picked up the book at the library and read this poem over and over again. It aroused in me a pleasure that I was too ill-equipped then as well as now to express in words. He is reassuring his beloved that he’ll bring about a change when the soldiers will march past holding in their hands bouquets of flowers instead of guns; when the state bank will return cheques and receive flowers; when one will get no less than four lakh if s/he just presents them with, say, a rose, or a chandramallika; when there will be only one kind of inflation and that will come incessantly in the form of artistically successful poems; when the leader of the opposition will be a lover, not a politician. I fell in love with this poem, right on. It was the title poem of the book, published in 1974, his second collection.

Then I collected his first volume, *Uttaradhikar* (Inheritance), published in 1967, and his third, *Kothao kono krongdon nei* (There’s no cry anywhere), published in 1978, thinking there must be more of this kind. I scanned the indexes and found one called “Love” in the third volume.

“No, love is not some slender boat/Whose eyes, face, nose will be eaten away/ By shoals of sword-like fish ... No, love is not some slender boat/It is not the floating decks of some wrecked ship on sea/Nor the Daruchini Island, nor a swim of strong biceps/Straws? no, it is not even that” (my translation)

Then what is it? It is, he goes on to tell us, “Vanquished, always, everywhere.” (my translation)

When he says love, he means it in both personal and collective terms. Love does surface but except in two or three poems, it is love vanquished or unfulfilled and it is inevitably so. What he says in the poem, “Songoti” (Consistency), dedicated to Amiya Chakravarty, has become something of a saying among forlorn lovers, “The lover will be united with his beloved alright/But will get no peace, no peace, no peace.” This picture of love fits in the dark, bleak world that he makes of the capital city, the place where most of his poems are set. There are flowers and trees aplenty; there are those wild gusts of wind that drag you out of your four walls; there is, even, a full moon overhead. But the wind, the shalik birds, even the thin river (in “Aaj Saradin”) fail to give him the resolve to knock on his beloved’s door, leaving him all befuddled, making him feel like a homeless person. The moon in “Naswar Jotsnyay” (In transient full moon) comes as his muse but casts light only on values which he’s abandoned. There are roses in “Protyoher Kalo Ronangone” (In the dark battle field every day), but they come into his hands after crossing thousands of dead bodies, barbed wires on borders,

guttured villages, pools of blood etc. So the petals are pale and withered.

His diction and sensibility seemed more urban than Rahman and his tone more emotional than Abul Hasan, a combination which is very rare. Though the power of the language took me in, the optimist in me resisted this prophet of despair from entering my world. Hastily I got back to Mahmud, Azad and Goon to suture my troubled mind.

Then I went to university and saw up close how competitiveness, envy, hypocrisy and compromise work among students and teachers. The image of the silent river was pushed to the furthest edge of the background while the foreground was occupied by tension and anger. Then the time came to settle in Quaderi’s city to make a living. Now with every passing year, it seems, he is sinking deeper in me like no one has. When I read his poems now, I see a poet whose whole being, childhood included, was hopelessly rooted in urban culture; I see a poet who has loved his city like a boy or girl loves their doll, so much so that they put it in a keepsake box and carry it



with them till the last day of their life, regarding it their most valued possession.

Now that I know more about this city and its political context in the late 1960s and 70s, I can see why in *Inheritance* his city was covered mostly in dirt, blood and darkness. The politics of killing initiated by then Pakistani government had spawned in him this depression that overshadowed everything else. Then after independence, in *Greetings to You, My Beloved*, the country was lifted high in the spirit of starting from scratch, and so was Quaderi. The second collection too had poems darker in tone than the first, like “Schizophrenia”, but it also had such wonderful ones as “Nishiddho Journal Theke” (From the banned journal), “Blackout-e Purnima” (Full moon in blackout) and “Ekusher Shikarokti” (Confession of Ekush). Now I could see the full moon could as well be an intimation of freedom, or it could be the psychological food that the homeless people feed on, roaming in the parks or streets. His empathy for the poor and the street prostitutes is as genuine as Saadat Hasan Manto’s. But his response to nature and social issues is markedly different from his peers. He responds, almost invariably, as an alienated individual who finds it difficult or impossible to be at one with the collective. In the poem, “Nishorger noon” (The salt of nature), he explains his own alienated position vis-a-vis other poets i.e. Azad (it is dedicated to Azad), Rahman, Mahmud, Chakravarty and Tagore.

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Rifat Munim is Editor, Arts & Letters.

# An intellectual seen at close quarters

Golam Faruque Khan

The earliest memory I have of him is that of a very bright, lively and eloquent young man conversing with my father and bursting into laughter every few minutes. As far as I can remember, it was in 1961-62 that I saw him first at our home. Sitting in my father's lap, I happily noticed every day the immense happiness the two friends derived from their conversations that continued for hours together, and tried to join their guffaws, not having a clue to what it was all about. Usually a pile of books and journals lay on the table between them, and they often read out passages from articles and stanzas of poems as a basis for some new observations or a fresh peal of laughter. "How happy these two friends are, playing so long every day with their books and papers!" - this is what I, a small kid snuggling up to my father, might have always thought. The young man I have just mentioned is none other than Jatin Sarkar, a leading light in our literature, who has turned 81 on this 18th August.

Later, as I was growing up, I discovered that some of the books that engaged them so intensely in those days were *Banalata Sen* by Jibanananda Das, *Adhunik Bangla Kavyaporichoy* by Dipti Tripathi, *Charles Baudlaire: Tnar Kabita* by Buddhadeb Bose, *Ekaler Kabita* edited by Bishnu Dey, *Sudhindranath Dutta Kavyasangraha* edited by Buddhadeb Bose, *Prothom Gaan Dwitiyo Mrityur Aage* by Shamsur Rahman and *Bimukh Prantar* by Hassan Hafizur Rahman - books that were just out or relatively new and were setting new trends in Bengali literature. The journals were *Samakal*, *Porichoy*, *Kabita*, *Natun Sahitya* and the like. As both the friends were on the Left, the new-published books by Marxist writers like Gopal Halder, Amit Sen (Sushobhon Sarkar), Hirendranath Mukherjee, Debiprasad Chatterjee and Benoy Ghosh frequently came under discussion. The lingering Marxist debate on what came to be known as the Bengal Renaissance as well as on some great writers and poets from Rammohun Roy to Rabindranth Tagore also claimed their attention. They closely followed how Bengali literature was changing under the impact of European modernism invoked by the poets of the 1930s, particularly Buddhadeb Bose, and their successors but were not fully uncritical of that modernist shift. They were always on the lookout for new books and journals, and despite being located in a remote corner of the country, they acquired a remarkable skill for grabbing any new publication of some consequence.

Apart from this daily adda, they were regularly staging plays at our house, setting the whole neighbourhood on fire. And there was their politics aimed at bringing a new socialist order - an order that seemed feasible till then. As I came to know later, they had worked together day and night organizing the language movement in their part of the then Mymensingh district in 1952, kept up with all the political changes that followed, and had a hard time coping with the martial law proclaimed by Ayub Khan in 1958. Jatin Sarkar has documented many events of this phase of his life in detail in his magnum opus *Pakistaner Janma-mrityu Darshan*.

He was already a teacher, political activist and writer when I had barely enough intelligence to know him as my 'kaka' in the early 1960s. More than five decades later now, amid many tumultuous changes at home and abroad, he is still steadfast in pursuing the vocation he once gladly chose for himself. As a writer he earned his spurs in 1967 when he was awarded Enamul Haque Gold Medal for his well-researched essay *Pakistaner Purba Pakistaner Upanyaser Dhara*, and he has not looked back since. His first book *Sahityer Kachhe Prottyasha* was published in 1986 - rather late in

the day. But the huge crop of literary works - more than 60 books - that he has produced afterwards has remarkably enriched our literary and intellectual domain. His seminal works, *Bangalir Samajtantrik Oitijya* and *Pakistaner Janma-mrityu Darshan*, are path-breaking studies in our cultural and socio-political history. Through these books and other works he has called our attention to some less explored but important areas of thought. That socialism is not an alien concept and a socialist dream has been part of our tradition is a point he has forcefully made with ample evidence. With deep insights he has looked into peasant psychology and the role of peasantry in effecting great changes in our political history, and has reminded us of the priceless treasure of thought and reason in what is known as our folk tradition. He has convincingly demonstrated that the so-called folk tradition, marginalized as it was when the notion of 'modern Bengali literature' emerged in the 19th century as an outcome of colonial education, is actually the mainstream literary-intellectual tradition in Bangladesh.

He has also warned us against the danger of not trying to understand matters pertaining to religion and leaving the interpretation of religion to bigots.

