

Paying my respects to Shamsur Rahman

Shamsur Rahman had an understanding of this simple truth when he first took to writing. Each and every word has its own colour, its own tone. The sentence that he composed with words, his experience tells him, presents him a picture, makes music for his ears. With words as my support, he at times takes a walk along mountain paths, at times on moonlit nights, close to woodland, and fixes his eyes on the soulful eyes of a deer. At times he becomes the lone inhabitant of an island, at times he flies on his wings in the air, staying away from the sun lest his wings melt away.

SIDDIQUE MAHMUDUR RAHMAN

He was born on October 23, 1929 in Dhaka in a middle class family. He started writing almost accidentally, while he was a student in the University of Dhaka. That was 1948.

Why did he write? What made him write? The answer to the question that readily comes to mind is — he wrote because he couldn't help doing so, even when he was past seventy. The family he grew up in was quite a large one. None of the members of his family ever thought of doing any creative writing. He was the single exception, and he wrote without any premeditation. None of his elders ever asked him to do any writing outside his schoolwork. And this includes his parents and his teachers. Rather, he faced some opposition when he wrote something on his own. Far from any encouragement, all he got from his father was total disapproval. However, he refused to be disheartened and kept up his spirit.

When he was in class seven, a one-year-old sister of his, Nahar, died after a brief but fatal attack of smallpox. He loved his little sister very much. Whenever he picked her up or took her to the fields he tried to please her by putting his pencil into her hands. Two or three days after her death he wrote a small prose piece on her. Just felt a sudden urge to write. That expression of a very personal feeling made him write his original piece. He cannot claim any literary merit for it. After this a few years rolled by. Prose or verse, nothing came out from his pen during the period, apart from classroom tasks.

A few days after he had stepped into the grounds of Dhaka University, it was a noon darkened by monsoon clouds. He just managed to write a poem: an act of pure impulse. Without any preparation, no forethought preceded it. The weather must have produced a feeling of dejection. Any particular reason for this change? Actually he just wanted some relief from the sadness that had engulfed his mind. There is a feeling of joy once

your thoughts take shape in words. Once the shape assumes a body beautiful, the writer feels fulfilled.

When he started writing, there was no thought whatever that it would do any good to his country or his people, that it would change men for the better or that it would be a force for social change. Had it been so, he might as well have put his paper under the pillow or the mattress. True, at the time he was deeply grossed in writing, adding lines upon lines. When he finished, he look for readers. He even looked for appreciation.

However, to come back to the question of why he wrote, what made him write? Whatever he experienced he wished to share with others. His experience was derived from two sources — his reading and his living of his own life. His writings are the result of his endeavour to articulate his experiences. The value of the experience of life outweighs that of reading, but the latter has its own claim to be counted. The world of books is like the house of a liberal teacher with a capacious mind. Here we can, and

do, pick up lessons, both necessary and useful for us. Our outlook on life is transformed. Creative literature teaches us how to be makers of truth. Behind a person's work as a writer are the two urges: the urge for self-expression and the urge to pursue truth that allows no rest to the pursuer.

To pursue truth! The words are easier said than done. One can have a vision of truth only through discovering one's true self. To attain this one needs to traverse many levels of consciousness. Many of us never come to see truth after long wanderings. A few do. The crucifier did not wait a moment to see truth as he lifted Jesus on to the crucifix. A writer's journey is as arduous as a saint's in this life-long pursuit of truth.

For some, a literary work is a higher form of life's playfulness. But this is no common play. This is a play involving a deeper, and higher, level of intellect. Literature is not a part-time endeavour. It needs total commitment. Literature claims self-sacrifice, total dedication, and unremitting labour.

