

SHORT STORY

Ghost Alley* -Part II

JAVED JAHANGIR

Nani Ma slowly walks towards the window where something catches her attention. Qismat peeks behind Nani Ma, out the window. The night sky is lit up with a million ice-cubes -- dirty and free, destined to sweeten no one's palate. Impossibly, a crow, bedraggled and miserable looking, roused from its bird slumber, sits on an electric wire, too afraid to fly. Qismat cannot help a smile at the bird, wondering how it was that some shrapnel of ice hadn't struck the wretched creature.

"But we have to hide Baba, run and hide," Nani Ma says suddenly like she just remembered something and Qismat recognizes the tone of voice -- the same as when she ended her tales.

"Why? Why hide Nani Ma?" he says, feeling alarm and confusion at once and sitting up in the bed. "Everything is okay."

"Can you not hear them, Baba?" she says in a low voice just over the rains. "The hanadar brigade are approaching, boy, they're waiting outside, they're hiding in the dark spaces and will catch you."

"Nani Ma, it is late at night, there is nobody outside, no hanadars, nobody anywhere...look!" And as if in response, a loud volley of hailstones rattled off someone's car in the street below. Taak-taak-thak. He watches Nani Ma

with her arms extended through the grills, as she tries to catch a piece of ice. He looks out the window once more, and sees that the bird is gone. The hanadar bahini (Pakistani Death Squads of '71) has also vanished into the night.

"Hey look, look, there's the Buriganga River and there's the ghat." She shouts looking far past the twisted machinery that is Dhaka city. Perhaps she even looked into the past, for she suddenly smiles. Qismat wonders if the sparkle in her eyes is from tears.

Qismat has a photograph of his grandmother, a black and white image. They have arrived at the wharfs at Sadar Ghat on the river Buriganga. Panchi boats with billowing sails like houses landed their passengers there. Buriganga -- Bengali for the 'Old Maid Ganges' -- a tributary that brought the Ganges home to lay down and die. Qismat cannot avoid the brightness of the young woman's eyes, outshining the ribbons in her hair. Her family -- her husband the professor of rivers, roguish in that England-returned way, smiles next to her various family members the men large and mustachioed, women in burkhas flapping in the river's breeze -- all looking expectantly at the new bride who has come to their family. Even in the photo, everyone looks incredibly still -- like the weight of heirlooms had slowed them down.

Qismat can't see the river, though he knows that she could



artwork by apurba

see the shriveled rivulet because it had always been her compass. She was always pointing to it.

"So few boats now, look," she says to Qismat. A single disheveled braid of hair, fat and python-like, swings behind her like a hemp rope that has come undone. Standing by that window, lost in whatever she was looking at, Qismat sees, that in the gloom, all color is drained and she looks like the photograph in the album.

"Nani Ma I really feel like I am dying. ...there's this girl," Qismat says

But she says "Then to the market, me and you for paan and betel-nuts to bite and chew."

"Nani Ma, I want to tell you I am sick, I may be dying even!" says Qismat his eyes are closed. "It always hurts here..." pointing vaguely somewhere at his chest. His heart is what he seeks.

"...A betel worm slips out of sight..."

"Nani Ma, one day you will come here and I will be gone, you know..."

"Mother and Daughter will have a fight..."

"...Saffron flowers bloom anew

"Fresh, sweet pumpkin stew ..."

"Nani Ma, I really feel like I am dying. ...there's this girl."

"My little one, up with you..."

"What, Nani Ma?! I am telling you my problems, you keep on with your nonsense... stop playing...please, I am serious."

Qismat says with a smile he cannot help. Mad, crazy or out of control, Qismat always found it hard to remain serious with Nani Ma.

"A girl. I want to talk about a

girl," said Qismat "A girl," she said quietly, as though that was all there was to be said.

"Will you be angry with me now? You are the only one I can talk to, Nani Ma."

"Does she live in a house with many Krishnachura trees?" she asks.

"Tree? What tree? Nani Ma, I am trying to tell you there's this girl, and that I think I love her..." and Qismat heard himself for the first time.

"You are asking about trees?" but Qismat's voice is losing its strength. "Dying," he said. "I'm dying. Truly."

"Tell your friend, she should never walk underneath that tree after dark. Especially with her hair undone. If you want to show her your true love, take her to the river," she said.