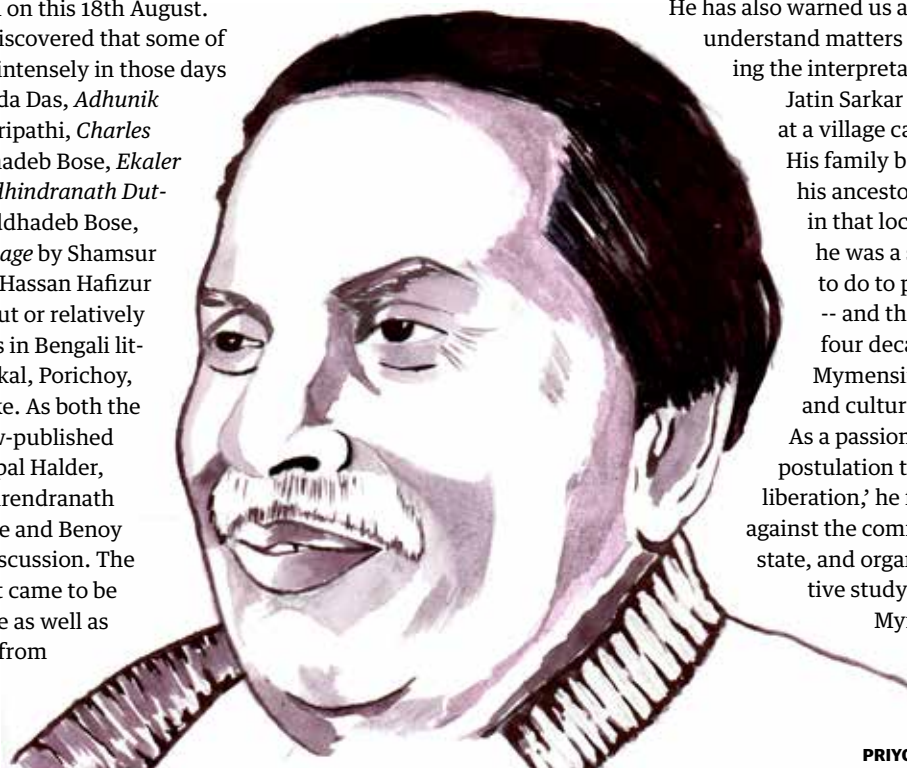
Jatin Sarkar was born on 18th August, 1936 at a village called Chandapara in Netrakona. His family belonged to the rural literati and his ancestors did a lot to spread education in that locality. He started teaching while he was a student in the 1950s - this he had to do to pay his way through his studies -- and then he taught Bengali for nearly four decades at Nasirabad College in Mymensingh. He has been a communist and cultural activist from his student life. As a passionate believer in Amilcar Cabral's postulation that 'culture is an act of national liberation,' he flung himself into the struggle against the communal ideology of the Pakistani state, and organized a number of very effective study circles and cultural forums in

Mymensingh throughout the 1960s. Later he also led Udichi, one of the foremost radical cultural organizations in Bangladesh, for quite some time. He was even jailed for a year for his 'dangerous' political

belief when there was a resurgence of the defeated Pakistani ideology in Bangladesh in the mid-1970s. Living now at 'Banprastha,' his tranquil house in a small town like Netrakona, he is still intellectually engaged as before - always writing, speaking and working quietly to raise awareness around.

It may not be out of place to point out that we are now on the verge of a huge generation gap as those who fought the long political and cultural war leading to the emergence of an independent Bangladesh, and remoulded our values and set the standards of excellence are on the way out. The world of our scholarship is not that vibrant either, to say the least. Nonetheless, we are lucky that a few devoted scholars and teachers like Jatin Sarkar are still with us. He is one of those versatile scholars whom we can still turn to for an answer when faced with a knotty intellectual problem - be it in the area of literature or history or philosophy or any other branch of the humanities. And his exceptionally simple life dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge holds out ever so valuable lessons for us. He has always looked upon life - even in the hardest of times -- with the same fortitude and sanity as he always finds emanating from his favourite words from Rabindranth Tagore: 'Monere aj koho je/ Bhalo-mondo jahai asuk satyere lou sohoje.'

Our only wish on his 81st birth anniversary is that he will be with us for many more years in good health and his characteristically high spirits, and keep lighting our path with his rare wisdom. ●



PRIYO

**Golam Faruque Khan** is a poet and essayist who writes with equal fluency in both Bangla and English.

# Authors are not to pursue fame

Very recently, Sanatkumar Saha called Mohammad Rafique one of the two or three most significant living poets in the country. He was discussing Rafique's latest book of poetry, *Duti Ganthakabya*, a collection of two lyrical ballads, in an article published on *bdnews24*. From Boishakhi Purnima to Dhulor Sangsare ei Mati to Keertinasha to Gaodia to Kopila, Rafique has carved for himself an untrodden path. When one treads along with him, one sees how sincerely he has placed bricks after bricks to build that path, lining it with trees, drenching it with a vast river in the background. The bricks are taken from Mahasthangarh, so to speak, the trees and rivers from the southern region, and the inspiration for it all from the myths and heritage that are our own. He has consistently distanced himself from European modernism. When I engaged him in a talk on the current literary scene, this seasoned poet reflected on a host of issues and subjects. The following is just a glimpse of the two-hour-long talk. The rest of it will come in the later issues. **Editor, Arts & Letters**

## I want to begin with the situation of the current literary scene.

Mohammad Rafique: It's on the decline as it is the world over.

## Is there anything starkly different about the current scene?

Self-promotion strikes me as a significant difference in the current scene of literature. Young poets and prose writers are too busy promoting themselves in different media platforms. As if their familiarity is what qualifies them to be poets or writers. In the process of all of these activities, you forget to enrich your craft which is basically the ultimate standard, if there is any at all. Writers are to write; they are not to spend any time over promotional activities. It is the responsibility of editors and publishers to reach out to those who are writers of real worth.

## Do you think media can play a role in bringing about a positive change?

Well, there's no literary magazine in this country that can represent the seasoned and the emerging literary voices of the country. Just imagine when we had started writing in the 1960s, the time was not favourable at all. The country was reeling from a neo-colonial government. Even then, there were three literary magazines that successfully represented the writers of the time. First, there was *Samakal* edited by Sikandar Abu Zafar; then there were *Kanthaswar* edited by Abdullah Abu Sayeed, and *Uttarmegh* edited by Zillur Rahman Siddiqui and Mustafa Nurul Islam. All three of them maintained very high standards despite the fact that they hardly got any advertisement. In fact, they brought out such excellent magazines digging into their own pockets. When we embarked on the scene, we looked up to those whose poems were published in the pages of *Samakal*. They set such high standards that whenever any poet was published in any of these magazines, we thought he was of some real worth. That was how I came to know about my own poetic talent.

So, that was the scene back then and it was a truly thriving scene that gave birth to the most talented poets. We didn't even know that someone could write in daily newspapers. It was beyond our knowledge.

But the scene changed after independence as daily newspapers rose to prominence. So, this is a huge difference and literature pages of daily newspapers have only increased with time. This is a real crisis.

## Now *Kali O Kalam* seems to be the only quality literary magazine and there are some good little magazines in circulation as well.

No, *Kali O Kalam* is not that kind of literary magazine that actually represents the writers of the time. Of course it is a good one. But then, it is brought out by an organisation which is commercial in nature. By literary magazine I mean that particular kind which is an initiative by a group of writers or which is brought out by one writer who in turn is associated with a whole lot of writers and which has a literary goal to achieve. As for the little magazines, they are supposed to be more than just magazines. Little magazine is a movement and it gives birth to new ideas in literature. Now, can you tell me of any magazine or little magazine that has come up with an original idea or any new aesthetic goal or innovation? So, this lack of a magazine is affecting our budding writers. Even so, I believe writers are to write and not pursue fame.

## Like Jibanananda Das? He had published only a little over 150 poems during his lifetime and was discovered later.

In this age of self-promotion, genuine writers will have to wait even more for recognition. In the literary world, fame comes later. There is actually no easy or ready way to fame. You have to prove your worth and fame comes only after that. Proving your worth takes decades, sometimes even more than that.

There's this poet who is now regarded by many as the most talented poet



PRIYO

of the 20th century. His name is Ceasare Vallejo. He was a peruvian poet not well known to his countrymen, and had only three volumes of poetry to his credit during his lifetime. Vallejo and Neruda were good friends and it is noteworthy that Vallejo was a nonentity compared to Neruda's fame when both of them were alive. But things are beginning to change now and Vallejo is getting as much recognition as Neruda has.

## Who are the Bangalee writers that have got recognition after their times?

You have already mentioned one poet. Then there is Manik Bandyopadhyay and many others. In fact, most of our great authors did not get recognition in their lifetime. Our greatest author, Rabindranath Tagore, do you think he was as celebrated when alive as he is now? A lot of writers rallied against him consistently; some were always busy slandering him.

Let us not forget when Tagore, Nazrul and Jibanananda were writing, that was the golden days of Bangla literature. The Bangalee middle class was at the height of self-discovery and enlightenment. That enlightened class could not receive most of our great authors. If that is so, then imagine the situation now. The middle class now is weaker, culturally deprived and do not have a strong sense of heritage. So, how is a genuine author to be received by this lot? The answer is obvious. ●

See the full version of the interview online.

# IWP: Life is short, art long



The International Writing Program is a unique conduit for the world's literatures IWP WEBSITE

Wasi Ahmed

The midnight drive from the tiny Cedar Rapids airport in Iowa city didn't seem to promise anything of visual joy the US mid-west is so well known for. That was not to be. As Mark, our driver (a published poet as well), drove us through the thin shrouds of fog flanked by the most amazing flourish of dark-green fields, the nocturnal silence seemed quite a bit unreal as glinting little dots of eyes - of deer - watched us pass by.

The international writing program (IWP) hosted by the University of Iowa, like it does every year, brought in thirty plus writers this time to join the Fall Residency from all over the continents. I was delighted to be nominated initially by the Dhaka American Center around three months back and later selected by the IWP authorities. The selection is known to be strict as they need to bring the numbers down to thirty or a little more from well over seventy to eighty nominations received each year.