One who commits himself to literature has two resources to draw on — ideas and words. There can be no communication without the aid of words, of language. It is possible to convey some feelings with the help of gestures but to communicate one's thoughts, however simple they may be, one needs sharp, crystal-clear, meaningful words. There is no other way. Shamsur Rahman had an

understanding of this simple truth when he first took to writing. Each and every word has its own colour, its own tone. The sentence that he composed with words, his experience tells him, presents him a picture, makes music for his ears. With words as my support, he at times takes a walk along mountain paths, at times on moonlit nights, close to woodland, and fixes his eyes on the soulful eyes of a deer. At times he becomes the lone inhabitant of an island, at times he flies on his wings in the air, staying away from the sun lest his wings melt away. At other times, he sees himself among miners, deep underground.

I have said earlier that for a writer to be able to write, his one resource is the depth of his experience. For a poet, his true love, as Reiner Maria Rilke said, is his childhood. A poet can always pick up some gems from there. An elderly poet finds a wider field of experience since he has already left his childhood and youth behind. Many things had happened in his life.

He met many people, he found many friends, had been fortunate in respect of the warmth and kindness of many that had come his way. He had seen bloody riots, seen the ugly face of communalism, famine, loss of dear ones, partition of his country, floods and cyclones, language movement, mass uprising, the arrogance of military rulers, the unique non-cooperation movement under

the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, genocide, the resistance of the Bengalis, the War of Liberation, the birth of Bangladesh, the inhuman killing of August 1975, the black phases of army rule, peoples' uprising, restoration of democracy, all crowding his memory.

In his experience, alongside events very personal to him, many national and international events had occurred, and I think these, quite naturally and logically, had cast their shadow on his works in the different phases of his poetic life. His life and work had always been closely linked with each other and he had always regarded his writing as an art, never a propaganda piece. He had always kept in mind that no creative work can eschew the quality of art.

Shamsur Rahman was a humble practitioner of Bengali poetry who had been lavishly rewarded by the poetry-lovers of the land, and bestowed with many literary prizes. He received the Bangla Academy Prize as well as state awards like E k u s h e y P a d a k and Independence Award. He received Honourary D. Litt degrees from Rabindra Bharati University, Shantiniketan, and Jadavpur University of Kolkata, as well as North Bengal University of West Bengal. He had written over sixty books of poems, three books of literary essays, one memoir for young readers, four books of rhymes, and five novels and short story collections.

A hawk stays aloft



JONATHAN DARMAN

Joe Lieberman awoke Wednesday with few prospects and no party. He'd lost the Democratic primary for his own Senate seat to challenger Ned Lamont and the army of "Netroots" Internet activists who'd hammered Lieberman's stubborn defense of the Iraq War. Even some of his friends thought his announced independent candidacy would be a sad and solitary quest.

But then came Thursday, with chilling news of a terror plot in Great Britain, and suddenly it was clear that Lieberman would not go gently. "If we just pick up like Ned Lamont wants us to do," he warned a campaign crowd, "get out by a date certain, it will be taken as a tremendous victory by the same people who wanted to blow up these planes." Hawkish Joe was back: early polls showed him leading Lamont in the general election.

And so, at least for one day, Joe Lieberman became the most prominent spokesman for the Republican strategy in 2006: paint Iraq critics as frail on national security at a time when our foes are at their fiercest. The GOP has moved aggressively to capitalize on Lieberman's defeat and the subsequent London terror news. On Friday, the Republican National Congressional Committee circulated a memo urging Republican candidates to jump on the week's headlines: "Recent events have reminded us that we continue to operate in a pivotal phase in the global war on terror," it read. "You should move to question your opponent's commitment to the defeat of terror and ... create a definitive contrast on this issue."

The GOP has artfully used that script in the last two election cycles. Its appeal had seemed to wane as anger over the Iraq War mounted. But Karl Rove and the Republicans now see a new opportunity in "Lamontism" the idea that liberal Democrats will risk failure in Iraq to score points with a public grown weary of war. (Lamont favors withdrawal of the troops from Iraq but redeployment elsewhere in the Middle East.) "If you have Lamont Democrats who say, 'Bring 'em home, turn away and it will all be over' ... the American people say, 'You're kidding yourself' ... The only way you walk away from war is as a victor," said a senior administration official who asked for anonymity speaking about the politics of national security. Now GOP candidates across the country who have feared the mention of combat on the campaign trail are embracing it once again hoping that one last time, Americans will come to see the conflict in Iraq as indivisible from the broader war on terror.

