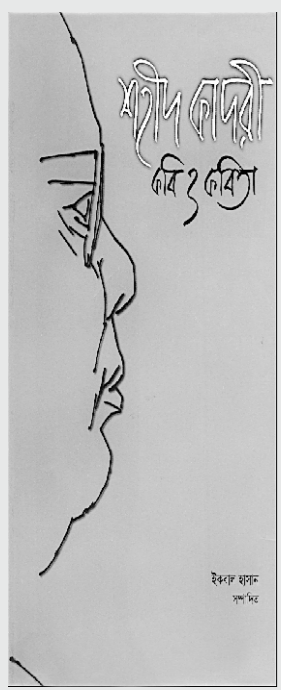


EXTRACT

Shaheed Quaderi: 'welcome to Dhaka'

Translated from *Shaheed Quaderi: Kobi O Kobita*, edited by Iqbal Hasan, Agami Prokashoni, Dhaka, 2003.



One of modern Bangla poetry's most eminent voices, particularly during the late fifties and sixties, belongs to Shaheed Quaderi, when his name was on many lips. Like Sudhin Dutta, he has written sparsely. So sparsely, in fact, that to read his poetry one has to not only search for him, but to literally uncover him. And for those poetry lovers who are also discoverers, his poems at once astonishing, indifferent yet blood-human, displaying a scientific turn of mind, a diseased, loveless, wounded existence, one that yet constructs a well-lit universe amid the darkness all around will illuminate with their light touch. Auto-biographical and confessional, freely unfolding their secrets as in a psychoanalytic session, we gain admittance through his poems into planetary areas where we ceaselessly come into contact with a frightening, remote, cold-blooded, desolate life.

I have had a thirty-year relationship with Shaheed Quaderi. One memorable noon somewhere in Motijheel right after Bangladesh's independence in Fazal Shahabuddin's office where the latter was busy trying to bring out his newspaper Binodon, loud laughter spilled into the hallway from inside the office, and here I had just come to Dhaka from Barisal, my feet still caked with mofussil mud, everything seemed magical, full of surprises...curious to see who possibly could be bewildering this hot noon with that kind of laughter, I peeked inside to see curly-haired, round faced, short-statured, dark-skinned Shaheed Quadri, who, after I was introduced to him by Fazal bhai (Fazal Shahabuddin) immediately said "Welcome to Dhaka." And then what uproarious laughter upon hearing that I too was attempting to write poetry! Since then I have been a spell-bound reader of his poems...

Shaheed Quaderi: the poet in self-imposed exile

The Dhaka poetic world of the fifties and sixties was a small one: everybody knew each other, they all were intensely aware of each other's work, famous adda centers evolved around battered desks and endless canteen cups of tea in newspapers and magazines, all in the halo of a now-irretrievably lost, old world bohemianism where almost anything went, anything seemed possible, where Dhaka was a small, dreamy provincial capital of slow rickshaw rides, lazy card games in sports clubhouses, 11-point movements and Baby ice cream parlours, where gentlemen only (please!) boozed away the days at Dhaka Club and the Dhaka university vice-chancellor's white Raj bungalow gleamed with a now-vanished aura in the sun, where the connection with Opar Bangla writers and poets and Kolkata was far more intimate and visceral. The smallness of their world also produced its opposite effect, where it could produce a feeling of being forever put on, home always seemed somewhere else, where horizons were limited and narrow, where nothing really happened, no action, no bright lights, which produced its own brooding alienation, a sense of fleeting identity, of loss and existential despair, of a bitter sense of powerlessness in the face of an unfeeling, often violent world, always on the receiving end. It is this dread, this sharp awareness of the surreal combined with the aforementioned Dhaka, its now-vanished leisurely cadences, its slow unspooling of life, that gives their poetry much of its uniqueness. All those things are gone now. Gone is the time when a poet did not need, nor gave a moment's thought, about cultivating political connections; indeed it was the opposite, where the poet articulated an authentic opposition, a distance fraught with frisson with the state and the political establishment, where

Talk of the state reminds me of independence day's armed forces,
talk of the state reminds me of barbed wire at the racecourse, curfew, Section 144,
talk of the state reminds me of khaki in hot pursuit, the minister's black car behind the jeep,

Shaheed Quaderi is a significant Bangladeshi poet of the fifties. He is the author of only 3 books of verse, but his tone, alliteration, images and the use of simile made his a unique poetic voice. He has been abroad, in exile from his homeland and poetry, for an inordinately long time. However, by intermittently writing poems he has signalled that his divorce from poetic life is not complete. This interview, published here in a condensed form, was conducted in New York in September 2002 by Shamsul Momin.

