

SHORT STORY

Killing The Water -Part II

MAHMUD RAHMAN

Despite my mother's belief in science, she seemed to have a special hunger for blessings. Once the weather cooled down, she cajoled my father to take us on road trips to far-flung shrines. Even though he was skeptical of these pilgrimages, my father didn't need much convincing. He enjoyed the opportunity to see how far his Jeep would go before breaking down. And when it did, he relished the chance to fiddle around with the engine and show his agility in getting us back on the road.

During these trips, the Jeep's radiator would inevitably leak and my older brother Imtiaz was sent off, pail in hand, to the river or canal by the side of the road to fetch water to prevent the engine from overheating. Every hour on the hour. This gave my mother an opportunity to remind us, "See, what did I tell you? Water is the source of life, even in modern machines."

And it was to water we were dragged when we visited the shrines. She bought dozens of bottles of 'blessed water' on each of our journeys. The bottles would have to last until our next expedition. Each of the shrines was near a large pond. The mazaar of Shah Jalal in the northern city of Sylhet was right on the edge of a tank stocked with thousands of gojaar fish. The tomb of Bayazid Bostami near the port of Chittagong overlooked a pond teeming with small and huge turtles, some more than a hundred years old. And the shrine of Khan Jahan Ali in Bagerhat, near the Sunderban forests, was just up the road from a tank containing crocodiles. In each place, pilgrims bought fish or meat from vendors and fed them to the animals. This, we learned, added to the blessings you received from just visiting the holy places.

There was a story attached to each of these ponds. The saints, when they were still alive, had all been insulted or attacked by evil men. With their magical powers, they had turned the evildoers into fish, turtles, or crocodiles. They could have utterly destroyed them, we were told, but the holy men were merciful and they had set up places of pilgrimage where travelers would gather and feed those unfortunate souls into eternity.

Each time we returned home, I wondered, could it be that some human souls were trapped inside the fish we were eating from our own pond? For some days I would lose my appetite and joined my father in declining the taste of fish. My mother chose to remain silent about the wisdom of eating fish. Instead she treated me to a small drink of blessed water. I expected some sweet, heavenly taste, like the ambrosia I had read about in school, but it simply tasted like stale water.



artwork by saabyasree hazra

There was plenty of sweetness around the house. A line of fruit trees girded the edge of the pond. My favorite was the guava. Its trunk slanted, this was the easiest tree to climb. Some of the branches leaned out over the water. Plucking a juicy, ripe guava from one of those branches was tricky because you were in danger of falling into the pond. I left such risky jobs to my older brothers.

The palmyra palm was a towering hulk and its big fan-like leaves stood guard, like a sentinel, over the pond. If the guava tree was hospitable to young boys eager to climb and pick fruit, the palmyra was said to be home to the *bhoot*. Nearly every ghost story told in Bengal has a spirit living in a palmyra tree.

"But why do the ghosts prefer this tree?" I asked.
"That's the way it has always been."
"But there are no branches where one can comfortably sit. Don't the ghosts get tired of holding on to the trunk or leaves?"
"Spirits have no weight. They can sit perched on a mere leaf."
"But why not a mango tree? Or a jackfruit? There's so much more leafy cover, and they could even feast on delicious fruit."

"Ghosts don't need to eat."
"Then why should we be afraid of them? They won't eat us. Will they?"

No answer ever satisfied me. Perhaps the clue lay in the *kolshis* that I saw hanging from palmyra trees in the villages. The earthen jars collected the sweet sap; later the sap became *tari*. We never had toddy in the house, but we all knew what drinking it did to you. All you had to do was listen to Yusuf Bepari who lived behind us. When you saw him under the influence -- roaring in the streets, cursing or abusing his wife and children -- you could easily believe that evil spirits from the palmyra tree had grabbed hold of him.

Our first house -- the cottage where I was born -- was a small distance from the haunted tree. But that would change. Mymensingh Road was to be enlarged again. More of my father's land was taken, and

more cash flowed into his pockets. My mother now campaigned for a brick house. It was built with its back wall skirting the trees on the edge of the pond and, as luck would have it, the bedroom my sister Meeta and I shared was built right underneath the palmyra tree's leaves. At night we could hear a swoosh-swoosh rustle coming from the roof. The roof was one of our favorite playgrounds during the day. Meeta and I played hopscotch up there. But you could never persuade us to go up there at night. We knew darkness was the time when the *bhoot* emerged.