Democrats say the terror card won't work this time. "We've all become more sophisticated about this as we've seen the consequences in Iraq," says Jim Webb, the Reagan administration Navy secretary who's running as the Democratic Senate candidate in Virginia. Webb opposes a timetable for withdrawal but wants a "careful" exit from Iraq in consultation with Mideast allies. Many Democrats were cheered by Lamont's victory and said it presages a November payoff for candidates who offer sharp criticism of the war. Still, few Democrats in tight races seemed eager to pin Lamont buttons to their lapel. "I think I'll just pass on that," Webb said when asked about the Connecticut primary.

Some Republicans are being less bashful in their embrace of Lieberman. Vets for Freedom, an independent group of veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, is launching a media campaign in support of Lieberman. Among the group's advisers are prominent Republicans: former Coalition Provisional Authority spokesman Dan Senor and Weekly Standard editor Bill Kristol. The group is attractive to Republicans "who want to help Lieberman but (are) not going to start writing checks to his campaign because he's still a Democrat," says a senior Republican affiliated with the group who asked not to be identified while the group is launching. Lieberman's former chief of staff is also helping the group along with prominent Democrats who are rooting for Lieberman but don't want to risk the ire of the Netroots.

National Democrats say they won't be distracted by Connecticut. Still, as fall approaches, the Democrats are staking their hopes on their ability to talk critically about foreign policy without being labeled "anti-war" a challenge that's vexed them in every campaign since George McGovern's 1972 presidential bid. Reached by Newsweek on vacation, McGovern offered Democrats a warning. "For 50 years, (Republicans) used the fear of communism to beat Democrats," he said. "I hope we don't have 50 years of terrorism for them to do the same thing."

With Holly Bailey and Eleanor Clift.

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The Israeli defeat

It was a typical test of strength in the fight between David and Goliath. Hizbullah has not been destroyed or discredited but stands tall as ever, gaining popularity across the Shia, Sunni, and Christian divide in Lebanon. Its stature as a hero has grown across the Arab and Muslim world. Hizbullah won because it was on the side of righteousness and justice against the tyranny of Israeli occupation. The myth and memory of the much vaunted invincibility of the Israeli military, its victory in

ABDUL HANNAN

CONTRARY to the claim made in Washington that the Hizbullah in Lebanon had been defeated in the 34 day war with Israel, voices of deep dismay anger and frustration heard from Tel Aviv conclusively indicate the defeat of the Israeli military campaign against Hizbullah resistance forces.

There was no mistaking the frayed standing of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert as a war leader who, addressing the Knesset immediately after the war was over, spoke of "painful blows" received by the Israeli army, admitted the "shortcomings" in the conduct of the war, personally owned "overall responsibility" for the operation of the war and promised its "review."

His speech was repeatedly interrupted by the angry opposition members of the Parliament. The Israeli defense minister promised

"full inquiry and investigation" into the Israeli military performance. Benjamin Netanyahu, leader of the right wing Likud Opposition flayed the government for its "many failures" of threat perception and response, failure on the home front and in the theatre of operation. He demanded a full explanation. Opinion poll conducted on the war in Israel showed deep frustration at the unsatisfactory outcome of the war for Israel.

By all accounts, Israel failed to achieve its objectives of the war, sparked ostensibly by the capture of the two Israeli soldiers on July 12. It failed to secure the return of the two captured Israeli soldiers; it failed to destroy Hizbullah; it failed to occupy southern Lebanon up to the Latini river.

In the war it lost nearly 120 soldiers besides 40 civilian casualties. Twenty Israeli tanks were disabled. Israel in its last minute ground invasion of Lebanon to obtain military advantage before

the cease-fire was in place, lost about 40 soldiers in one day alone in the frontal encounter with Hizbullah.