It was the legendary Paul Engle, a poet himself, who envisioned the idea of having writers from all over the world in a residency program in Iowa city -- the one and only UNSECO city of literature, well over fifty years ago. Among the luminaries from our region who took part in the programme and wrote about the wonders that the city of Iowa holds for writers include Sunil Gongapaddhaya, Shankha Ghose, Humayun Ahmed, Mohammad Rafiq, among others. In fact, it was Sunil who drew the most attention sharing his Iowa experience as not exceptional but as something that helped him become what he wanted to be. Over the years, the programme has grown to become the most prestigious writer's residency in the world with writers of various literary genres and cultural backgrounds coming here to interact among themselves and also participate in some of their chosen literary events for twelve long weeks. IWP's selection covers both established writers as well as those who have started to shine as emerging ones. This job is deftly done by the IWP team headed by Christopher Merrill, the illustrious poet and Director of IWP who over his long tenure is kind of a cult figure to writers around the world. Many made their way to global renown under his mentorship. This year's Man Booker winner South Korean Han Kang was an IWP alumni few years back.

The beauty of this year's programme is the diversity of the practitioners in their respective literary fields. We have with us, besides the most likely troop of poets and fiction writers, playwrights, visual artists, cinematographers, script writers, even musicians. However, the key credential of each participant is essentially rooted in his or her literary accomplishments. So, a visual artist amongst us is also a novelist. A musician a poet. A script writer a short story writer and so on.

Besides the diverse arena from where the writers got together here, the interesting part this year is the number of young writers and poets, more than any time in the past. The youngest among us is Cristine, a 26 year Ethiopian; a budding poet herself, she is the loving baby of all. Very articulate and fiercely independent, she is likely to make her mark in the days to come. The oldest is Odeh Bisharat, noted novelist from Israel. There are quite a few celebrities whose books sell more than hundred thousand copies a year. Egyptian Khaled Alkhamissi is one whose acclaimed novel *Taxi* got translated into more than twenty languages soon after publication and sold well over two hundred thousand copies in Egypt. Indian Vivek Shanbhag from Karnataka, who writes in Kannada, is, to my mind, advancing steadily to make into the international circuit soon. Argentine playwright Mariano Tenconi Blanco, though young, has been experimenting hugely with stage crafts of all sorts to tell his stories in quite unconventional style. Shenaz Patel, fiction writer and playwright from Mauritius who writes in French, is also quite a noted one.

It's such great fun that one can only expect from a residency such as the IWP. There are reception parties almost every day with people thronging in large numbers to know about the writers - an experience perhaps unthinkable in any other part of the world. The reading sessions are full with eager listeners, so much so that you could hear a pin drop.

The best part that goes without saying is the all too precious interface irrespective of the writers' respective fields of writing. The breakfast session is the opener of the day to follow. Everyone loves to linger on with coffee or tea to get to talk to one or more of the writers. But what often features as the most common scene is how well or worse did one got along with new writing or revising or editing or just thinking all night without touching the keyboard for once. Israeli Galith Dahan would at times appear totally distraught having caused a mess with her upcoming novel, while the Nigerian beauty Ukamaka would wear a shy smile having been able to jot down a long chapter of her novel.

There are so many things each one has to say and hear. Botswana's Legidile Seganaberg wears a head gear that neither matches a hat nor a cap or a pagri; a round pipe of a hat like a kulbalish that covers his head and goes down a foot behind hanging threateningly to slip off any time. He is a vegetarian in a massively meat eating country and is planning to become a vegan some day. To become a vegan, he explains, needs a vegetarian to graduate to a far higher level of abstinence from products of animal origin. A vegan doesn't even use leather products, let alone eat egg, milk, ice cream and yogurt.

It's going to get better as everyone expects to make the best of the assemblage. And with Iowa offering so many wonderful avenues to explore, things are sure to be memorable. For art is long, life short though. ●

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Acclaimed short story writer and novelist **Wasi Ahmed** writes from Iowa, USA about his initial days at the prestigious Residency Program of international writers of Iowa University

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# 15 years later: What 9/11 changed for me

Nadeem Zaman

On the morning of September 11, 2001, I was asleep. Never one for early rising, I would have slept for another two hours at least if my mother hadn't called and told me to turn on the TV. Minutes after her call, my phone rang again, this time a friend bringing me news of the event. My television was on, and by then both towers of the World Trade Center had been hit.

The country watched in real-time as the murder of nearly 3,000 Americans was carried out, in broad daylight, by a group of men with box cutters and pilot's licenses from flight schools in Florida. As the day went on speculation had already begun in the media that the United States was under terrorist attack. The last event of such proportions had happened six decades earlier, on December 7, 1941, when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and pushed America into entering World War II.

In the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D Roosevelt issued Executive Order Number 9066. With the attack on Pearl Harbor fueling longstanding racism against Japanese and Japanese-American residents in the West Coast, eventually between 110,000 and 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry, including US born citizens, were relocated to internment camps along the Pacific coast. About 62% of those interned were US citizens. While it was not written into the executive order that only persons of Japanese ancestry were to be targeted, the Secretary of War and the Military Commanders interpreted the order's implicit sense of urgency as a call for the most extreme measures, and acted accordingly, in violation of the Constitution.

On October 26, 2001 George W Bush signed into law the "USA PATRIOT ACT," which was short for "Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism." In Bush's words the law was intended to "enhance the penalties that will fall on terrorists or anyone who helps them."

The PATRIOT ACT affected me twice: first when I saw a list of countries around the world that were put on a terror watch list, and a second time when I received a letter to appear in person to be fingerprinted.

Among the countries on the Department of Homeland Security's list was Bangladesh. I was still a citizen of Bangladesh at the time, and there was Bangladesh, alphabetically near the top of the list. As a citizen of a country billed by the DHS as a potential breeding ground of terrorists, because over 90% of Bangladeshis are Muslims, if I failed, or refused, to be fingerprinted, it would suggest guilt, or at the very least the existence of some nefarious secret I was trying to cover up.

Four days after 9/11, a former airplane mechanic, who once worked for Boeing, murdered a man in Arizona. The victim was a Sikh man whose beard and turban meant to his killer that he was a terrorist, and the killer in his patriotic rage sought revenge.

Despite the Saudi royal family's decades-long close relationship with US presidents and intelligence agencies, the name of Osama Bin Laden, one of the royal family's many scions, meant nothing to the general American populace. Within weeks of the attacks Laden became a household name across America. And after the 9/11 attacks, Bin Laden's position in the US foreign policy in the Middle East went from key ally to public enemy number one.

In the US brown-skinned men, men of Arab, Middle Eastern, and South Asian descents became the very image of the enemy. The PATRIOT ACT, like EO 9066, never specified whom to target, but the FBI, CIA, NSA, and other local, state, and federal authorities chose to go with their own interpretations, which echoed those of the FDR's Secretary of War and Military Commanders.

Following the debacle of the 2000 election and the Florida recount fiasco that haunted it, I was attuned to the unfolding drama, but knew nothing about the Texas governor and eventual "winner" to get excited either way. In a previous piece I alluded to the fact that George Bush is a recovered alcoholic and born-again Christian. Of course, neither condition precludes him or anyone from being president. Hitler never touched a drop of alcohol in his life. My observations about Bush were not meant to be disparaging, but I'm thoroughly suspicious of zealots of any stripe, of people citing any



form of "divine intervention" for their acts and decisions. Little did I know in 2000 that, in the light of Bush's perjury and illegal invasion of Iraq, getting sober would remain his most commendable and noble achievement. The man I got to know as president, and whose history I slowly learned, was a spectacular failure in life, and eight years of his presidency left the country broke, the tremors of which are being felt to this day.

Bush declared his "war on terror," calling it a crusade against the forces of evil. A Christian leader using the word crusade to declare war on a Muslim state had historical implications that were seemingly not on Bush's radar. He then directed war on Iraq, which had nothing to do with the 9/11 attacks, and marshaled the power of his office and that of the US intelligence community, to craft one of the biggest fabrications of the early 21st century, selling it wholesale to the American public, with help from the mainstream media: Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. For that reason Iraq had to be bombed, and Hussein, yet another product of US foreign policy in the region, had to be removed from power.

America is now in the post-9/11 era. It has different meanings for different people, different groups. In one way or another, everyone is affected. 9/11 re-defined America, and revitalized old cycles.

The insidious and demoralizing narrative unleashed by the powers that be in the aftermath of 9/11 set the stage for Donald Trump. Law-abiding people are supposed to jump to clear their names and denounce the actions of murderers just because they share with them a faith or a nationality. That is not proof enough of our devotion to America. So, we have to fit in an image. An image that will make America feel safer. An image that we have no reason to meet or to try to fit in.

But here is an image I'm happy with: resister, critic, dissenter.

I wasn't guilty back then, and if I am required again to give my fingerprints, in violation of my Constitutional and civil rights, I will refuse. ●

See the full version of the interview online.

**Nadeem Zaman** is a Bangladeshi-born American fiction writer. Occasionally he likes writing long nonfiction pieces.

The centre-spread is to commemorate the 40th death anniversary of Kazi Nazrul Islam, the poet of the literary scene and kept burning as a comet as long as he was active. In this section, we offer two pieces by Neel Dangshan. The other is an essay on the poet by Prof Serajul Islam Chowdhury. Both of them always posed threats to the powers that be.

## Blue venom

Syed Shamsul Haque

**B**rown light fills the room all day. And all night. The windows, covered with brown paper, shut off the view outside. A naked bulb hangs overhead. Often, one can hear the sound of heavy footsteps, of one man or maybe two, in the corridor outside. Sometimes a motorcar is also heard, farther away.

He sits alone on the blanket-covered bed all day. He continues to sit the same way when night comes but sleep eludes him. At some point sleep comes to him naturally, and he drops off before being rudely woken up by a sharp prod. He opens his eyes and at first can only see the khaki uniform, close to his face. As his eyes clear he can see the unfamiliar features of the man in uniform.

He has not seen this soldier before. Must be new on the job.  
“Get up.”

