

1971: An Ilish Story

KHADEMUL ISLAM

It is December 1972 in Dhaka (then Dacca). A brilliant mid-morning on a back verandah in Rayer Bazaar. My mother and I are comfortably perched on old cane *moras* watching my maternal grandmother about to gut a fish. She is seated behind the dark, curved blade of an old *boti*, holding down its scarred, wooden stock with her right foot. The sharpened edge of the blade glints. A small, stained *pati* (reed mat) is spread beneath the *boti*. By her side, on the coarse red cement, is a little wicker basket. She is a tiny woman with a white, stiffly starched sari like a crackling cloud around her. I haven't seen her since I was a child. Our family, my parents, I, my brother and sister, had escaped from Karachi, from the old West Pakistan, to Dhaka, to the newly-risen state of Bangladesh barely a month back, and were staying with my *mama* (maternal uncle) till we could find our footing. I look up at the sky bordering the verandah roof, at the day glowing with the same liquid light in which we, five refugees lugging three suitcases, had crossed the Indo-Bangladesh border at Benapole. My grandmother had come down from Chittagong to visit with us, marveling at her grandchildren's growth and clucking sympathetically at stories of our flight from Pakistan.

"Ilish mach," she had informed me with a smile, holding it up in the air. From the Padma. "Taja (fresh)," she had added, pointing to a startlingly clear, protruding eye. And indeed, the sleek body, silvery as a sitar note, faintly bluish-green on its back, had winked in the vivid sunlight. It is a medium-sized *ilish* ("they're small in the wintertime"), the downward slant of its mouth and the angular line of its lower jaw giving it a vaguely determined air. I cannot remember the last time I had seen one. Born and raised in dry, dun-colored, sprawling Karachi city, all this, fish, rivers, relatives,

Dhaka's sudden swathes of green grass and toy-sized *dak opish* (post offices), is new to me.

My grandmother is talking about 1971. Every Bengali in 1972 talked about 1971, about the civil war, refugees, and the subsequent release from the daily horror.

"1971 was 1947 all over again," she says as she holds both ends of the fish with her hands and vigorously saws it back and forth across the blade. Fish scales fly in all directions and a few sizzle upward, float momentarily at the top of their arc, aquamarine and topaz spangles, before gliding down on to the cement. In 1947, during the Partition, my grandparents had fled from Calcutta (now Kolkata) along with other Muslims. Whole *paras* (neighborhoods) slaughtered in a day, my mother had said. Babies thrown over walls. Trembling adults and crying children fleeing pell-mell.

She then cuts off the small dorsal fin on the gray, denuded body, brusquely ripping through cartilage and tendon, leaving a thin scar, a bloodied line, on top. Then snips the smaller lower fins off. *tchk, tchk*, till the tiniest stubs are left.

"Down the road from our house," she continues with an upward glance at us, the irises of her eyes black as amulet string. "There was a Hindu household." Her hands are betel-nut brown and turmeric-stained, a working matriarch's hands, ceaselessly directing, lading, tucking in, handing out the daily bazaar menu, smoothing out, folding a *paan* leaf, picking.

She neatly fits the blade under the crescent moons of the gill covers and shears them off, exposing the glutinous, intricate balsa wood fretwork of bone, spotted with scarlet moss and lichen, that knits together fish head. The gills, serrated flaps laid on top of each other, are a distinct, flushed maroon.

"Taja," she says again and nods approvingly, the corona of sprung hairs around her head stirring with the motion. Behind her against the

far wall are two empty flowerpots and a red earthen bowl with drained rice starch for crisping her saris. Their shadows, peasant-dark doubles, are sharply etched on the peeling yellow limewash. A column of ants is marching up the sides and round the rim of the bowl.

"They were long-time residents of our *para*. We would allow them to use our big pond for bathing," she says, vigorously scraping the last few scales off near the deeply Vee-d tail. Her words are in sync with her moving, working arms, spilling out, then halting, then spilling again.

"Well, you know, Chittagong is a conservative place, and our *maulvi* was a Peace Committee member." Peace committees had been Bengali groups, largely in the rural areas, fostered by the Pakistan army for propaganda and terror. She turns the fish upward and makes an incision just below its throat with the tip of the *boti*, a precise surgical cut, then gingerly draws out tiny fish sacs and glands, gray and yellow snot strung on liquid lines like a surreal *dhobi's* wash. Out come micro pouches and bags, pearl and umbra, to be flicked on to the mat. The first flies appear.

She then grips the fish solidly with both hands, one clamped over the mouth and the other around its middle, and cuts its head off, the flesh on her upper arms jiggling with the effort. A snapping sound as the spine, after an initial resistance, gives way. Red specks spatter her spousal right knee. Ash-colored threads, supple links to an external world of water and weeds, are visible inside the hollow stem. The mouth gapes. She trims the head with casual, familiar little flourishes and puts it in the basket.