With the brick building came a Murphy radio. This was magic. But where did the talking voices and music come from? Imtiaz explained that there were little men and women inside the wooden cabinet. Once, armed with a screwdriver, I tried to see the little people. All I got was my knuckles rapped with a ruler. It was simpler to accept my brother's words. After all, if the palmyra tree could house spirits and I had visited places where humans had been transformed into fish or turtles, why couldn't little people live inside the radio?

The brick house was always in a state of construction. At first there was no drawing room or indoor bathroom. The firewood and fish businesses proved insufficient to sustain the new wants of the family. My father launched a new venture, opening a Burmah-Shell petrol pump, complete with service station and car wash. He decided that the drainage from the car wash would best be handled by digging a small channel, about eight inches deep and a foot wide, running the length of our property all the way into the pond.

This creek, which came to life each day when cars were being washed, became a source of infinite joy to my brother Saadi and me. It was like having our very own river. Dhaka sat on the Buriganga (the old Ganga), so we called our river the Picchiganga (the tiny Ganga). Now we no longer had to wait until the rains to float our paper boats. We could do it year round. We even built a boat out of tin cans and equipped it with its own little steam engine. Then a whole town went up on the banks of the river, with buildings made of wooden blocks and roads laid down with cement. Our proudest accomplishment was a concrete bridge over the river. Now we could not only float our boats on the water, we could also roll our toy cars and trucks through our very own town.

One afternoon Saadi and I discovered dozens of fish floating sideways on the pond. When we informed the adults, everyone was alarmed and perplexed.

"What can it be?"
"Did someone throw poison into the water?"
"Did they catch a disease?"
"Somebody must have placed a curse," my mother concluded. She poured all her bottles of blessed water into the pond. The next day she asked my father to dump a few pounds of potassium permanganate. The water quickly turned purple, then settled into a state of greenish scum.

If my father suspected anything, he never acknowledged it. Saadi and I were still busy playing with our little make-believe town. The streaks of oil in the water flowing underneath our bridge were worthy of no special notice. Besides, we were tired of eating fish. We didn't mind the disappearance of our pond's fish from our meals.

There used to be a time when birds flocked to the pond: storks, herons, and kingfishers. Now the birds never returned. A foul smell soon overwhelmed the surface of the water.

Then the palmyra tree appeared to die. Its carcass stayed up but the leaves became hard and brittle. The swoosh-swoosh sound vanished from our rooftop. The spirits must have deserted as well.

Mahmud Rahman is a Bangladeshi writer living in Oakland, California.

Cruising: A writer's journey

ADIB KHAN

Saturday 5 August 2006
7:30am

I'm reluctant to get out of bed. It was a long trip. There are no direct flights from Canberra to Byron Bay. A wakeup in yet another motel room and for another Writer's Festival. The novelty has worn off. So why do I keep going to them? Exposure, vanity . . . The chance to meet people? But this one at Byron Bay is among the best. Jill Eddington, the Festival's director, is unbelievably efficient and calm. She has a way of asking writers to participate and it's hard to say 'No'. The sessions are held in marquees near the beach. Brilliant setting when it's not raining. Large audiences -- mostly women, sophisticated and curious. They are the big buyers of books in Australia. One sees a few men too. Some are young but mostly they are grey-haired. Today, I'm on two panels. In the morning, I'll be contributing to a discussion on 'Writing about Freaks and Eccentric Characters in Literature', and then a discussion on 'India and Bangladesh'. Publisher's dinner later in the evening. That's always fun. Tomorrow, a writing workshop in the morning and then back to Canberra where I'm on a Writing Fellowship at the National University, the Defence Academy and the University of Canberra.

It's raining. Makes me nostalgic. I think of monsoon in Dhaka. Mangoes, jackfruits and hilsa fish cooked with kashundi. Chom choms, pran haras and freshly made emritis. I always had a sweet tooth. That calm city of my younger days is alive in memory only. 'I'm a stranger in a strange land.' The biblical sentence resonates with sadness. That's what I said to myself on my last visit to Dhaka in 1999. I was someone looking through a window pane at a life that was once my own. I fleetingly think of my university days. Mr Monem's passionate lectures on the Romantic poets. Dr Murshed's scholarly analyses of John Donne's poetry. Other, less interesting, classes. I still chuckle when I recall the one on Thomas Hardy one steamy, hot afternoon. Hardy's never been a favourite of mine. On this day the lecture droned on until, in sheer desperation, a few like-minded fellow students and I bounced a ping pong ball on the floor at the back of the class. 'There's noise of a ping pong ball,' the lecturer said without taking his eyes off the text. 'Could you please stop it?' And he continued unflappably with his clinical dissection of *The Return of the Native*. Modhu's canteen floats into vision. Now there was a place of learning! I had my life's education over disgustingly watery tea and hot shingaras. The arguments, the stories and the dreams I shared with friends. Rock music and American novels. Stuck between the East and West. The beginning of my fractured existence. The war of liberation and its long term consequences hastened the splintering process.