He gets up and follows the soldier outside in silence. Once outside, the soldier pushes him ahead, following him but also monitoring his movements.

Soon the two of them come to stand before a row of doors, one of which he is pushed through. Unlike the cell he was in, the toilet he is in now is neat and clean, with a washbasin. The floor is spotless and there is no stench in the air.

He blinks and looks at himself in the mirror above the washbasin. For a moment he mistakes his own reflection for that of someone else. He stands transfixed before the mirror, till the illusion passes and he can recognize himself again. He thinks he looks the same as before and for a moment he finds it easy to believe that he is standing in front of the mirror in his own house for a shave. He notices that his face is covered with a dark stubble.

It is now that he discovers a new smell that lingers on his clothes—the smell of gunpowder. For the last two days a one-sided battle had raged across the city with bullets flying, shells exploding, the air turning warm and pungent. The smell of that battle on his clothes now makes him feel nauseated. He still has no idea why he has been imprisoned here.

The soldier guarding him gives him another prod when he comes out and begins to follow him as before, as he walks on till they come before a second door. Another soldier, who stands guard before the door, now takes over and ushers him into a different room. He finds himself face to face with three officers seated across a pair of tables joined side to side. The tables are the color of glue from the gaab tree, empty, bereft of paper, pen or other objects. He cannot remember when he last saw anything as starched and well-ironed as the uniforms the officers wear, though the employees of the mercantile firm he used to work in were always encouraged by the boss to dress smartly. The collars, epaulettes and buttons appear to gleam in the light inside the room, as if they had all been carefully polished with wax.

The soldier who had escorted him nudges him and tells him to give the officers a salute. He hurriedly raises his hand in an exaggerated salute to pay his respects adequately. There is no response from anybody on the other side of the table, which he interprets as a response of sorts. The officers wear a look of quiet efficiency which assures him to some extent that he will now be released soon and be on his way to Jafarganj once again, just as he had been before he was captured.

Only the day before, like many others, he too had been stopped and searched by soldiers near Mirpur Bridge. But unlike the others, instead of being allowed to proceed after the inspection, he had been arrested and brought to this prison.

Shortly, one of the officers opens a cupboard and brings out a file. A red pencil appears in his hand miraculously without help from anyone else. At the same time another man comes in through a door on the other side, carrying a notebook and pencil and sits down at a small table nearby, the pencil poised in an expectant slant over an open page of the notebook.

Finally one of the officers beams at him sunnily and inquires politely if he has had a good night's rest. “Yes,” he replies. Even though he has stayed up most of the night he does not find it appropriate to tell them that now. “I slept well,” he tells them. “Good, good,” the officer nods and says.

The second officer now lightens up and smiles at him. “We are not yet able to bring bedbugs and mosquitoes under our control and curtail their activities,” he says. “We apologize for any inconvenience caused on that account. Sincerely.”

He is touched by their concern, indeed overcome by it. The third officer cuts in after the second and asks if he has been served food or not. Though he has not eaten anything, given the easy bonhomie established between him and the officers, it appears unseemly to rat on their subordinates to them. So he remains quiet.

“Do you mean they haven't given you anything to eat?”

Immediately one of the officers summons a soldier who comes and stands at attention before them while the three pester him with questions. “Go and get food,” one of them finally tells the soldier, “and get a chair too. Why do I have to remind you people that a visitor deserves a place to sit at?”

Miraculously, a chair appears in a moment. He sits down awkwardly, feeling uncomfortable. Even when he tries to change his posture, the discomfort does not go away. When the interrogation begins he soon loses track of who is asking him what.

“Name?”

“Nazrul Islam.”

“Kazi Nazrul Islam?”

“Yes, Kazi Nazrul Islam.” He notices, from the corner of his eye, the pencil in the hand of the man with the notebook moving rapidly.

“Father's name?”

“Kazi Saiful Islam.”

“Age?”

“Whose age? My father has passed away.”

“Your age?”

“Forty two.”

“Place of birth?”

Nazrul hesitates.

“What is your place of birth?”

“Burdwan district.”

“In India?”

“Yes, in West Bengal, India. We migrated to Dacca in 1948.”

“And when did you start writing poetry?”

“Poetry?” Nazrul fails to comprehend the question and stares at each of them by turn. All three stare back at him, waiting for a reply.

Finally one of them shuffles in his seat, blinks once or twice and asks him for his address.

“My address?”

“Yes, where do you live in Dacca?”

“No 1, Gobindo Datta Lane, Laxmibazar. Very close to Sadarghat.”

“Isn't Gobindo Datta a Hindu name?”

“Ji, it is a Hindu name.”

“You are Hindu.”

“No, I am not.” ●



**Syed Shamsul Haque** is one of Bangladesh's very few versatile authors. His oeuvre includes poetry, novels, short stories and plays.

Translated by **Saugata Ghose**. Reprinted with permission from *Bengal Lights Books*. This book is published by *BLB* as part of its *Libraries of Bangladesh* series seeking to bring out quality translations of contemporary Bangladeshi authors.



who, in the tumultuous days of anti-imperialist movement, had emerged as a comet in the pieces. One is part of a novel excerpted from *Blue Venom*, a translation of Syed Shamsul Haque's , one creatively and the other critically, brings out the poet's rebellious potential which has

# How to look at Nazrul and his work

Prof Serajul Islam Chowdhury

Nazrul's genius, of course, is multifaceted. But his main identity is as a poet, though many have said he'll make a lasting impression rather for his songs. Nazrul himself believed he'd made significant contribution to music. But I think he is fundamentally a poet and his poetic spirit is evident even in his songs and prose. But question arises what kind of a poet he is.

Rabindranath Tagore, the greatest poet of all, had known Nazrul's worth as soon as he emerged in the scene. Tagore dedicated *Basanta*, his lyrical play, to the incarcerated Nazrul. When Nazrul started his hunger strike inside the prison, Tagore sent him a telegram, saying "Our literature demands you." It is interesting to note that Nazrul was only 24 then and most of his brilliant poems were yet to be published. General readers took an instant liking towards his poems and his popularity has remained so, even to this day. That popularity is a barrier to literary perfection is not a universal truth, especially when literature transcends topicality.

"I'm the poet of the present and I'm not the prophet of the future" Nazrul himself made such declarations; he has gone as far as saying, "I don't care if I am dead or alive after the craze of the time passes." He surely was a poet of his time, and embraced the tides of his time in his poetry, but the ultimate truth is that he is still alive, forty years into his death, and will remain so in the future as well. It is because his poetry is imbued as much with aesthetic beauty as with philosophic depth. He restrained uproar and tumult with the grace of art and with his inherent intuition he could clearly see the present and the future. He could play the bamboo pipe and the war drum in impeccable mastery at the same time.

Who is a poet? Answering this question, Michael Madhusudan Dutta has rightly said a poet does more than just marrying one word with another; a poet uses his imagination to turn his words into poetry. Nazrul does just that; by using his imagination he turns the ordinary into the extraordinary. Contemporary politics, drinking tea, shaving a friend's beard, disturbance caused by the excessive growth of water hyacinth, a little girl's quarrel with a squirrel -- all these apparently trifling matters are elevated to the level of poetry in his hand. The state authorities, however, saw danger in his talent and banned seven of his books, one after another, as soon as they were published. They even thwarted the publication of the paper he edited. They didn't stop there; they put him behind bars.

This surveillance and ban on his writing was caused as much by the content as by the appeal it had to the people at large. Because there was excellent unity of content and aesthetic articulation, his writing instantly appealed to most readers. The man who bravely ignored state rule did give in to the rule of art. He has written, "That which does not find a place in world literature does not last forever. It is tended with love at best for two days, then it dies."

What Nazrul has sought to achieve is not just state freedom; he has actually sought to bring about a fundamental social change, in other words, social revolution. We need to keep this social revolutionary self of Nazrul in mind for two reasons. First, it flows through his existence like blood through the veins. Secondly, it helps us understand his life and works. He is a poet of love, and immensely so, and at the same time, he is a poet of hatred. Those two contrarities go hand in hand: without hatred love does not grow deep. His friends and foes are clearly defined: foes are capitalism and imperialism, and friends are the oppressed classes.

It is this revolutionary self that aroused in him the sense of internationalism. In this respect, he has even exceeded his contemporary modern poets who were overwhelmed with the surface at the expense of the inner



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conflict. His internationalism was not a matter of the surface; it was rather a matter of intuition and perception. Say, for example, his poem "The rebel": its articulation is specific to a culture and place but its metaphoric meaning is international.

In the context of history, his magazine, *Langol*, could foresee the advent of the Shudras, the lower castes. "From now on the society will act according to the Shudras' needs and not the other way round." He always had faith in the working class people that they would build a new society out of the old one and that there would be no retrogressive elements in this journey. He has spoken of breaking down the existing society, even asked for a storm and a crowbar to execute it, but it was for building a new one in place of the old, not to create anarchy.

Scientists are warning us today about the green house effect, which is actually the result of capitalism's unfettered growth and profiteering. However, when capitalism was dependent only on coal and oil and gas were yet to be discovered, Nazrul wrote in an editorial of *Nabajug*, "Seeing the way ice is melting and the way the atmosphere is changing for lack of water, it seems, the doomsday is coming closer."

Nazrul's contemporary modernists fell into the trap of the west's decadence and reactionary taste. But his modernism was appropriate as his mind was free and he never showed any interest in enslaving his taste.

