

## SHORT STORY

## What Will The Poet Do Now? Part-II

DHRUBO ESH  
(translated by Farhad Ahmed)

The next eight days the poet spent in trying to collect the seven-eight hundred takas. And on the evening of the eighth presented himself again at Red Dots Graphics. Today a different picture presented itself to him. The artist was angry, or distracted. He had an angry expression. Why were his eyes red? Did he also consume canal? The poet sat down on a chair as noiselessly as possible. The artist hadn't yet seen him. He was hectoring Peepul in angry tones, "What is it with you guys? Didn't I tell you not to do anything except cover art? Is this the time to design banners for spices?... Hah! all of you have gone nuts. After February I'm out of here--I'm not going to work with this house again!" And then he saw the poet. Said, "Oh, it's you? What is it? You've come for your cover art? Peepul, give him his cover output. I'm going for a cigarette." And saying this the artist stood up. The poet also stood up. Said, "Just one thing..."

"Yes?"

"I couldn't collect the money."

"What?"

"The money for the output," the poet said, "I couldn't get it."

"So why did you come here?"

"Well..."

"Are you a poet? Or a bloody beggar?"

The poet was taken aback.

"If you don't have the money, why did you commission the art work?" the artist asked.

"Well, if later one... I'll get you the money after I sell my books."

"You're going to give me the money after you sell your books? You can't raise eight hundred takas, why do you bring out a book?"

"That's my personal business"--had the situation been different perhaps the poet would have said that. He didn't say it now. Instead, he muttered, "Well, I'm definitely going..."

"I can't give you the output without the payment."

"I'll pay you. Once the book comes out I'm going to pay you."

The artist's eyes seemed to get redder. He said, "I told you, I can't do it. You think I own this place? Why should these people give it to you on credit? Who are you, Shamsur Rahman?"

"If you're going to talk like this, then..."

"How else do you expect me to talk? How? Go away, I'm not giving you the cover art. No money, a poseur! Get up! Get out!"

"What kind of behaviour is this?"

The poet felt deeply hurt.

The artist said, "Just go." Then turned to the boy, "Peepul, look in

the Current folder. Open Tara Shaukat's cover. *Secret Heaven*. Look under S... right, that one." Then looked at the poet, "Now what? Why aren't you going?" The poet had never felt more humiliated. He looked pale and disconsolate. He got up and said, "I'm leaving."

"Lots of Cocaine--put that song on."

A bizarre English song started to play on the computer.

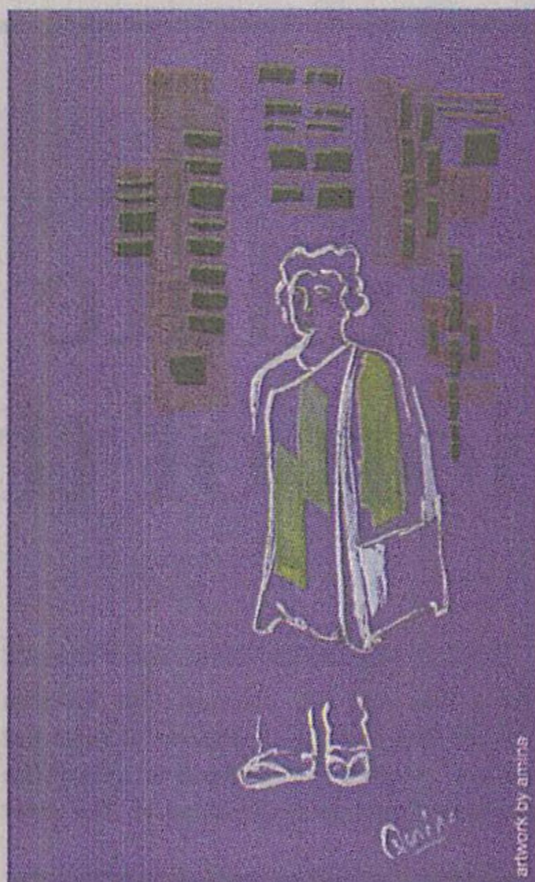
*She don't like*  
*She don't like*  
*She don't like*  
*Co-caine!*

The poet again addressed the artist, "I'm leaving."

"Go"--screamed the artist. The angry poet did not say anything else. He looked pleadingly for some time at this "great" artist. The "great" artist did not bother to look back at him. He had become engrossed with the inner flap of Shaukat's *Secret Heaven*.