Translated by ASRAR CHOWDHURY and KHADEMUL ISLAM.

AM: How have you been without poetry for more than 24 years?
SQ: It is true that I haven't written poetry for 24 years, but poetry has always been with me. You may recall Keats once said *poetry of the earth is never dead*, meaning our earth will always have poetry. The poetry of life still surrounds me, and I also read poems.

AM: When did you realise you had the potential to write poetry?
SQ: I never thought I would write poetry. I was always of two minds about it. I became friends with the likes of Shamsur Rahman, Al Mahmud, and Fazal Shahabuddin at a very young age. I used to fearfully ask Shamsur Rahman: what will happen to me. He would say I was going to be fine, but would also add that either I would establish myself as a poet, or self-destruct.

AM: So one can assume Shamsur Rahman influenced you from your early days?
SQ: To tell you the truth, I had almost quit writing poetry. My first poem was published in 1956. I was a school student at that time. Buddhadev Basu published my

reviewed books, right?
SQ: I did write a review of that book. The real reason I never wrote reviews is simply laziness. I wrote only when I was forced to. Nobody forced me, so I did not write. Huq forced me into it, and thus I wrote the review. Huq later told me that he arranged a publication ceremony of the book at a restaurant. I ran into Shamsur Rahman there and when he was handed the book he said, "Ah, where is Shaheed today, that boy could write". I was very hurt when I heard this. I went home and that night wrote my poem, "Brishti, Brishti."

AM: We know something about poems, poets, the writing environment of the eighties and the nineties. What was it like during your time, where did poets gather for *adda*?
SQ: In our days, Dhaka was a very small town and all *adda* was centered in the newspaper offices. There used to be *adda* at *Shamakal* office. There used to be *adda* at *Shawgat* office. These were the places where we all used to meet. I first met Al Mahmud at the *Shawgat* office. The very day Al Mahmud came from Brahmanbaria to *Shawgat*, my first poem was published in that very magazine. Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury was then the poetry editor of *Shawgat*. I became friends with Al Mahmud that very evening. He had a book on Marxism in his hand.

AM: This happened in 1956?
SQ: I can't recall exactly, but it must have been 1956.

AM: Buddhadev Basu's poetry magazine *Kavita* was tremendously influential. After the publication of your poem in that magazine, did you think that our poets could also make it?
SQ: Yes, I think that our poets could also make it.

poems, Shamsur Rahman became an icon. What do you think is the reason behind this?
SQ: There are two reasons for this. First is the unique quality of Shamsur Rahman's poems, which immediately attracts the attention of the reader and distinguishes him from others. Second, we are talking about the fifties -- a watershed in Bangla poetry. After the five influential poets of the thirties, the Calcutta scene was deeply influenced by the politics of the forties. Poetry did not escape this reality. The big names of this period were Sukanta Bhattacharya and Shubhash Mukherjee. Although their poetry was good, it was one-sided and sounded more like slogans. Poetry is reflection of life. Life needs not only bread, but also roses. At that time, Marxism was all the rage and the poets were all talking about bread, not roses. Poetry had undergone a change. However, some people were saying that poetry ought to also talk about other things. And right in the middle of all this Shamsur Rahman then wrote *Shudhu du tukra shukno rutir niribill bhøj / dekhi chhaya niye shorire chhoray*.

AM: You still have the lines memorized?
SQ: This poem brought a new voice, a new dimension to Bangla poetry.