Nazrul will live on, to enhance the joy and aesthetic beauty of our life, and to be a fellow traveller in our struggle. The British charged him with treason and the communal state of Pakistan was busy identifying the incendiary parts from his writing. If there comes a time when a social revolution is not far away, maybe the state then will be embarrassed with his poetic utterances, but the society, ultimately, will get him as someone very close to their heart. ●

Translated by Ranjan Banerjee

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The writer is **Professor Emeritus**, Dhaka University. He is an eminent Marxist critic and historian of the country, with numerous books of criticism and history to his credit.

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# S M Sultan: creativity unbound

Sharmillie Rahman

Sultan lived his art, that is to say, his life was synonymous with his art. He embarked on a journey to find what lies beyond pragmatic instruments of knowledge, to retrieve the celebratory impulse that lends life its celestial beauty.

A child of nature, a wild one at that, Sultan did not try to idealise bucolic life that glints off the edge of our nostalgia, harking back to a pristine past. He did not estrange man from nature. Man appears aggrandized as he is invested with a messianic aura. His figures attain a rotundity which became a hallmark of Sultani touch. Round, swirling strokes, puffing up the bodies inordinately, testify to a gesture towards inverse idolatry: the figures are larger-than-life entities, architects of their own fate, and in abeyance of providential divinity. They are seen awash in the glory of their own labour. They have grown out of the soil they till, thus being akin to the crops they yield. These bodies seal the peasant's birthright to the land, and the significance of the inextricability of one from the other.

Sultan's palette widely varied in both range and pitch. Sultan's strokes oscillate between fluidly rhythmic sweeps to jaggedly staccato jabs. When he played with the tonality of colours, the softer, almost tentative plasticity of these fecund strokes leaves no doubt in one's mind that Sultan was preoccupied with rendering his pictorial planes with a temporality that is not specific to any historical time and space.

A free-spirited artist, Sultan's soul was anointed with a restlessness that remained unchanged to the very end of his life. He lorded over a life of his own design in conformity to his own panache. His birth in poverty could not deflect his precocity to draw. This enfant terrible, who refused to succumb to boundaries -- be they natural or artificial -- attracted generous patronage all throughout his life.

Shahid Suhrawardy played a pivotal role in enrolling him to Calcutta Art School. Very predictably, though, he failed to obtain any academic certification degree. Yet, his nomadic forays took him all across India or what became of it after the partition; he travelled far and wide, to the US, UK and France, not to mention his intermittent sojourns in Pakistan. But it was Narail, his hometown in Jessore, where he returned time and again, and finally settled. He was embraced by the genteel with open arms, yet chose to wager his fate with the ones who hovered beyond the pale of privilege. He raised a menagerie of animals and birds; he looked after orphans around



S M SULTAN

his solitary life which every so often would resound with the haunting tune of his flute. He decked himself in sarees with flowers tucked in his long, wavy locks.

In terms of proximity of style, Shahbuddin came close to Sultan. Both dwelled upon the innate force of resilience that compels every human caught in a struggle to resist. Shahbuddin's protagonists who came forth as symbols of the indomitable spirit feeding on a heroic lust for freedom, were inspired by the freedom fighters; they are not to be misconstrued as representative of a home-grown nationalist ardour. However, Sultan is poised at a remove, quietly spinning a tale of humans in their earthly habitat. His men and women too are immersed in a struggle for emancipation, "emboldened" in stature through their collectivity, to regain what is lost.

Sultan's Jessore is famous for its special form of needlecraft. In reference to the "embroidered quilt", he once said the design requires one to be spontaneously guided by his/her own instinct, and to err on the side of caution, one needs only to be conscious of his natural surrounding and be able to re-present it honestly through these patterns. Suffice it to say, this is just as true for Sultan's art! ●

Sharmillie Rahman writes short fiction. Occasionally she delves into writing on art.



## Bahram, artist of the 'unreal'

Sharmillie Rahman

Bahram's surreal theatre is populated with hybrid creatures, as if scouted from some kind of jabberwocky, half man and half animal, intertwined as they are with dismembered body parts re-assembled to forge phantasmagorical forms; these anthropomorphic entities are placed against a backdrop of an equally un-real, unknown space that turns our perception of "objects in space" on its head.

Artist Bahram, born in 1950 as Syed Quomer Hossain Sheerajy, passed away On August 2nd, 2016. A precocious autodidact, he came into the world of art as a painter of rickshaw boards at the age of 15. Apprenticed under artist Abdul in a workshop in Agamachhi Lane in the 1960s, he was progressively steered into other avenues as well, including cinema banners and hoardings. Bahram's distinctive style, inflected with the sce-

nographic language of rickshaw paintings, brought him under the radar of art cognoscenti whose recognition of his unique creative sensibility subsequently gave him an opportunity to participate in Britto's (a non-profit run by artists) workshop. A fortuitous break for Bahram came in the form of a chance encounter with artist Nisar Hossain in 2010, leading him to work as a resident artist under a scholarship from Art and Bangladesh, an organisation that publishes Depart, an English art magazine that plays a catalytic role in promoting art and artists of Bangladesh.

His prolific productions over a three-year residency culminated in an exhibition entitled Dereal at the now defunct Dhaka Art Centre. Bahram, brazen and brusque, in his words as in his works, challenged the mainstream representational techniques with his unique language of art born out of his lifelong practice in a traditional yet marginalized 'craft' form. ●

# Between sense and nonsense

Ranjan Banerjee

After I set foot in the precincts of Abdur Razzaque Gyantaposh Bidyapith in Dhanmondi, what caught my attention first was a portrait of Ishrat Akhond, put up at the entrance, with that signature smile painted all over the face that takes you in and tells you there's a woman who put her heart into what she did. But life runs faster than ever in this city, leaving you no time for reflection on the last conversation you had with her, or on the last time you saw her, running to and fro with an enthusiasm that was rare and genuine, to make an art event a success, or on how you felt when you heard she was brutally killed by a group of fanatics for no reason at all.

It was sometime in mid-August. I was in to take a look at the artworks shortlisted for Aminul Islam Young Artist Award 2015. So I went up the stairs and walked in the studio where the exhibits were.

The collections were as varied in medium as in temper. Works ranged from video to performance to photography to printmaking to installation to sculpture. They were installed in five rooms. Performance and video works occupied three rooms while the other mediums took two. The emphasis on video and performance was evident from the allocation of space for different mediums.

The lithographs were the first ones to strike me. Being the irretrievably modern that I am, I could instantly relate to the man in a cloak sitting alone with a guitar. Palash Baran Biswas did the lithographs. Rupam Roy's conical sculptures had meticulous textures and they caught my eyes. Shamsul Alam Helal's photographs brought to the fore the life of the hijra community -- a courageous and commendable approach because these are the people who are persecuted and pushed to the margins due to the choice they have made, defying the heterosexual norms of gender identity. Salma Abedin Prithi's photographs, too, played with the politics of identity, especially with how women are forced to internalise patriarchal values.

Palash Bhattacharjee's video had a prolonged image of a dark skyline with clouds menacingly piling over. It struck me as an excellent, symbolic portrayal of the alienation that city life is plagued with. Rafiqul Islam Shuvo's video was elaborate and it moved between the drudgeries of city life, with flashbacks of swimming in the river as children. One of the winners of the award, Shuvo's work was a testament to the crises that city life breeds in the form of inequality and alienation and he executed it in a much broader panorama than Palash's.

Razib Dutta, the other winner, experimented with form, juxtaposing text with what seemed like a deliberate departure from modern and abstract art. He was basically trying to develop a story through a series of works, all of them having a character named Ramiz and an accompanying text purportedly explaining Ramiz's actions or thoughts.

Then I walked into another room to take a look at one of the performances. It was a performance by Ali Asgar, I learnt. It's quite long, going on for about two hours. When I stepped inside the room, I saw a psychotic man hitting himself on the back with all his might with a belt. The whipping went on for several minutes at a stretch. Then he ate a banana before he squirted a blob of shaving gel and daubed it all over his face which, apparently, was already clean-shaven. Then he started shaving. While he was shaving, I walked out to take another look at Shuvo's video. When I went back in, I saw him wearing a brassiere. He was trying to unbuckle it, slowly, very slowly, stealing mischievous looks at the camera sometimes. I left the room at this point. It must have gone on, with the performer taking up other quirky actions. The potential of this piece was not lost on me. Someone with homosexual desire may any time find himself or herself in such psychotic situations as the society s/he lives in has no tolerance for such people.

To me some of these works were commendable, aesthetically as well as politically, while some -- those by the likes of Dutta and Asgar -- did experimentations that I wouldn't vouch for. It is true that breaking new grounds takes a lot of work and experimentations. Having said that, I intend to question a few trends, evident in Dutta and Asgar's works, that deliberately seek

to distance themselves from the audience. The abstract painters, with their esoteric nature, took an elitist turn, going closer to the highly educated and cultured, and away from the people at large. But the proponents of these new trends seem to have gone several notches up. In their effort to save art from esotericism and make it a vehicle for self-assertion or bring it to the masses, they seem to have trapped themselves in what is known as the post-modern situation. While the moderns distanced meaning, these post-moderns are determined to destroy it altogether.

The tide of modernism is ebbing. Now is the time for carving out new avenues, true. While building newer avenues, the young generation always responds with a tremor in their effort to eliminate the father figures from the earlier generations, true. This is why the realism of Jainul simply disappeared into the hands of Aminul Islam, Safiuddin Ahmed -- true. But were they -- whether the realistic or the abstract school -- an alienated bunch? Did they have no audience? Or the likes of Sahabuddin who stand somewhere uniquely between the realistic and the abstract, did they fail to build a bridge between their works and the audience?