I exemplify postmodernism.
But enough! I must get going . . .

4:45pm

I'm exhausted. I've caught up with my publisher, Linda Funnell, from HarperCollins and we are on our way to meet my editor. I have worked with her on two books but I have never met Judith Lukin-Amundsen. That's the sad world of dot com we live in. Communication without meetings or the joys of conversation.

The session on characters was a bit flat. I think in the short timeframe of an hour, most writers would have difficulty in articulating how they create and develop characters. After all, they evolve during the entire period of writing a novel. Why did I write about such an odd character in *The Storyteller*? An ugly, bisexual, storytelling dwarf in the slums of New Delhi! I wanted to see how far I could stretch my imagination. Was there a limit to the creative horizon? Vamana wasn't for the faint-hearted or the conservative. In a bizarre way, I couldn't control his development or the direction in which he was headed. It was almost as if he had an independent life of his own.

Writing about odd characters is often an act of self-discovery. Conceiving a character like Vamana may also be a response to curiosity about a side of life a writer may know little about. It can be intimation that the imagination is tired and needs to be revived with the stimulant of something weird, something different. It can be an inadvertent process of shock learning that involves being up close and personal with people one would avoid. Working with marginalized people leads to self-questioning and assessment of one's own values and sometimes the uncomfortable realization that maybe as a writer one is not as liberal in thinking as might be expected. For me, flaws in people are far more interesting and offer greater scope for exploration in fiction than virtues. Embedded in their faults is the essence of humanity. And, as writers, that is what

we must strive to show.

The afternoon session on India and Bangladesh went like a dream. More and more Australians are getting interested in the growing economic prowess of India. And along with that is the desire to know more about the country's culture. There's always a danger that in such a format Goliath will dominate the stage. Well, that didn't happen. Bangladesh held its own, and I had to make the point that I wasn't an Indian. Why have I gone back to Bangladesh in my forthcoming novel? That's easy. I wanted to explore the phenomenon of terrorism brewing in a remote region of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. But the novel's not about gratuitous violence. It's a multilayered story about a Bangali family with all kinds of secrets. Every family member has been damaged in one way or another. It's also about a love affair between the protagonist's Muslim father and a Hindu woman. How much do we know about our parents and their pasts? In many ways they are strangers to us. They control what we know about them. But do they always tell us the truth? What do they censor and refurbish? As children, do we forgive them if we make sordid discoveries about their past lives? We expect them to be role models. But can saints ever become parents? Aren't they flesh and blood, impulse and instinct? Can't they be tempted? Make mistakes? Perhaps, as children, we can be unforgiving hypocrites. How unflawed have our own lives been?

5:10pm

Coffee with Linda and Judith. There was no handshake with Judith. We embraced silently as though there was no need for words. We have known each other for a number of years over the telephone, fax and via email. We've argued, debated and pondered. Invariably she has won. She's older than I had imagined her to be. I'm reminded of the great phrase of Yeats: 'Monuments of unaging intellect.' And my God! What a mind she has! She loves my new novel. Judith has shaped it quite brilliantly during the editing. She must have poured hours into it, judging by the suggestions she made. It's now tight and doesn't drag. I'm delighted with the final outcome. I remember the last chapter. It's all my own. After the first draft, it was fifteen pages. Subsequently I shortened it to about nine. Now, it's four. That was the only chapter that Judith didn't touch. I have to confess, I am rather proud of the ending. Unexpected, sudden and climactic.