AM: Were there no poets at that time whom one could follow? Then the poets were Ahsan Habib, Syed Ali Ahsan, Abul Hossain, I don't quite know, but I wonder if any of them were representative poets at all.
SQ: They were trying to combine two eras, being suspended between the modern and the traditional. They could not fully cope with the very different beat of modern poetry, which Shamsur Rahman was able to do.

the dock, the rows of bars in a tiny jail cell, the serried ranks of prisoners; talk of the state reminds me of not coming back from processions the face of the youngest brother, talk of the state reminds me of Tejgaon industrial area, the wounded faces of workers in hospitals. Talk of the state reminds me of banned pamphlets, secret presses, dispersed crowds at the corner of Medical College 'two dead, five injured' talk of the state means rows and rows of cameramen, poster on walls: talk of the state means way up on a football field at high noon a lonely microphone...*

It was a time when to be a major poet meant something, carried weight, stood for something dense and indissoluble, when a poet's lines, his words, were full-bellied sails, where Tagore was a light you could count on infallibly (an astonishing number of them wrote poems of gratitude to him, a whole catalogue of thanks), and when a new book, a new poem by a major poet was a significant event among the culturally aware, among that now-distant, more appreciative, more discerning, finer, quieter reading public.

Khademul Islam

*translated section of S. Quaderi's poem *The state means left right left*.

party. It was impossible for me to join him. Al Mahmud was now also busy with his own political people. I realized that if I had to live there I would have to join a political party. Seeing how busy they were and their various associations, I thought there was no place for me in my homeland.

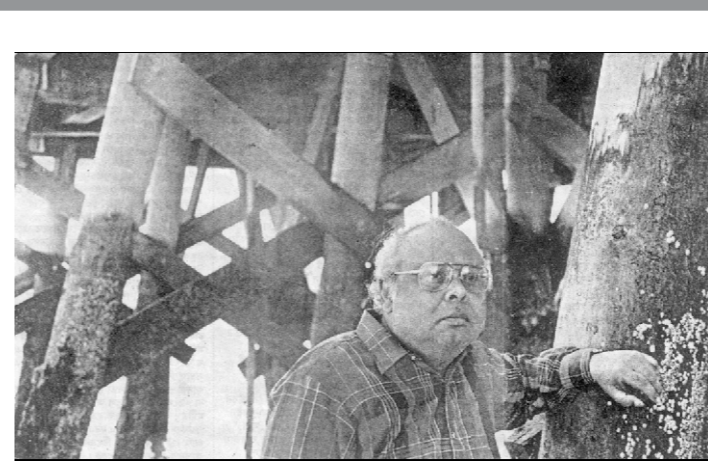
AM: Had you planned to come to America?
SQ: No, there was no plan. I met my second wife in London, an American citizen. At that time I was very lonely. We were married... we planned to return to Dhaka, but my wife's mother fell sick and she wanted to look after her. This way I came to America.

AM: Then you decided to settle in the United States?
SQ: Yes. Decided to settle here. To cut off all ties with Bangla literature, to never read a Bangla book again, to have absolutely nothing to do with Bangalis again in my life. Give birth to a new world.

AM: Why this sudden decision to never read a Bangla book, to have nothing to do with Bangalis, even though I know a few old friends gave you ample reason to feel hurt and rejected?
SQ: Frustration and desperation led me to reject anything related to Bangla and Bangla poetry. I thought I was finished. I was at the library one day when a book attracted my attention-- *The Encyclopedia of World Literature* published by Columbia University Press. I looked curiously at an article on Bangla literature. I found the name of only Shamsur Rahman among my friends. I sat there speechless.

AM: Shamsur Rahman's name?
SQ: Only Shamsur Rahman's name. I was very impressed and felt sad for myself, thinking that I too could have written. It's too late now. There is no way to return back!

AM: Sometimes you meet old and new poets at various functions in the US. In recent times you have met Nirmalendu Goon, Abdullah Abu Saeed. After meeting these people, does it not strike for once that you should start writing again?
SQ: My feelings regarding writing again are like shooting stars. In 1986, I wrote a poem called, "Before the rise of the Third Reich" for *Diganta*, a magazine published from New York. The poem was written in the US. It's not true that I have stopped writing. Unfortunately, what I've written in my time of exile are all in disarray. However, I do have plans to publish a book. I fear myself the most when I think of publishing. People know me as the Quaderi of the Fifties alongside the likes of Shamsur Rahman and all the big names of that era. Even that may not be a problem when you come to think of it if it were not for my laziness.