Artwork by Razib Dutta

Despite all their limitations, the masters of the earlier generations which include Jainul Abedin, Quamrul Islam, SM Sultan, Aminul Islam, Murtaza Basheer, Sahabuddin -- they never failed to build that bridge of communication, a bridge without which art has no meaning. The signs and norms of meaning in an era may gather rust over time. But they never disappear from the locus of an artwork. The postmodern tendency to create nonsensical works and challenge communication and meaning is as much European in origin and nature as any modern notions. These artistic traits of the post-modern may produce some real meaning and solid ways of communication when put in the context of the west where they were born and now are growing up. But when we try to translate them unthinkingly in our culture, I am not quite sure how it will be received and interpreted by our audience. Maybe this explains why the brochures and media coverage of such works are full of heavy jargons and high-sounding words that make no sense at all.

Before concluding, I want to thank Bengal Foundation for hosting this exhibition and the family of Aminul Islam for initiating this award. We hope this award will give young artists a platform to showcase their experimental works. ●

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**Ranjan Banerjee**  
is an art critic  
and commentator  
on culture and  
politics.

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# The songs of a different river

Umme Farhana

*Poetry is the one place where people can speak their original human mind. It is the outlet for people to say in public what is known in private*

**-Allen Ginsberg**

Abdullah Al Muktedir is not an urban poet, nor does he care much about modernism. His poetry does not contain the boredom of city traffic or hypocrisies on Facebook; nor do they talk about costly liquor or the charm of a film star. He does not go for the depiction of everyday life, for visualising realities of the life he lives, nor does he impose an artistic grandness on the trivialities of being. Rather, he narrates his feelings like one encounters in fairy tales, or perhaps in an epic. His tone is melancholic that mourns the past -

“Now like crossing the river through a bridge,

We can quite easily ignore all our relations.” (Shadanandapur Anadaheen Howar Por, p.49, my translation)

Anya Ganger Gaan, Samudrasaman, Muktedir’s first collection of poems, makes readers see life through the lens of poetry. It engages readers in the truth that he, as a poet, has discovered through his poetic consciousness. His reality is far different from that of ours, and also from other contemporary poets.

Readers who perceive modernism as a reflection of urban life would find Muktedir’s poetry not so interesting, they might as well find it old-fashioned, full of romantic lyricism. But a careful reading will make room for a second thought. Though there is no imposed experimentation in his poems, he has reconstructed language in his own style. He has blended spontaneous colloquial forms with the usual standard one. At the same time, we can find old-fashioned Bangla, the Shadu Reeti, in the book. He uses English titles for his poems. A few unnamed poems, though, are given no title but a single letter from the Bangla alphabet. Poems that are consisted of two or four lines

are sure to make readers sense a different and elevated kind of feelings.

“At the furthest limit you live, yet closest to me” (Oi, p. 44, my translation)

The poet has come up with some genuine images as also with some unusual ones: the moon seated on top of a betel-nut tree and the sea drowned in the sea itself. A few metaphors like “squirrel eye,” “yellow-coloured smell” or “star-fruit body of the star-fish” have been used in a very unique way. Walking on the leaf-covered ground is like boozing with strong liquor to him. He sees the red flowers in spring soaking in the colour of blood.

Death is a recurrent motif in Muktedir’s poetry. He perceives death in the same way as we perceive love and the loss of love.

“I died, closing my eyes forever, when I was born” (Ure Bheshe Dure, p.40, my translation)

The poet is absorbed in Nature. The festivity of winter moves him the same way as the first shower of rain does. River, water, rain, ocean mesmerize him. To him, the Jamuna is not a river, rather the body of a young woman or the heart of a young man. He imagines the Jamuna to be a living character without personifying her. In his eyes the Jamuna is saddened because somebody has changed her name one Ashwin; he speaks of it as though the river is a damsel in distress, waiting for her lover to save her.

There are times when the Jamuna becomes something more than just a river, some gigantic being like an ocean. The Jamuna represents the watery portion of the world to the poet. The river in the book title could also be construed as the mystical Jamuna. Poets from this part of the globe perceive the Jamuna as the flow of eternal love because of the Radha-Krishna myth. Love lends a different credence to the world he creates. Sometimes, without even any direct reference to love, a very subtle and powerful sense of love is created.

“Only once there was rain, there were you and the smell of hasnahena.

Only once, after long long days, there came a prolonged evening.

Of the thousand histories of ours, this only is the one worth telling.” (My translation) ●



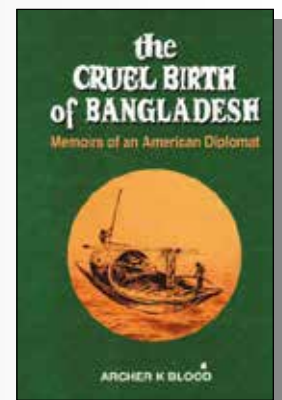
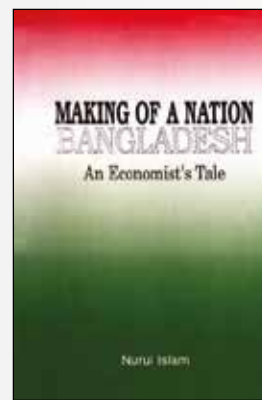
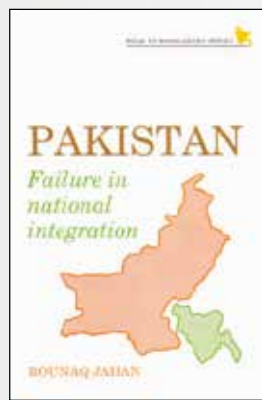
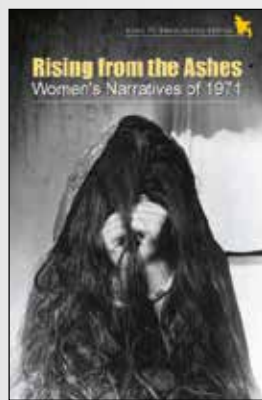
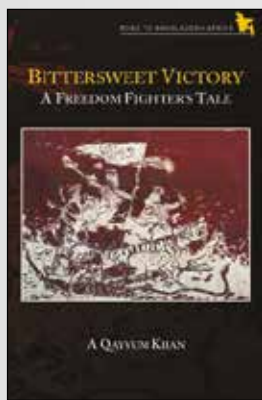
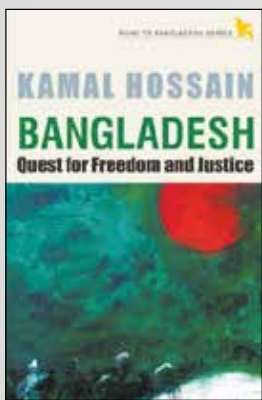
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Anya Ganger  
Gaan,  
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Muktadir.

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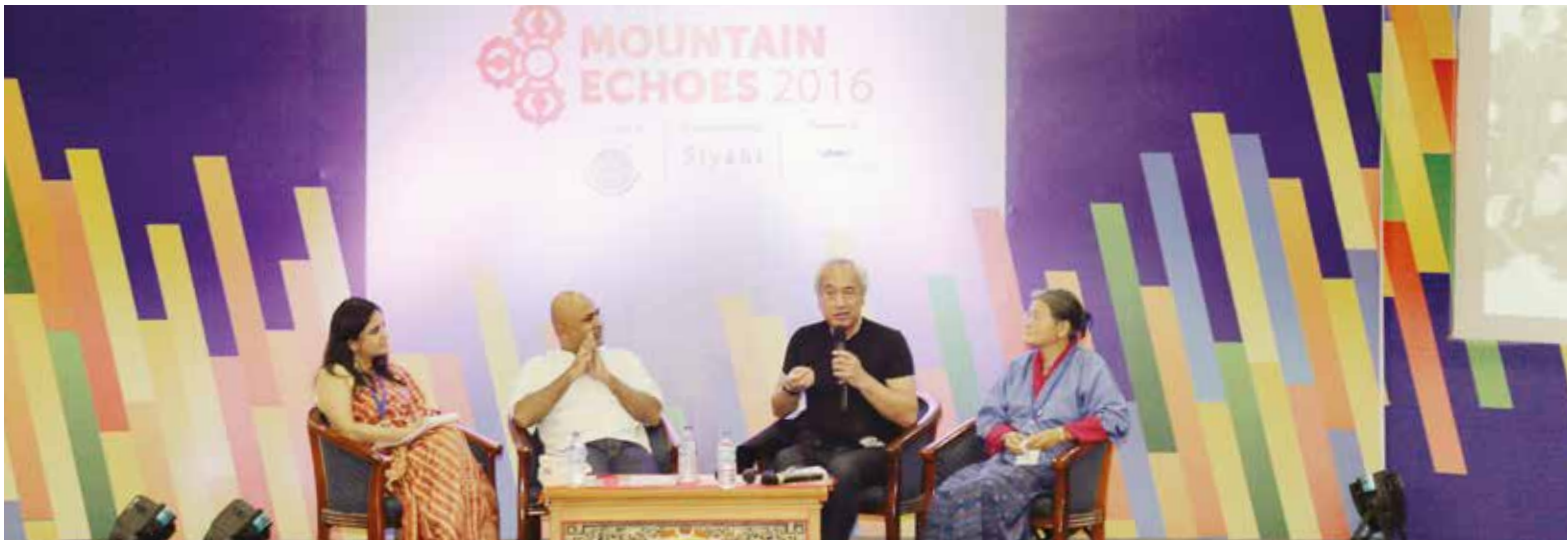
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# Mountain Echoes



Sadaf Saaz, left, sitting on a panel with Omair Ahmad, Witi Ihimaera and Kunzang Choden

COURTESY: SADAF SAAZ

## Sadaf Saaz

Nothing quite prepares you for the magical landing in Paro; one of the world's most dangerous airports. It's breathtaking setting amid green peaks of Bhutan's Himalayan range conveyed a feeling of awe mixed with serenity. Apparently only eight Druk Air pilots are trained to commercially land here; more reminiscent of a mountain airstrip than of a major airport of an independent country. Even the capital Thimphu, reached through winding roads high up over a sparkling gorge, is like a beautifully quaint town out of a postcard. Bhutan is one of those places that evokes an aura of myth and mystery in one's imagination, and somehow it didn't disappoint, despite the rapid development it went through recently. Bhutan's challenge is to be part of the modern world while retaining its essence.