The wounded poet got out of Red Dots. Downstairs he thought, now what? Well, for now, a cigarette... the poet stood and lit a cigarette. While smoking he mullered over a lot of things. Had the artist deliberately humiliated him? Or was it because his mood had been off? Must be his mood was off. Otherwise how could an artist behave like that with a poet? The poet saw a blue car. Sky-blue.

The car parked and two men came out of it. One was a very well-known individual, a popular novelist and television drama writer. The other one was probably his publisher. The poet had seen them a few times at Shahbagh. The novelist-cum-television playwright had also once been easily accessible. At Shahbagh. When he too would sit on the curb outside PG Hospital and take tokes of canal.



Nowadays he went to bars, drank foreign whiskey. Et cetera, et cetera. One heard a lot of talk about him.

Whose was the sky-blue car? The novelist-cum-playwright's? Or the publisher's?

What the hell was it his business whose it was anyway?

Both the writer and publisher walked away from the car with a busy air. Went up the stairs and disappeared. Were they going to Red Dots Graphics? To the artist?

The poet lit another cigarette. For a while he stood there and looked at the passers by and the buildings. Purana Paltan was an old neighbourhood; this road, how old was it?... A frighteningly fat lady walked past... The girl in the rickshaw, a young prostitute?... How many floors was this building? One, two, three, four... No, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight--eight floors. The inhabitants of the eighth floor lived close to the sky. Did anybody live up there? Or was it an office--stray thoughts. And lit another cigarette, and another one after that. Even after a lot of thought the poet could not resolve his doubt: Should he approach the artist again? Or should he not?

The writer and the publisher hadn't yet left. The poet again climbed up the stairs to the third floor. To Red Dots Graphics.

The artist's mood had lightened. He was talking with the novelist and his publisher. All three of them were laughing about something. Then the writer and publisher got up and left.

On the computer screen was a solemn-looking book cover. A translation of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Evil Hour*. Something abstract. The poet couldn't make head or tails of it.

The artist saw the bewildered poet. Said, "You?"

The poet said, "Yes..."

"Again? What is it now?"

"Please don't be angry with me. If I don't have the money, what can I do? Maybe I won't be able to take the art work..."

"I told you that."

The poet, crestfallen, said, "I wanted to ask you about something else."

"What?"

"Would you do a few drawings for my book? On tracing paper?"

"No. I don't do drawings on tracing paper."

"You used to do it before."

"I used to. I don't anymore."

"I'll pay you."

"You'll pay me? How much?"

"Whatever you want."

"Is that so?" the artist laughed. "No. You can't get hold of eight hundred takas, how can you pay me?"

"I'll give you the money."

"Please leave. Don't bother me anymore--Peepul, change this colour. Get rid of the cyan. Put in black thirty percent."

"So you won't do my work?" the poet asked.

"No! Now will you leave?"

Peepul turned in his chair to look at the poet.

"Please leave," the artist said. "I have work to do."

The poet felt very disheartened.

He turned to leave. He didn't say I'm leaving. He came out of Red Dots Graphics.

Then came the muezzin's call for *maghrib* prayers. A lot of time passed.

The poet was seen standing in front of the Red Dots Graphics building. Standing and smoking cigarettes. Artist! Hah! An artist who did book covers. The air! Sitting there thinking he was Max Ernst! Bloody commercial artist! Anything was possible in this country! Ah, if only there was some canal now!

But the poet was not going anywhere else. Not even in one of the possible eight directions. Now the poet was going to wait.

He was going to wait for the 'great' artist.

Wasn't the son of a bitch going to go home tonight?

In the poet's shoulder bag lay a green-plastic-enclosed box cutter. What stories were going to be in the newspapers tomorrow? 'Artist stabbed!'

Should it be 'stabbed' or 'cut up'? A box cutter was not the same thing as a knife!

The poet composed a news headline-- "Artist so-and-so cut up before commencement of book fair!"

Would they publish a photo of the cut-up artist?

Let them!

The bloody air he put on!

The poet lit another cigarette.

Dhrubo Esh is a well-known Bangladeshi artist. Farhad Ahmed is a free-lance writer/translator.

## Book Reviews Sing a song of six books

Kaiser Haq

Among resident Bangladeshi fiction writers in English Niaz Zaman has the longest track record. She made her debut in 1980 with a very readable novel, *The Crooked Neem Tree*, brought out a first collection of very readable stories in 1996 and has recently published *Didima's Necklace and Other Stories*. It compares well with its predecessors, and smoothly takes the reader through a varied social and historical landscape.