Shaheed Quaderi by the Atlantic in Salem, Massachusetts, 1995.

AM: You may recall Buddhadev Basu in an unpublished article once banished some words from modern poetry. Later, in writing a poem on Rabindranath Tagore, he had to use those very words and then admitted that it was impossible to consign

words into oblivion.
SQ: Yes, I did read that piece and it did influence us a lot. For example, we won't use a verb in isolation. Pramath Chowdhury introduced the style of using the present continuous tense. If you use a continuous verb, the rule then would be to not use the original verb. The problem with this was in doing so, the poem loses its phonetic organisation. There is a saying that words on their own have no meaning. Their meaning depends on how you structure them. Merely because one is omitting certain words does not mean you are enriching poetry. It is here that we owe Shakti Chatterjee a debt, when he showed us that we had not exhausted the possibilities of a verb, that there were entirely new ways of using it.

AM: We keep hearing that Bangla poetry is in flight from reality and that this is the principal reason for its current malaise.
SQ: Modern poetry is being written predominantly by the urban middle class. They have no connection with rural life. This does not mean that it has lost its depth because the fundamental feelings and emotions in Man's lifelove, death, despair, birth and loneliness all these are present in their poems. It may seem that they have turned away from life because you cannot find any talk of the plough in their poems, no crops or huts, but life's basic, deeper themes are there all right.

AM: Shamsur Rahman, Al Mahmud, and your best poems have enriched our literature and inspired readers and poets alike. Unfortunately, English translations of these great poems have failed to spark readers. Is it because of the quality of translations

or something else?
SQ: I think poor translation. The translator has to be equally adept in the mother language and the language he/she is translating into. If a third-rate writer of prose translates a first-rate poet, the results are likely to be disastrous.

AM: Recently you called your elder brother after many years. Are you feeling the pull of home?
SQ: Yes, I am eagerly looking forward to returning.

AM: Do you plan to write poems when you do return?
SQ: I have not sworn that I won't write poems. Or that I will write poems. It all depends on circumstances. If it comes naturally, then I'll write.

AM: Is there anything you would like to mention to poetry-lovers or our readers that hasn't been covered in this interview?
SQ: Nothing except that poetry cleanses the soul and I still read poetry. What I would like to say is that instead of analysing them, one should make the reading of poems an everyday habit.

One Splendid Summer Night

SHAHEED QUADERI
(translated by Kaiser Huq)

Moyeen, if on a splendid summer night lit up by fireflies all the brilliant emissaries of this civilization were to die it wouldn't be a great loss to anyone-- I know it well, and so do you! Or if I were to slip off this terrace right now, toppling over this handsome bannister, on this topsy-turvy windblown evening, on to the dusty footwork pavement, would it be a great loss to anyone? Or let's say it's you in my place Taking a dive to the pavement; People will say the same and they won't be far wrong. No better time than now, Moyeen! Now! This topsy-turvy windblown evening. The two of us have stood here on this balcony on countless nights in dew-wet hair in the depth of winter, on countless nights leant our faces into the wind and the wind thatperhapshad blown over many rose gardens and brimming lakes and wished to sail over the planet like a benediction struck our faces, pulled up short, hurt and turned topsy-turvy with smell of alien flesh

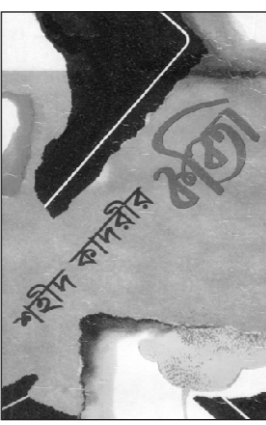
Remember the rose you picked up at a wedding fete, that in an hour or so within your grasp, yes, in your hand the poor rose shrivelled like a dead bird into nothing. That exquisite blossom couldn't bear the heat of your skin, do you understand, Moyeen, can you? if it were someone else in your place it wouldn't have been any different, not at all...