Light armed but steel willed, a few thousand Hizbullah fighters, fired with the rage of injustice, defended the territorial integrity of Lebanon with remarkable valour and a spirit of sacrifice, survived the massive military onslaught of the 30,000-strong Israeli army equipped with awesome military weaponry, contained and repulsed the enemy.

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of the much vaunted invincibility of the Israeli military, since its victory in the six-day war of 1967, is in ruins.

The Hizbullah win is a turning point in the long narrative of the Arab-Israeli conflict and bids fair to be the forerunner of a new Middle East with reawakening of strength in unity and solidarity of the Arab and the Muslim world. It is significant to note that the OIC and the Arab League rose to the occasion. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's participation and role in the emergency meeting called by OIC in Malaysia was praiseworthy. The effect of successful Hizbullah resistance has profound significance for the future landscape of the Middle East and will leave a lasting impact on the political, psychological, and military power balance in the area.

It is now clear that the capture of two Israeli soldiers was a pretext for a major offensive that had been in the works for a long time. Seymour Hersh the investigative journalist of the New Yorker magazine, who has a track record of ground breaking stories on My Lai massacre in Vietnam, prisoner abuse in Abu Ghraib detention centre in Iraq, and alleged US plot to launch nuclear attack on Iranian nuclear installations, has now written in the current issue of the magazine about US involvement in the planning of recent Israeli military attack on Hizbullah. Quoting a US govern-

ment consultant, he disclosed that early this summer Israeli officials visited Washington to share plans for the attack.

All along the 34 day war, the US supported Israel with military supplies and stalled every step of the way a UN brokered cease fire to allow Israel time to make military gain against Hezbollah. The failure of the Israeli offensive in Lebanon is a defeat of the Bush-Rice plan for what they described as "a new Middle East" where Hizbullah as a military force will be eliminated to reduce the threat of a possible Hizbullah retaliation against Israel, should the US launch a military strike against Iran.

Behind the objectives of Israeli attack against Hizbullah lurked the wider shared Israeli US strategy of weakening links between Lebanon and Syria and between Hizbullah and Iran to redress the strategic imbalance brought about by the Iraqi fiasco which has strengthened Iran and Syria in the region.

Israel laid waste to southern Lebanon and parts of Beirut by indiscriminate and relentless bombing for 34 days on end, destroying bridges, power plants, gas stations, and apartment blocks, killing more than one thousand civilians and displacing about a million people.

Israel's air and sea blockade of Lebanon prevented rescue and relief operations, raising international concern and condemnation about the spectre of a humanitarian

disaster. But at the end of the day, the Israeli offensive received a drubbing, remained badly bruised and made very little gains. Not even the densest fog of war can hide the fact that Israel's invasion has been a moral, political, and military disaster.

For Israel and the US, the lesson in Lebanon and Iraq is the futility of the logic of military solution of a political problem. The dismantling of continuing Israeli occupation of Palestinian land in Gaza and West Bank, Sheba farmland in Lebanon and Golan Heights in Syria is central to the solution of the Middle East problem. Israel must renounce violence as a means of conflict resolution and engage in bridge building with its neighbours and address the Palestinian question based on internationally backed two-state solution.

No one knows what will be the fallout of the devastating and savage Israeli attack on Lebanon. There will be no surprise if it breeds a few more terrorists. Israel, an illegitimate transplant by the West on Arab land and sustained by American life support system, is an economic and political liability to America and a cause of security risk for America and the West. The sooner this realisation sinks into the mind of Bush and Blair, the better.

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Let's make a commonsense decision on Tata

NURUDDIN MAHMUD KAMAL

THE persuasive power of the people of Bangladesh is abysmal. This has been witnessed on many occasions since the beginning of the war of liberation in 1971. There is no mystery in it. Yet, some bone-headed persons cannot appreciate the reality. For instance, the government did not initially agree with the people's voices on the issue of gas export. But finally the people won the battle in 2002.

Currently, there has been a behind-the-scenes battle between those who favoured speaking in terms of realities and those who felt it would be politically unwise to invite a new controversy regarding Tata's investment proposal at a time when the Dhaka sky is overshadowed by political clouds. In the public domain, however, the scenario is different. People are vocal about the omissions in the proposal.