The ornament in the title story, "Didima's Necklace," becomes a symbol of feminine resourcefulness as its owner keeps pawing it to tide several generations of her family through a series of crises. When the family fortune eventually finds an even keel and the necklace is redeemed for good and is seen by all--for the first time--it is discovered to be quite unimpressive in weight or design. Then it disappears and didima too dies in venerable old age, a personage of mythic proportions. There are touching emotional resonances in the story, but they seem to be muffled by a meandering quality in the prose.

A similar tendency mars some of the other stories, e.g., "Holy Thursday," while "Mariam and the Miser," which is an amusing vignette, is spoiled by unnecessary feminist philosophizing towards the end. However, one should not complain too much, for there are a number of stories that keep things nicely balanced, e.g., "An Experiment in Human Psychology," "Reality," "By the Roadside" (a veritable prose poem), "A Lucky Escape," "The Nawab Who Loved Food," "Behind the Mosquito Curtain" (a gentle satire that will raise a chuckle from anyone fortunate enough not to be stricken by dengue). Interestingly, Niaz quietly peppers her prose with un glossed local words, which, after Rushdie, is, I suppose, quite apropos.

Three Girls: A Twenty-First Century Tale tells the story of... well... three girls. And a number of other characters, of course. After their homesteads have been ravaged by the floods of 1998, Anwara and her younger cousin Khalida grow up in a slum somewhere in Bangladesh. Anwara's situation improves when their rich uncle Mahmud (a.k.a. Sam) employs her father and also provides them accommodation after her mother dies of dengue. Khalida too is kept on as a household help, and the two girls are befriended by Maya, Sam's only daughter. But the irrepressible Khalida gets on her auntie's nerves and moves to Dhaka to seek domestic employment with the help of an agent.

Anwara is married off into an orthodox family dominated by her mother-in-law and quietly adjusts to the situation. Maya is besotted with her schoolmate Noman who is, however, no more than a name. A burqa-clad woman claims to have been sent by Noman to take her to him. The gullible Maya falls for the trick and is trafficked to India after being broken in through a series of gang rapes. Khalida gets into trouble on attaining puberty; she is seduced by a driver, thrown into jail on trumped up charges, resorts to vagabondage on coming out, and dies.

The narrative breaks off with 9/11, the point of this (commend-

ably enough) being that everyday there are many more horrible deaths worldwide than were caused by that horrendous event.

Plenty of other terribly distressing events occur in course of a terribly contrived narrative, but they have little emotional impact, chiefly because the characters are little more than cardboard cut-outs. Matters aren't helped either by the postmodernist posturings of the author, Faruk Abdullah, a.k.a. Carl Bloom (the former being the name adopted by the latter when he and his Bangladeshi wife had a Moslem wedding). Nor does the language stimulate appreciation: "entwined in some sort of wrestling act"; "she did not know, in her heart, what the condition of her father was towards her"; "write about it without incurring some kind of crime." Well, well, well...

*Yantrarudha* is the kind of novel that is difficult to write and even more difficult to translate, for it is about a spiritual quest undertaken within the parameters of the Hindu tradition but in an age dominated by materialist values. Happily, both author and translator have attained conspicuous success. Chandrasekhar Rath has become an illustrious name in the history of Oriya literature, and Jatindra Kumar Nayak has won the Hutch Crossword Book Award for Indian Language Fiction Translation for his English version, *Astride the Wheel*.

A densely-textured novel of considerable psychological power, *Yantrarudha* has for central character a middle-aged village priest, Sanatan Dase. His relentless struggle with poverty leads him to doubt the validity of the metaphysics that he is professionally committed to uphold. But after a chance encounter with a mysterious character he embarks on a series of pilgrimages and attains varied forms of spiritual illumination.

If good poetry is rare, good translations of poetry must be rarer still. It's a pleasure to browse through Syed Sajjad Husain's translations of Abul Hussain's early work. The introduction is unexceptional, but the translations read smoothly and convey something of the distinctive flavour of one of our senior modernists. Here's the whole of a brief poem, "Mummies":

Mummies

What are we but dried mummies, buried deep  
Inside the earth in tombs beyond the reach  
Of light, devoid of conscience, bovinely  
Content to eat and sleep? We talk of peace  
While hatred rages and strife reigns and ask  
Forgiveness for all while the demons who  
Torment our life derisively smile. We  
Are naught but skeletons preserved for show  
In pyramids.

The southern wind leaves us cold,  
Incapable of opening our eyes.  
We are all hollow men, deaf, mute and blind.

A book of translations in the other direction (English to Bengali) that deserves notice (and praise) is *William Shakespeare's Nirbachito Sonnetgucho*. The 'Nirbachito' in the title evinces what one might call 'numerical modesty' in an extreme form--for all but the last two of the Bard's 154 sonnets are here.