Once I'd bought a green parrot complete with cage. It used to hang on the balcony--- this very one--- and swing in the breeze. It was turning into a pet, even trilled a few tunes, ate out of my hand, drank pots of water. I even taught it countless phrases. And then one blustery night I didn't bring it in, it slipped my mind--- a small error but too much for that lovely winged creature to bear. Do you see, Moyeen? Can you? It'd be the same with someone else in my place...

now, on this bright windblown topsy-turvy evening you suddenly wonder aloud, on this cold balcony: 'After man's noble death his nobler weapons remain in the earth's depths beneath layers of rock, beneath piles of rubble; countless rose bouquets are roasted--- there's no fragrance anywhere; getting wind of our absentmindedness at least one parrot has toppled over on to the hard balcony floor--- its green hue no longer visible on this earth, although Machiavellian ideas on statecraft are nearly imperishable, like ancient banyan trees.'

Such thoughts have occurred to me too, Moyeen! Come, let us two take the leap on this splendid breezy firefly-lit summer night but before that if all the brilliant emissaries of this civilization were to vanish suddenly, like vapour then the rose, the parrot and their kinsfolk would benefit a lot more.

Kaiser Huq is Bangladesh's foremost English-language poet. He is currently at the School of Oriental and Asian Studies, London.



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poem. I thought I had made it. I don't have to write another poem again. After that, for two years, I neither published nor wrote another poem. One of the reasons for this silence was at that time I became friendly with Khaled Chowdhury and Sukumar Majumder. These people were philosophers who were very much into Plato, Hegel and Kant. We reached the conclusion that poets talked of high-flown things that were fundamentally meaningless. For this reason, Plato had banished poetry from his Republic. It is only through philosophy that life's meaning can be found, and I began to avidly read anything on philosophy I could get my hands on. Poetry then seemed to be merely child's play. I was at Chow Chin Chow-- the first Chinese restaurant in Dhaka. Syed Shamsul Huq appeared at the *mehfil*. He told us his first book on poetry, *Ekoda Ek Raatri* (Once upon a night), had been published. He wanted to give me a copy of the book and told me to visit him at his *Chitrali* office the next day. I dropped by *Chitrali* the following day, and Huq gave me the book and requested me to write a review. I replied then that let me take the book home, but Huq was insistent, "No, Shaheed bhai, once you go, that will be the last of you. Please write the review here".

AM: As far as we know, you never

AM: It is also true that even before publishing his first collection of

LIT PAGE MAIL

To: dseditor@gononet.com
Subject: Little Magazines
Date: Sat, 29 Mar 2003 05:05:16 +0000
Mime-Version: 1.0
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Thanks for the article titled "*Dhaka's Little Magazines: part rage against the machine, part duck in the meadow*" (March 29th, 2002) by Khademul Islam. Finally, an article in an English daily that not only acknowledges, but appreciates the number of entrepreneurs of original and indigenously-rooted writing in Bangladesh. These magazines-- attempting to ignite a pursuit of a more innovative, radical and most importantly, critical form of Bengali writing that has escaped the ambit of orthodox trash of recent mainstream writers (the mirror that perpetuates the machine?) - have long been marginalised. To expose them on DS to a greater readership, especially the ones that don't frequent the tiny *khoborer kagoj bikroy kendros*, is important for that informs the urban, and for that matter the rural reader, of the nuances of Dhaka life expressed in an adequately powerful, passionate, intimate and yet, simple language. A language that perhaps is couched in complex mindsets and contexts, necessary to describe nature within such a concrete jungle; or love and compassion in a largely, materially-apathetic lifestyle. On a more seemingly marginal, but important note, this will, hopefully!, encourage readers from the largely English-educated elite to tap into the critical realm that allows them to question the assumptions of their elite socio-cultural establishments. Who knows, a greater exposure of these critical thoughts might, contrary to the author's (Mr. Islam's) wishes, inspire greater Dhakaite-English writings on such matters, perhaps?

By the way, cool translations!

A W KHAN
Chamelibagh, Dhaka