Indeed, the authorities have made a habit of shifting the truth in case of the said proposal to define their objectives, or shifting the objectives when facts have changed. Over the past two years since Tata submitted their initial investment proposal in October 2004, facts were either suppressed or manipulated.

Official disclosures on the matter were few and far between. Consequently, it was generally believed that the proposal (if there existed any firm offer at all) was

kept in a black box, that too in a hide out, so that a common man could not reach there.

Let us thank the media. They have kept the people informed about many aspects of the proposal from time to time. Nonetheless, it is amazing that both the Asian Development Bank's representative stationed in Dhaka and the US ambassador in Bangladesh are apparently aware of the benefits that would accrue as a result of Tata's investment in Bangladesh.

However, it is now apparent that Tata's objective was to ensure windfall profit for them from their investment. And why not? That's the religion of any companybe it Tata or Bata. But, what happened to our beloved government? Except for reiterating a most commonly used phrase "win-win" nothing has been divulged regarding the specific benefits that may come Bangladesh's way out of the respective projects included in the proposed investment.

However, based on the presumed availability of cheap natural gas from Bangladesh, the company merrily planned the production of 1 million tons of fertilizer, 1,000 megawatts of electricity, and about 2.4 million tons of sponge iron based steel. They also agreed to export a major portion of all products produced under this so-called investment to India. For this, Tata perhaps demanded the availability of around 3.25 Tcf of gas for at least 20 years.

This meant that Bangladesh had

to give them a cut of about 50% of the proved reserves of gas in the country. Bangladeshis, it was whispered, would receive a portion of the output. Had those products not been export-oriented, the scenario would perhaps have been different. Having found that their objectives faced genuine obstacles due to partial divulgence (by media) of their secret plan, Tata's price for the gas and the size of the investment shot up. These were clear manipulations.

The government's first negotiating committee headed by Petrobranga in 2004 was flabbergasted. It could not reach a consensus. The media reported a breakdown in discussion. Tata gave a statement that it was not the end of the world. They carefully opened their magic box, perhaps in consultation with the BOI.

This time the investment package was raised to \$3 billion in two stages, initially \$2 billion and then \$2.5 billion. A new component coal production from an already producing coal field (Barapukuria) -- was included. Thus, the objective was changed once again. Interestingly, a revamped price range was also offered from \$1.5/Mcf to \$4/Mcf, with \$1.5/Mcf for the first six years. The habit of shifting the truth continued.

After a couple of years down a difficult lane, many questions were raised. GOB's lone mouthpiece was making all kinds of remarks, mostly half-truths. People of Bangladesh were gradually becom-

ing more suspicious every time Tata and BOI came up with new formulations. Nobody believed them. The media in Bangladesh truthfully continued to reflect the views and opinions of the common man in Bangladesh. But the proposal was about to fail.

Failure is terrible and terribly contagious as well. It wreaks havoc on both friend and foe. High on their own agenda, Tata and BOI blithely ignored one of the real causes of diverging from the public opinion on the subject, and thought that an occasional verbal morsel thrown towards the offer as the "proposal of the century" would create more trust and credibility. But it did not.

In a sense, by twisting the logic of its own moral horizon, Tata presumed that the size of the so-called investment at \$3 billion would cut the ice. They not only ignored the reserve of gas but also the most vital issue of energy security of Bangladesh. Nevertheless, it is inconceivable that the government of Bangladesh would give its consent to:

- Dedicate unconditionally 2.14 Tcf of gas for 20 years to start with;
- A peculiar price range for gas @ \$1.5 to \$4 per Mcf;
- Allow export of fertilizer, steel, and coal to India as output of the proposed investment;
- Allow a 20 km corridor on the India-Bangladesh border;
- Ignore international market price of gas that ranges between \$5 to \$8 per Mcf;
- Ignore the consideration that

Bangladesh will sustain huge losses both in the price of gas and in case of a disaster that might take place due to open-cut mining at Barapukuria;

- Ignore that Bangladesh should stake its \$10.7 billion worth of gas (@ \$5/Mcf) for a petty investment of \$3 billion with so many unknown conditions;
- Ignore Bangladesh's energy security through allocation of a large amount of gas for indirect export under Tata's investment proposal.