I had been invited to the Mountain Echoes Literary Festival. Listening to the wisdom of writer Pico Iyer talking about the art of silence took on a new relevance in a place far removed from frenetic bustle. His advice to spend time on one's inner health made infinite sense, to not just do something, but do nothing, for half an hour a day. Bhutan's respected Royal Queen mother, Royal Patron of the festival and a writer herself, while conversing with Penguin Random House Editor Meru Gokhale on how to deal with challenges, simply stated, "Everything passes. Just Be."

For Pico Iyer the local is very particular; comparing modern Japan to a wise old man wearing a cool new t-shirt, imbibing change without being transformed at heart. Rooted in the local yet connected to the global was a running theme.

Preserving oral stories and histories is important for a country sandwiched between two giants, India and China, which managed to protect its

kingdom and ward off enemies. Myths and history merge and are inseparable. Ancient cultures with common threads were discussed in a fascinating session which I moderated with Omair Ahmad, author of *Kingdom at the Centre of the World: journeys into Bhutan*, the award-winning Maori novelist Witi Ihimaera, and Kunzang Choden, founder of a museum of storytelling in central Bhutan, which includes stories of women, long ignored.

Historian Patrick French skillfully navigated us around the world in 50 minutes, covering Bangladesh, India, Turkey, the Middle East, UK and USA. The politicisation of religion, and the surfacing of anger, along with the language of anger, is emerging as a common phenomenon.

Feminine strength was highlighted while discussing individual stories from a wide range of Indian women. Amid patriarchy, sexual violence, poverty and societal expectations, there is also hope for new opportunities, celebration of bonds among women, and an openness about sexuality. Within this fault lines emerge. Research on India's largest marriage bureau shockingly reaffirmed the age-old preference for light skin, with even modern dating apps catering to this with photoshopping teams.

Amitav Ghosh reflected on the impending catastrophe of climate change, poignant to hear in this pristine country which is attempting to redefine "progress" on its own terms with the concept of Gross National Happiness.

In a festival dominated by Indian writers, I was the only Bangladeshi. Bhutan was perhaps the first country to recognize independent Bangladesh, festival co-director Tshering Tashi proudly reminded me, as we discussed the need for greater literary exchange between Bhutan and Bangladesh.

The intimacy of the festival, the engagement of the authors and the audience, and the warmth of the Bhutanese, meant that I left with great memories, new friends, rested and invigorated, with a lot of "soul" food for thought. ●

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**Sadaf Saaz**  
is a poet and  
co-Director and  
Producer, Dhaka  
Lit Fest.

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## ANNOUNCEMENT



Dhaka Literary Festival, drawing on writers and artists from all corners of the world, is going to hold its sixth edition in the historic grounds of Bangla Academy from November 17-19. It is fast emerging as one of the most exciting stops in the global calendar of literary events. At a time when Bangladesh is facing increasing - and fatal - threats to freedom of thought and speech, the importance of such an event

cannot be stressed enough. When the event was first conceived, the spectre of such violent threats was nowhere on the horizon. So, even as it takes a stand amid daunting circumstances, DLF also remains devoted to its unique and subtle vision of shifting cultural dialogues from the centre-periphery model to a peer-to-peer vitality. DLF is as focused on embracing the diversity of its own culture, promoting small - in cases, vanishing - languages, as it is on breaking of established axis of Anglophone dialogues. It is a festival that celebrates a wide array of literary and cultural forms and sets off debates on topics ranging from politics to science. Through this festival, Dhaka hopes to find a place of relevance in the world of ideas while introducing the world to all the richness -- and challenges -- of one of the world's most vibrant cultures.

**Sadaaf Saaz, K Anis Ahmed and Ahsan Akbar**  
Directors, DLF

# The failed pick-pocket

Rifat Munim

The moment I felt a hand scouring my side pocket, I froze. I was already in a bad place, squeezed in the cramped aisle of an overcrowded bus, my butt and groin tightly pressed against other butts and groins, all trying to find a footing, while my nostrils were busy warding off the pungent smell coming fresh from the sweaty armpits of my co-travellers. After taking off, the bus settled into an unsteady cycle of speeding up and slowing down, depending on the potholes and the possibility of catching yet more passengers. The driver braked to unpredictable halts every few minutes, sending us tumbling forth, thrown onto those in front, sometimes knocking them down, the whole aisle caught in the swinging laws of domino theory. So I had to engage both of my hands holding whatever I could, outstretching them in opposite direction, to stop myself from hitting others. When I was sure there was a faint movement in my pocket, I had only my eyes to check on things.

It was an uncanny feeling that combined fear and uncertainty with the forthcoming shock of financial loss. The pocket he was scouring had a decent allowance of 2,000 takas for the next two weeks. Would he take it and leave me penniless for the rest of the month? Would there be violence too? Would he hit me and cut me up like a mindless thug often does in a movie? This was, after all, my first encounter with a thug. I began to sweat, fretting over my next course of action: scream and tell others I was being pick-pocketed? Or clasp his wrist and fight him off like a gangster hero in a Korean film?

Pick-pockets and muggers, when caught in public, often met the most unjust fate of an agonising death by atrocious mob beating which was the last thing I wanted to happen to him. On the other hand, the frailty of my body -- emaciated by half-a-decade-long career of staying up through the whole night, alone, with mosquitoes flying about, and spiders and geckos crawling on the peeling wall of the dorm room -- admonished me for the thought of a fight with a machete or perhaps a gun-equipped thug. So instead of executing any of my plans, I looked over my shoulder, almost instinctively, and took a glance at him.

He didn't look away when our eyes met, nor did he pull his hand out. He rather went still, like a statue. The only movement on the outside of his body was visible in his eyes and face which gave the impression his mind was flitting between two contrary feelings: submission and fear. The fear of being caught and beaten to death I'd expected but the look of submission unsettled me. I turned my eyes away, and found myself speculating on the possible meaning of his reaction.

First, the fear in his eyes: the fear of being caught and attacked. I heard this particular fear acted peculiarly upon a person, often goading him into attacking first! Consider the case of Meursault who attacks a native Algiers for a similar reason. (I was studying English Literature at a public university, with a few courses in Continental Literature and was headed to Bagerhat, my home town, a one-hour bus ride from my university in Khulna, the divisional city.) So my sweating sped up to think I might be a victim for having caused a similar fear in the thug. But my brain eased off a little when I thought over the alternate look in his eyes, that of submission and contrition, as if he wouldn't utter a single word of protest even if he were taken to a scaffold now and beheaded then and there. Which meant I could put my foot down and take back what rightfully belongs to me! I'd make no fuss about it. OK, I'll go with it, I thought.

So when the bus was running smoothly without the possibility of any unexpected halt, I lowered my right hand and put it in my pocket to hold his. It was empty! There was no money left either! The shock of economic loss could be as painful as a crushing blow on your head, I realised at that instant. As three or four more passengers had jumped on board at the last stop, pressing us more to one another's butts and groins, he had slipped off the back door. His submissive look was a sham! That son of a bitch got away with my money!! How'd I even pay the bus fare now? Hurriedly I searched

into my left pocket and my fingers touched a thin wad of notes. I let out a small cry in surprise; I remembered I had kept the money in the left pocket!

Back in Bagerhat, that look -- that pathetic, submissive look of my failed pick-pocket came back gnawing at me a few times but soon I forgot it all amidst my childhood friends. One proposed a party of bangla, accompanied by hash. Bangla is the cheapest variety of locally brewed liquor which on rare occasions caused death en masse for faulty distillation. No kidding there! Once in a while -- I thought and agreed.

On our way to the hash spot, I met Pavel bhai, a promising writer who had been trying to bring out a little magazine for about four years now. He hadn't lost hope yet.

"Everyone, you see, everyone is ready to give you a lecture but not a single son of a bitch will dig into their pockets. It takes money, right? The papers don't print themselves out, right?" Pavel bhai said by way of explaining. "So, what are you going to do for me?" He said.

"What are we talking about?" I intoned.



"About the magazine. What else?"

"Well, haven't written in Bengali in a while."

"So you write in English now?"

"Yes, boss."

He sniggered at my answer.

"What's that snigger supposed to mean?" I charged.

"You son of a bitch! Your university turned you into a snob. That's what it is. Got it?" He paused in shock, then resumed. "How can you write a better poem in English? How can you write a better story in that alien language of yours? Marquez didn't write in English? Nor did his fellow Latino writers, and see what they have achieved! Do you see that? They are the ones dominating world literature today." His voice soared a little. Pavel bhai, our dear Pavel Korzhagin (that's how we called him after the protagonist in Nicolai Ostrovsky's *How the Steel was Tempered*, due to his background in leftist politics), was a different kettle of fish altogether, full of theory but lacking in action, and too uncompromising to survive in this society. So I thought better of telling him about the African and South Asian booms in English. "I'll give you a short story," I said instead.

"You've got two days. The mag is going to print in one week. Don't you frustrate me this time, OK?" ●

(To be continued)

The writer is  
Editor, Arts &  
Letters.