"One night--well, it was two o'clock in the morning, we heard screaming and shouts of *narai takbir*," she continues, referring to the Muslim rallying cry during the 1947 communal riots.

She holds the *ilish* lengthwise along the blade, grasping it by the twin prows of its headless neck so

that its back is towards her and slices open the soft white underbelly with one single fluid upward motion. She then brings the fish closer to her and peers inside.

"Eggs?" my mother asks. "I don't see any," my grandmother replies. "They get eggs only during the *borsha* (rainy) season." My mother waves her hands to ward off the flies.

She pulls out the slithery guts from the marbled, moist cavity with practiced fingertips. Dark strings coated with clotted blood. Her agile fingers worry inside the gaping, boat-shaped abdominal hole, checking and rechecking for detritus. For life, wet, humid, mucous-laden.

"The next morning we heard that they had been attacked and killed," she says with another glance at us, pushing back rimless spectacles with the back of her right hand, careful to keep her fingers clear of the lenses. "They said the *mollah* himself had slit their throats." Her voice ends on an accusing note.

"Who said?" asks my mother. "Their immediate neighbors. Muslims."

A silence, in which a breeze sighs through torn leaves as she deftly turns the fish over and under in her hands, scrutinizing her handiwork. A painter surveying an almost finished canvas, assessing shades and tones. Then, slowly, almost dreamily, she slices the fish into proportionate, heart-shaped pieces, bullying only through the spine and translucent rib bones, and plops them into the basket. The tail lands right by the head. Teardrops of blood, instant rubies in the hot bright gush of sun, well up from the chunks of pale pink flesh. The *boti* blade, like her fingertips, is streaked with blood and slick traces of gummy matter. Fishy secretions, around which the flies happily buzz.

"Where's the *maulvi* now?" my mother asks. "Oh, he's still walking around, hale and hearty."



She had used the word "jobai," the language of Qurbani Eid, the day of ritual sacrifice of animals that I have been steeped in since childhood. It specifically means to slit the throat. In Urdu, in Pakistan, it is the sharper, metallic "zabai." On Eid day, scared, wild-eyed cows would have their hooves tied and brought crashing down on to cement courtyards or bruised grass, and then the mullah would step in with his *kalma* and his newly whetted knives. Mullahs' hands, nails bitten to the quick, raised in supplication or stroking a beard, an index finger reverently running along a line in an open Qur'an as if to underline its surging rhythms. Hands that ran orphanages, bathed the dead, performed marriages, went door to door on Qurbani Eid plying their trade.

The cow would draw air through its mouth in great heaving gasps only for it to vent noisily through the ripped, open gullet, dewlaps flapping, and as this noise would fill the air above our heads, we the children in our festive new Eid clothes (the littler girls spangled in flickering *zari* and silk hair ribbons) would stand in a circle and watch as arterial blood, red, viscid, slippery, would first spurt and then seep into the earth. Beneath Karachi's peer-

less, fabulously blue summer skies.

I look at my tingling palms, at my grandmother's cheeks, still smooth after all these ruffled decades, at the chipped tomato of my mother's toes. Bengali skin, tenderly being warmed by a saffron sun. Our flesh, the mysterious, particular, almost prim denseness of live tissue, its sinuous declivities, the cells and membrane stitched together, really, by faith and prayer.

What unmakes us, makes us.

Later at lunch, with sugary squares of siestatime light streaming in through thin white curtains and my grandmother's hair still wet from her bath, my *mama* notices that I am giving the fish curry a wide berth.

"You're not eating the *ilish*?" "Not today." "Can't sort out the bones, eh?" "Yes, I think I need more time." A pause. Another round of rice and *daal* for everybody except me. "You're hardly eating at all." "I'm not very hungry." "So how do you like our Dhaka?" "Bhalo (good). *Khubi bhalo* (very good)."

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Ilish

ARUN MITRA
(translated by Farhad Ahmed)

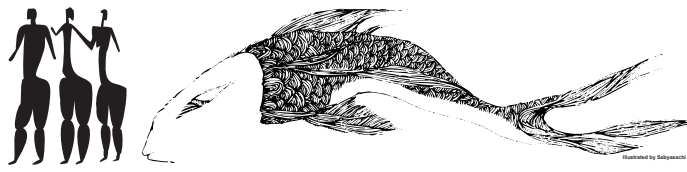
What plenitude!

A glittery charm floods the boat's floorboards. Morningstar in a Bangali sky lit the path ahead,

treading through marshes leaping over ditches crossing canals lakes to come to rest at this upstream wharf.

Now the diamond gleams in the city's eye now the waves of sorrow is stilled in one's breast. Beauty spreads from the floorboards, silver flies in all directions, I extend my hands, grasp silver scales.