The BOI still shuttles between one inappropriate phrase to another, unable to visualize the damage it is likely to cause in the process. The mysterious part of the game is that neither GOB nor BOI officially provided a clear picture about the Tata proposal. Nor did they inform the public of the changes over the years, or for that matter, sought any feedback or clarification from the people about the complex proposal.

The agony is that a free and a fair discussion on the proposal from Tata could provide a historic opportunity to find answers in the spirit of collective wisdom. Instead, we all witnessed the debris of unanswered questions. BOI and Tata perhaps still believe that they can succeed on the strength of their explanations rather than the people's support. They should realize that today's headlines are often tomorrow's boomerangs. They should now realize that they have lost the battle.

By now even the hard core of the government must be dismayed and shaken by the severity and universality of the criticisms levied against Tata and BOI. It has been observed that they at times moved with haste to prove that they were responsive to public opinion and accordingly they decided that something has to be done.

By June 30, based on the revised proposal of Tata, the BOI got swayed totally. On paper, at least, the joint BOI/Tata piecemeal approach centred around the price of gas, which indeed was not the case. However, in the wave of emotional overreaction, little attention was paid to how much financial loss the country would incur and who would pay for it. There were disputes about the objectives, but there was no realistic effort to resolve them.

The political panic regarding Tata's proposal reached its apogee in mid-2006. The government, the industrialists and the academic witnesses were in agreement that the nation had serious energy problems. But the question was what to do about it.

The critical issue of setting aside at the outset almost one-third of the proved reserve of gas (6.2 Tcf as per Nagorik Committee Report, November 2002) for 20 years was a farce. Even the latest Wood Mackenzie's Gas Sector Master Plan (GSMP, January, 2006) report clearly indicated that the combined present proven (P1) plus Probable (P2) reserve of less than 14 Tcf of

gas would deplete by 2015 for domestic consumption alone (the issue of Tata's demand has not been catered to). How can the government allow any indirect export of gas or coal that endangers national energy security? It may be mentioned in this connection that the National Energy Policy 1995 has not even been updated and approved by the government.

Despite the fact that nobody was listening, not even a bit was done to define the country's energy problem. Government agencies and energy industry experts were not jointly developing facts and proper analysis to show the people what our options are.

It is also a pity that there are no guidelines telling us the worst and the best that can happen to us in a deal and what it could cost. The nation now faces the fundamental issue of how to balance energy supply and demand most effectively in the period beyond 2007. The problem is not that of locking the barn door after the horse has been stolen. The problem is to find the barn to see if we have a horse in it.

The impending energy crisis in Bangladesh appears to have the name and telephone number of the natural gas reserve on it. Consumption of gas has jumped much more rapidly in recent years and the country is becoming more dependent on the IOC's supply from their gas fields. By next year, when Bibiyana gas field comes into operation, the ratio of

Petrobranga's gas supply and foreign company supply would become disproportionate, much more in favour of the IOCs. That is the danger. The government must therefore have a clear prescription on gas use and a depletion policy for the coming years.

Indeed, dissatisfaction of the people of Bangladesh with the so-called big investment of Tata is mounting. They are also disappointed by the role played by the Bangladeshi government. If this continues, the government would be dismayed and shaken by the severity and universality of the criticism levied against them.

The sooner we realize this, the sooner we will act. During the next one decade, we will have to continue to depend more upon indigenous natural gas and imported oil to satisfy the commercial energy need of Bangladesh, while alternate sources are being developed.

Consequently, we have to make commonsense decisions on our limited natural gas and coal, based on the facts of technological progress rather than on the fictions of unwarranted adventures such as Tata's investment proposal which cannot draw any benefit to the people of Bangladesh.

The author is a Former Joint Secretary.