The translator, Salim Sarwar, many will surely recall, was one of the more promising Bengali poets to emerge in the 1970s. After many years in the intellectually arid classrooms and corridors of Saudi Arabian academe, when, but for a rare and welcome appearance in periodicals, he was lost to our literary scene, the prodigal's return to Dhaka has, within the space of two years, resulted in this impressive volume. We shall naturally look forward to more from his pen.

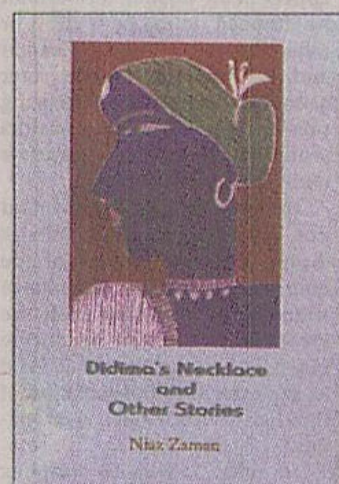
The translations are *en regard* with the originals, firmly balanced on crisp footnotes, and eminently readable. They are both attractive and faithful, with the rhythm, rhyme and structure of the sonnet form scrupulously maintained. Translation of course involves, as Umberto Eco memorably reminds us, complex and pragmatic negotiations. How should the English summer, to which Shakespeare compare his lover, be rendered in Bengali? Sarwar turns it to our "grishma," but wisely refrains from using that torrid word in the first line, and instead mentions "Baishakh," which at least carries a suggestion of freshness. Sudhindranath Dutta, to my mind, negotiated the passage between the two far-flung climes more elegantly by turning Shakespeare's summer into our "basanta" (spring). The other sonnets, happily, are more amenable to Sarwar's manoeuvres.

Admiring mention must be made of the 20-page introduction, which is scholarly, fairly comprehensive, and indeed even poetic. Sarwar generously as well as critically acknowledges earlier translators: Sudhindranath Dutta and Bishnu Dey, and on this side of the border, Zillur Rahman Siddiqui.

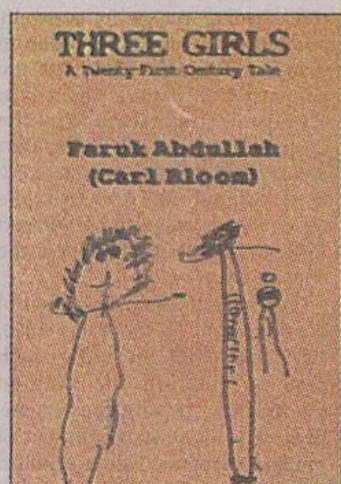
To end on a wholly negative note, Bangla Academy deserves to be anathematized for a very shoddy production; the cover does no credit to its designer, Qayyum Chowdhury.

Suresh Ranjan Basak, professor of English at the Metropolitan University, Sylhet, has published an interestingly wide-ranging collection of twenty-one essays in Bengali, *Sahitya: Nikat Somoy Durer Desh* ("Literature: Distant Lands Near in Time"). They deal with writers from four continents and many more literary traditions. Anglophone writers, British (D. J. Enright, Golding), American (Maya Angelou, Sylvia Plath), postcolonial (Naipaul, Seth) outnumber those who write in other languages, but a number of eminent Latin Americans and Europeans are also discussed (Marquez, Gide, Holub). A genuine love of literature is reflected on every page, and one hopes that this book will be read widely, for it will surely induce its readers to explore more of world literature. The essay, "Black Jesus: Blasphemy vs Artistic Freedom," stands out for its sober affirmation of creative freedom.

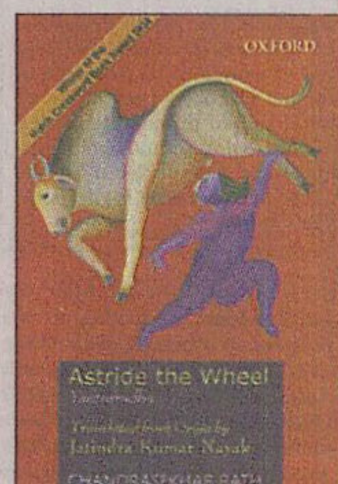
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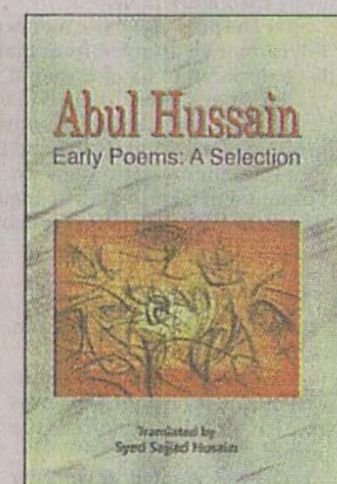
*Didima's Necklace and Other Stories* by Niaz Zaman; Dhaka: writersink/UPL; 2005; pp. 116; Tk. 350.