Oh drizzle, dance, dance the livelong day, let the city sway to the tune of scattered showers, I have found fourscore of fish scales I shall dine tonight on fragrance I shall while away the morning and evening like the proverbial king. I have paid in advance for ecstasy Is it seemly to cry now? No, not at all!



Book Review

Afsan Chowdhury's Chotogolpo

Published by Srabon, Dhaka, February 2003, cover by Robin Ahsan, Taka 70.00, 80 pages, hardcover.

MANOSH CHOWDHURY

THIS is a collection of seven short stories by Afsan Chowdhury written by him at different times (*Fateh Bewa's Kahini*, *Dhor*, *Ekti Proshthaner Potobhumi*, *Dhanda*, *Shay Ebgong Taar Podojogol*, *Bhira's Prohor*, *Bhara's*). Afsan's interest is not in portraying people, his antiheroes and antiheroines, or in merely sketching out character differences, but in showing them as full-bodied creatures who are enmeshed in a living web of history and memory, who gain their breadth and multifacetedness due to the intimate impact of history and memory. It is this that gives Afsan Chowdhury's stories a contemporary cast, that makes them memorable.

Since the publisher failed to give the dates when these stories were first written or published, there is no recourse for the reader except to read the author's preface. It would have been convenient had the dates been included. Afsan has written that Bangladeshi writers who started to write in the '70s did so during a period of historical significance, that it was an "intense and extreme period to live through." A period which now has begun to fade, perhaps even erased. 1971 was, and will always be, the greatest influence on their imaginations. He goes on to forewarn readers that 1971 casts its long shadow over his own stories. While one thus gets a sense of their context from the author, it is even more evident from the stories themselves, stories in which their characters move aimlessly, kill and get killed, where the uncertainty of a funeral means a corpse remains in the care of old man Moslem, where the inhabitants of these stories hide from each other at the very edges of a middle-class world, or sell one's wife to a client for the right price.

The characters themselves have complex inner lives and as the author unravels these complexities

lunatic, there is no such thing as madness. Their vision is perfectly clear: these *jimmis* are simply lost in another world, and this is why they do not recognize the people of this world. Their eyes see only the infinite. However, the reason behind *Fateh Bewa's* devotion remains a mystery. At the end of the story the reader joins the devotees in their rhythmic circle of pain.

In the second story, *Dhor*, is Maloti, Hindu, a peon's wife. She, after the horrors of March 25th, gets the news of the killing of her husband Shonkor from Kanai, who ponders long and deep in heavy rain, beneath a *kul* tree, how to break the news of the slaying to her, since the head has been cut off from the body. This is at the heart of the story: how do they recognize the body, and how as Hindus do they venture out onto the streets. Maloti disguises herself as a Muslim (as Moyna), then stuffs the body and the head in a gunny sack to bring it home, accompanied by her daughter and son Komol (who is now Kamal). Out on the street, the killers, wanting to be sure the family is not Hindu, haul the corpse out of the sack to check if it was circumcised. The corpse is circumcised, thus making Maloti realize the head is Shonkor's, the body is not. There is a deep irony at play here, that a headless body saves Maloti and her family from death right on the street. It is also from a sense of duty that Maloti turns back to return the body. *Dhor* is the only story in this collection that deals directly with the 1971 liberation war. The majority of the stories written about 1971 usually have been tales of heroism, but Afsan's treatment, unusual and fastidious, shows the opposite: that year's pain and sorrow, and a Hindu reality.

Women are central to both the stories; it generally is a feature, though not exclusively so, in Afsan's stories. Aside from the '*bewa*' and just-widowed women, there are also prostitute women in this collection of short stories. They are in *Bhara's*, *Bhira's Prohor* and *Dhanda*, and

occupy a significant space in these three stories. More importantly, they are all from middle-class backgrounds, a fact which forces the reader to think why it is so. A second reading leads one on the trail of husbands; excepting one or two cases, husbands in Afsan's stories, even when absent, exert their force: in the case of the *bewa* it takes on one form, in the case of the woman turned prostitute, another; and yet another entirely different form in the story about Maqbul and Najma. Afsan's preoccupation in these stories is the exploration of love and affection in households without husbands, or where there once was one, and even in one case where there is one, how that led to prostitution.