8:30 pm

In my experience, HarperCollins has always chosen its restaurants carefully. This one is called Boomerang and it's excellent. It's still raining. My agent, Lyn Tranter, decides to be adventurous and orders a dessert with wasabi in it. Wasabi in dessert? I'm more conventional, opting for the double layered chocolate pudding. It's delicious. There are a few calories to be accumulated tonight. Oh, what the hell! I'm a writer. I should only worry about the state of my mind. Suddenly Lyn decides that she wants a taste of my pudding. She uses her dessert spoon like a shovel and savages the side of the sweet. Then the big, fat strawberry I had been saving to savour at the end disappears in one mouthful. Aargh! Lyn likes my dessert. She digs deeper . . .

The conversation is genial and I talk to various acquaintances and fellow writers. But then it's time to go. 'By the way', Linda Funnell says as we exchange farewells. '*Spiral Road* will be published in April next year.' Well, that's settled then. What am I going to write about next? It's complicated . . . more than likely a novel on the effects of globalization on a rural community in Bangladesh. Maybe. It will probably be a part of a Phd project at Monash. Is that foolish or what?

I've managed to make a mess in my room. I go over the notes for tomorrow's workshop. Process and not method! Be faithful to your imagination! Too bad if you offend some people. Keep structure in mind. Conflict, dialogue, self-editing and, above everything else, LANGUAGE! No latha patha phrasing. I wish I could translate that.

I'm reading John Fowles' collection of essays, *Wormholes*. 'I have never really wanted to be a novelist . . .' he writes in the opening piece, 'I Write Therefore I Am'. Who does?

Lights out.
There was also a beginning for me. Words written in frustration of not knowing what I wanted to do in life. A kind of early midlife crisis. 'The first thing he wanted to see was the river . . .' And so began *Seasonal Adjustments*. And on that river began a novelist's journey that has not ended.

Not yet, anyway.

Adib Khan is a Bangladeshi-born Australian novelist. *Seasonal Adjustments* is his first novel.

BOOKNOTE



Farhad Ahmed

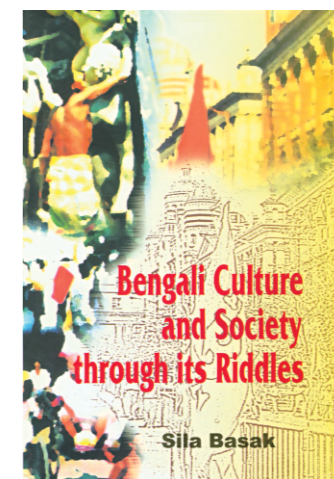
Bengali Culture and Society through its Riddles by Sila Basak; Delhi: Gyan Publishing House; 2006; Rs. 690; pp. 251

Bhasha achay shabda achay
Shada shabda nai
Pranir kachay thekeo tar
Nijay pran nai.
(Has language has words
No word he speaks
Lives with the living
No life has he.)

Answer: *Boi*, or book.

The above is the riddle on page 171 of this amusing and enlightening book on Bengali riddles, which displays extensive and valuable field work rather than, despite its title, any in-depth social analysis. It should be read at leisure by Bengalis and non-Bengalis alike. One of its strengths is that the author, from West Bengal (in fact, as she puts it somewhat mystifyingly, "... the archetypal structure of the present volume was awarded the PhD degree by Calcutta University"), makes the reader aware of broad differences in riddles between the two parts of Bengal. As when she notes riddles prevalent at weddings, burials and circumcisions "among the Muslims of (rural) Bangladesh," or gives riddles that are unique to the

A universal appeal



districts of Bangladesh, such as the following one from Noakhali:

Andhar ghar bandor nachay
Bandor er ki akkayl achay
(Monkey dances in dark room
Has monkey any sense?)

Answer: *Pakha*, or hand-held fan.

In the end, aside from the fact that the book deserved a better editor than it got (why is it that in this part of the world Phd theses and project reports turned books are so miserably produced?), one wishes there were more riddles from the tribal areas of Bengal, from the Mundis, Chakmas and Saotals, "whose oral literature is very rich."

It would be one way of preserving cultures and heritages being wiped out by ethnic cleansing in the guise of modernization and nation-building.

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photo by nasir ali mamun

"Death is not extinguishing the light; it is putting out the lamp because dawn has come."

--Rabindranath Tagore

The Daily Star literature page deeply mourns the passing away of Poet Shamsur Rahman (1929-1996), the towering poetic genius and pride of all Bengalis. As more that one critic has observed, it was Shamsur Rahman and his contemporaries (but primarily Shamsur Rahman) who in the late fifties forged the broad poetic order that has lasted till this day.

May he rest in peace.