## Bleak

Mohammad Shafiqul Islam

You're eructing after a sumptuous feast  
Garbage is close to the road by the slum

Polythene bags filled with leftovers leave  
Us at the hands of city stench and trashes

Yet street children, stray dogs, city crows  
Survive on odds and ends in the dustbin

A sib roams around the city for three days  
Still without food, she waits with a hope

A dead body lies in the drain, none looks  
The crow wonders if it'll take a morsel ●

## Lost faith

S M Shahrukh

Bright days, hot nights  
the moon playing hide and seek  
behind dark clouds getting darker;  
engulfing my town, my country,  
the inner sanctum of my being.

Faith?  
That elusive cradle where I wish to shelter  
has long since closed its loving embrace  
has become the clutched fingers of  
the assassins in the dark.  
They move with their darkness in the bright sun  
the glimmering blades, honed edges  
the gun barrel cold steel, for now.

I look for the mercy of the heavens  
but that high seat has long been usurped.  
It is time for the evil and terror to reign supreme  
in a world devoid of His mercy  
in a world where people cower in fear  
with terror in their eyes  
silvery tears turned red  
mixed with the blood of the slain.

People search deep in their hearts for  
You, the merciful, the omnipotent  
but they wander devoid of Your bliss  
and I join in a funeral procession  
carrying a coffin with faith firmly tucked within it. ●

[This poem was written after the attack on the Holy Artisan Bakery in Gulshan, Dhaka on July 1]

## The difference

Syeda Samira Sadeque

You saw body parts moving,  
I saw art.  
You saw body clothes moving,  
I saw colour.  
And it was this difference between your right-angle and my  
left-angle of Seeing.  
It was a hairline fracture, really,  
The difference.  
A but-crack, a split nail.

But it was Enough.  
It is destructive how we let others define our insides.  
Because You, You are tucked in a corner of my brain firing neurons  
Deciding how I should judge.  
Because You, You are the space in a corner of my head that I actually  
need in the shape of an  
Absence.  
Because I, I need to see the art, feel the colours.  
Not merely see body parts moving. ●

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3 AND 15

## Salute to the poet of Dhaka

The candour that he brings in to portray his city and his own person is nowhere to be seen in the poetry of Bangladesh.

When the news of his death spread on August 28, that grave but gloomy look came back to me. Always separated from the herd, true, but what he saw and how he saw it never failed to sweep us with the best urban poetry of love, of alienation, of social dreams unfulfilled, of the pathetic presence of the have-nots. Every time there is a heavy shower now in this city, preceded by bolts of lightning, I'm invariably reminded of his "Rain, rain". His was a rain that sends all the profit-mongers, hypocrites and people of dubious intentions away into hiding and brings out the poor and the sad on the streets.

Salute to you, Quaderi, not just greetings. Now I know, whether I live in a city or a town or a village, you will continue to sink deeper and deeper in me as long as I am sane and alive. ●

## A slave

I took a turn down the next corner. It was not needed, though. Parul was too engrossed with her daughter. For a split of a second, I thought this child could have been mine. But the next moment I was weighed down by the thought whether Sobhan Mia would give me a job or not.

I was lucky I got the job. Every morning I walked from Shegunbagicha to Mohammadpur. I worked all day at Sobhan's Mia's firm, checked the accounts and returned to Shegunbagicha late at night. It was an impoverished existence. If I woke up in the middle of the night, I felt like putting an end to this life.

I started walking the streets with my head down, trying to avoid the gaze of my acquaintances. Even so, I met Parul twice more. Once I saw her in a rickshaw with a handsome man. Probably she married this guy. I heard from Shofiq that Parul had married a good looking and well off man. Another day, I saw her with a girl chattering and laughing. But she didn't notice me. Even if she did, she wouldn't be able to recognize me. Poverty, hunger and stress changed my feature a lot. Besides, to avoid the curious and pitiful looks of my friends I had grown beard. Long beard and sunken cheeks were enough to conceal my identity, yet I adopted a different style of walking. That's why even Shofiq, my ex roommate, didn't recognise me.

I was certain if I met Parul, she wouldn't notice me either. She would rather walk away hurriedly like Shofiq. But Parul did recognise me instantly. She was shocked perhaps. For a while, she said nothing.

I said as casually as possible, "It's been a while! I have an important meeting. I need to rush."

Parul kept staring at me. There were hints of pain and shock in her eyes. When I started leaving, she said, "What's happened to you?"

I tried to smile and said, "My business has failed Parul. OK, Bye!"

Parul said nothing more. I was astounded. Her eyes were full of tears. She looked away. She stood there in silence for a while and then trudged across the road.

I almost forgot Parul. The life I was leading now had no space for such insignificant emotions like love. But with a few drops of trivial tears, Parul re-established herself. I felt once again the utter pain of having lost her and it overcame all other sorrows of my life. I needed to feel this pain. ●

# A slave

Humayun Ahmed

Parul was supposed to come by nine sharp. She didn't. I waited till twelve o' clock, alone. I was too upset. I felt like crying. Women, God knows why, are so moody! When I reached home, I found a small note left by her on the table.

"Call me on this number -- 69762, in the evening  
-Parul!"

I had called her on their neighbour's number many times before. But today why should I call her? Didn't we finalise after a lot of talks that on Monday we would leave for Tangail by ten in the morning? There, we would get married at Majid's place.

I lay in bed all through the afternoon. My lunch, ordered from a nearby hotel, remained untouched. I used to do this when I was young—skipping meals for being sad. I did that today. I kept thinking, "It's over with Parul!" As I thought this, I felt low and cheap. In the evening, when I went out to make the call, I was still upset and my lips quivered a bit while speaking.

The owner of Green Pharmacy asked in utter shock, "Are you sick?"

"I'll make a call." I said dryly.

Parul was nearby, probably. She picked the phone immediately and spoke in that childish tone that made my heartbeat race every time I heard her. "Listen! I got a job in a school. Can you hear me? Such a poor phone connection today!"

She was too excited and spoke in an animated voice. I heard her incredulously and stuttered, "You were supposed to be there at nine ..."

"Oh! I remember that. But listen we have to postpone the date. We don't have the emergency any longer! Besides ..."

"Besides?"

"With your current business state, if we get married now, we'll have to starve."

She blurted out more. Once she laughed! Well, I got the message—Parul wouldn't come to marry me. But it was just yesterday when we went out and bought household items. She roamed the entire market, even after she exhausted herself. It was just yesterday when she blushed profusely before asking the salesman for a double bed cover. But now she simply said "with your current business state ..."

It was quite a blow for me. I was never really brave. Or else, I'd have committed suicide. I'd have taken poison or jumped from the three storey building. But I did nothing. I was a soft person, you know, by birth.

It was a bad year for me. Accidents, downturns in business followed. Irfan took a loan of four thousand taka from me. He died suddenly. I ordered one wagon of salt in Ramgonj that simply vanished without a trace. I suffered heavy losses in other businesses too. I could barely stand on my feet. Women are quite visionaries! I realised. Parul had foreseen my future!

I lost touch with Parul. I never went to see her. Yet, we bumped into each other now and then. Sometimes while lingering around the same bus stop. Whenever she saw me, she said affectionately, "What a surprise! You've lost weight. How is your business?"

"So so."

"You have lost weight. You want to go out for a cup of tea? It'll be my treat."

The other day it was in front of a cinema hall. I wanted to avoid her. So I pretended not to see her and started walking past but she called me, "Listen! Listen! Did you come to watch films?"

"No," I said.



DIBARAH MAHBOOB

"Come here! Listen to me!"

"What?"

"I have a birthday programme today! My friend's son's birthday. Can you please choose a gift for me? Come with me!"

Every time I saw her, I was amazed. I couldn't possibly comprehend how a job with a three hundred taka salary made her so confident and proud! She never mentioned our marriage again. It seemed a trivial thing that once we had fixed a date to get married. Her sparkling look and chattering rather indicated that her life was much more meaningful and happening now.

On April 13, Parul got married. I almost forgave her for not sending me a wedding card, because if she did, that would have been another act of cruelty on her part. That evening, I went to watch a film after having a square meal at a restaurant. Then I went to a friend's house and chatted late into the night. I behaved as if Parul's marriage hadn't affected me at all. As if it's a common thing to fix a marriage date with someone and then marry another person! As if it happens all the time!

That night I felt the air warm in my room. Sleep eluded me and as I lay there, I mused. If my businesses got better a bit, I would marry a simple girl and I would burst out laughing while telling her how Parul ditched me.

But with time, things got worse. I lost most of my savings in a small business contract. I was in deep water. I fired the boy servant and had to dispense with a few precious things that were bought with much difficulty—a transistor, a record player and an expensive table clock. Then one day, I practically starved the whole day with half a loaf of bread.

I had had no idea about how cruelly this city treated someone with no money to support himself. I realized it soon while roaming around this cruel and heartless city. At that time, I felt famished all the time. Even the mere sight of rice at roadside hotels, covered with a piece of cloth, made me sad. Poor working class people having a good meal were a welcoming sight. "Such happy folks," I considered them and my eyes would fill with tears. I scabbled about to survive. Once I took a job as a salesperson at New Ink shop, writing advertisement for a soap company. In the midst of all this, Parul was erased from my memory.

Then one evening, I was going past the Mohammadpur market when I saw Parul all of a sudden. A cute child with her, wearing a red dress, looking like a doll. The child was walking, holding Parul's sari. Just to avoid Parul,

» SEE PAGE 15

**Humayun Ahmed** is our most prolific and most popular fiction writer. He passed away in 2012. Translated by **Marzia Rahman**. She is a fiction writer. Her debut novel will come out soon from Bengal Publications.