Two characters, male, in the stories are Naxalites. They are not husbands. Both are associated with death. One's story begins after being killed (*Ekti Proshthaner Potobhumi*), while the other, released from prison, enters a life of killing (*Bhara's*). The former, before his murder, forced his parents to wait for the prodigal son, and then after his murder, caused their flight from home. The latter Naxalite, now a 'free' man, faces the dilemma of adjusting from killing for a political cause to killing for money. He compares his situation with the choices made by his sister, a prostitute, and comes to a surprising, if unconvincing, conclusion. He is the cause of his parents' death, and he is also the cause of his sister's prostitution. That is the way the story turns: a single male is a Naxalite, the single woman is a prostitute! It is perhaps a little too formulaic! The Naxalites in Bangla fiction do not correspond to real-life people at large, but that is a different tale. My real point is that while representations of Naxalites in Bangla fiction tend towards the super-heroic and the macho-masculine, Afsan's creations are like ordinary people, especially the Naxalite who is killed. They are not phantoms, and while in *Bhara's* certain plot twists feels a little clichéd, yet the psychological



strains revealed in the man shows Afsan's talent as a writer to be unique.

However, death is the matter at the end; death or departure, departure and displacement, displacement and uprooting -- tangible and intangible -- these form the backdrop of Afsan's stories. It is a reality that the reader has no choice but to confront since Afsan literally drags the reader along with him, and this dragging has the intended effect of making the reader think.

I am forced to say that the publication standard is very poor. Not only gross spelling mistakes abound (for example, '*punno*' on the very first page, which is spelt with a *roshoo* here is spelt with *dirgho*, *aasrito* which is correctly spelt with *roshkar* has been spelt with *dirghikar*), but there is considerable apprehension on my part that syntactical and word order errors are also present. One gets this feeling while reading the book, and the spelling mistakes only reinforce this feeling. Afsan Chowdhury has used an extensive vocabulary in these stories, something which is not seen in present-day writers in Bangla, and which points to Afsan's close (given the fact that he also writes in English) relationship with Bangla. This is a conscientious act on the part of the writer. Given the above, it is indeed unfortunate that the publisher proved to be so neglectful of his duties, and one wishes that it not be so in the future.

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E-mail from Khulna: reply to Augustine Gomes

From: Ahmed Ahsanuzzaman
To: dseditor@gononet.com
Subject: Attn: Khademul Islam, Editor, Star Literature
Date: Tue, 22 Apr 2003 11:29:39 +0600
X-OriginalArrivalTime: 22 Apr 2003 05:29:40.0058 (UTC)
Mime-Version: 1.0
Content-Type: text/plain; format=flowed

Dear Editor, Star Literature

This email was prompted by the article "The Renaissance That Failed: the little magazine movement in Bangladesh in the eighties" published in the Daily Star literature page on April 19. In the piece poet and writer Subrata Augustine Gomes, now living in Australia, wrote about the reasons behind the failure of little magazine movement in Bangladesh, which initially in the 1980s showed such promise. Through you I would like to thank him for his soul-searching article. However, as a previous activist of the so-called 'Renaissance' (I was the assistant editor of *Prosun*, the little magazine then jointly edited by Augustine Gomes and the late Masud Ali Khan, whom he mentioned in the piece) I can't quite agree with him.

He is nevertheless absolutely right in his observation that it was because of creating barriers within the barrier among the activists of the little magazine movement that caused its rather untimely death. I would like him to remember how difficult it was for us to publish our magazine *Prosun*-- the second volume, which also happened to be its last--in 1990. What frustrated us most was not however the money required for publication, but the attitudes of our fellow little magazine activists who wanted to know who would be contributing in the issue, that they would not write if some "others" had contributed. And when the volume was ultimately published quite a few of our own friends refused to call it a 'little magazine' at all. Thus, the "blacklisting" of little magazine activists, contributors and writers, albeit quite arbitrarily, definitely contributed to the sorry demise of the little magazine movement.

However, another reason, equally grave, he did not quite mention was the lack of sincerity and integrity on the part of the activists, which, I believe, was crucial to the fall of the movement. And it's Augustine Gomes who knows it better than any one else! I am sure he remembers the bizarre experience when I gave a good amount of money to one of our activists for publishing a book of mine, and who then just came up with only 100 copies-- and those too merely photocopies! Maybe we were enlightened by the trail of our illustrious predecessors in the West! At the end of the day, it really mattered.

Again, as hinted in the piece, were we really prepared to launch the movement? In other words, did we prepare ourselves for it? Most of us were rather content living in an ivory tower with the thought that we were doing great when actually we were not reading or discussing at all. We didn't want to know what was happening in world literature. Besides, we would never confess that most of us didn't understand English. In the process, we didn't enlist the help of those who would have read and understood literatures in English. One of the aims of our movement was to extend the horizon of our learning and knowledge. We not only miserably failed to achieve it, but sadly enough, even failed to realise we had failed.

In a recent email to me, Augustine Gomes (who is Augustine Bhai to me personally) suggested that I take up the editorship of *Prosun*. In reply to my query he assured me that I was the right person for it. However, may I humbly ask him whether the problems and limitations we encountered in the '80s and the early '90s are no more there to thwart a renewed attempt? Or, is it because he just wanted me to have a go at it?

Let me confess, unlike him I am not that optimistic.

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