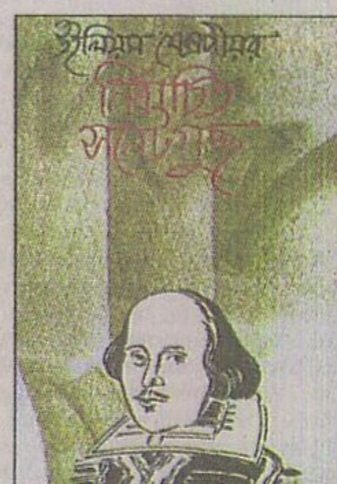
*Three Girls: A Twenty-First Century Tale* by Faruk Abdullah (Carl Bloom); Dhaka: The Devil's Workshop; 2006; pp. 215; Tk. 300.



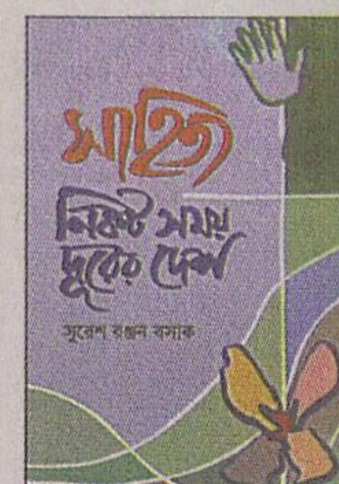
*Astride the Wheel Yantrarudha* (translated by J. K. Nayak); New Delhi: Oxford University Press; Second impress 2005; pp. 179; Rs. 245.



*Abul Hussain Early Poems: A Selection* (translated by S. Sajjad Husain); Dhaka: writersink/UPL; 2006; pp. 55; Tk. 225.



*William Shakespeare's Nirbachito Sonnetgucho* translated by Salim Sarwar; Dhaka: Bangla Academy; 2006; pp. 143; Tk. 115.



*Sahitya: Nikat Somoy Durer Desh* by Suresh Ranjan Basak; Dhaka: Manan Prakash; 2006; Tk. 125.

## Is this a first?

KHADEMUL ISLAM

W N Herbert is considered a leading Scottish poet, one who moves comfortably and easily between Scots and English. His poetry is distinguished by humour, tight forms and metrical structure.

The above qualities are on display in *Bad Shaman Blues*, his latest volume of poetry (Bloodaxe: 2006), where Herbert ranges not only between his two languages, but also geographically from Sofia to Beijing, from Athens to Kolkata. As well as in his rueful goodbye to youth:

So say farewell to all pretence at manhood:  
The ninety-minute legs, the tan  
That once looked buff, not tangerine; be careful  
Combing your decockatoodled hair.



The book also contains the poem titled 'Adda.' It is unusual for a well-known Western poet to have tackled the theme of a very Bengali conversational art form, and use the original Bengali word as its title. Westerners might not quite catch every nuance of the term, but we, don't we.

## Adda

All day I've been a penguin in the library, telling kids how those birds form a shuffling mass, like seed-pods on the coldest sunflower: Iceflower of the Southern loes. I've been explaining how the circle churns to make outsiders, how each bird spends a moment in the white petals of that blast, and this is how I'd like to see their city.

Instead I've been rushed from boiling shade to shade, drunk *Thums Up* in the compound, and gazed at Kolkata's grimy shimmer past the glass: All day I've been the emperor of air-conditioning.

Later, I sit on the verandah of the Director's flat and discuss the rain that's suddenly, deafeningly falling on the palm-leaves and the car-tops. It's dark now, the lightning emitted from the underside of clouds needles at bicyclists; the day's heat is sown through by the teeth of rain, the sharpness of the shower. This is *Kaalbaishakhi*, the April norwester.

Sarika says there is a season pinched between Rainy and Autumn called *Sarat*, bright, not hot--better for visiting. But I love this whetted weather as much as her re-carving of my quartered year:

It's like the way that mood-words want to be untranslatable, a dictionary of difference: *Hiraeth*, *honfibu*, *fortwurstein*, *suadade*--new seasons in the mind--and *abhiman*, a word she tells me means 'pride' in Hindi, but in Bangla it expands, like a blossom in the rain, into this sulking as at something mistakenly withheld.

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.