"Damn," Qismat swears under his breath. This bloody madness of hers, allows him to talk to her, but also kills him sometimes. She talks when she wants to, sings when she doesn't.

But what about this new thing? Qismat holds this new discovery of love like a stamp collector holds a rare stamp, and looks at it from various angles. It hurts, but it hurts something else, like a green mango hurts the cheeks. Was it possible to be in love like this? Shit. It is easier to simply think about Shyama in the realms of fuzziness and abstraction; but somehow now she has become a constant utterance of his lips

and his tongue -- she is a word.

"Here take these...quickly," she says suddenly.

"Hailstones- they will help you," she says quietly, smiling and Qismat notices her hands extended out of the windows, held a few large pieces of ice in them and her eyes were at pointed at him -- large, like the moon. He knew what she meant -- in Qismat's family new-born babies were rubbed with water from a melted hailstone. He pushes off his sheets and gets out of bed.

"Come Nani Ma, lets go downstairs," Qismat says. "I will escape," she said, "You will take me. There are people I must speak with -- people I must listen to, sing with...go to the Shrine. You will take me to Baulia, to Majarkot," she said.

Qismat wants to lie, but finds he has nothing to say.

"I will walk along the river, at the Shrine I will sing," she says. "I will sing songs that will scare the hanadar away! You think they will just crawl away? We will fight!"

Qismat looks at her, the hair on his neck standing up like soldiers. He says, "Nani Ma, aren't you afraid of getting lost? Who will I talk to then? Who will sing for me then?"

She stops at the threshold of Qismat's room and turns slowly at Qismat and smiles.

"One day you will get up and find you are not so clever after all..." she says pointing at him with one finger. "I know my way

about -- you don't know anything!" She says.

He smiles back at his grandmother's play-acting and gently grabs her by her arm.

"Nani Ma, come with me tonight to your room and I will sneak you out on another night. Agreed?" Qismat can't help feel a rush of delight to see the brightness in those eyes spark, even for a moment, as she looks at him. She can see what his grandfather saw in those eyes to fall so madly in love. His grandfather, someone nobody talks about, but who is always there hiding underneath all words.

As they gingerly walk down the dark steps, one at a time, she gently hums a tune that Qismat mistakes for breathing at first.

"O boat-man of miracles, take back the oar, My rowing is done All my life I have pulled the oar The boat moves not and falls back with the tide and ebb Matters not my heed of ropes and bars The helm doesn't cut through water The boat is free, and the stern will give The boat is not secure anywhere."

Outside the hailstones continue with a rhythm all its own. Taak-taak-taak.

Bangladeshi-born Javed Jahangir lives in Massachusetts. His novel 'Ghost Alley' awaits a publisher.

Naguib Mahfouz: A beginning without end

ASRAR CHOWDHURY

Naguib Mahfouz (b: 11 Dec 1911; d: 30 Aug 2006), Egyptian-born writer, was the first person from the Arab world to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1988. The three novels, *Bayn Al-Qasrayn* (Palace Walk), *Quast Al-Shawq* (Palace of Desire), and *Al-Sukkariyah* (Sugar Street), popularly known as 'The Cairo Trilogy' and published between 1956-57, established Naguib Mahfouz as a pioneering literary figure across the Arab world.

The youngest child of a minor civil servant, Mahfouz's mother named him after the physician who delivered him. He was born in Sayyidna Al-Husayn district of Al-Gamaliyya neighbourhood of old Cairo, and in fact spent virtually his entire life in two neighbourhoods in Cairo. He would wake up at 4:00am, work till 7:00am, go out for a walk, have breakfast at his favourite Ali Baba café where he would read the morning newspapers, and then return home to write for two additional hours.

Although Mahfouz rarely travelled outside Cairo, let alone Egypt, he wrote one novel after another and became the spokesperson of his generation, a generation scattered over 22 nations. Mahfouz's almost single-handed effort evolved and established Arabic prose, especially the novel, in the form and manner we see it today.

A towering figure in the Arab universe, but virtually unknown outside it, even writing this modest profile of Naguib Mahfouz feels akin to containing an underground fountain.

Where does one start and where does one end? Nearly twenty years on, Mahfouz is still the only Arab to have won the Nobel Prize in literature although storytelling has been a favourite pastime of the Arabs from the dawn of written history. And this storytelling transcends religions and cultural boundaries within the Arab world to include such names as Orhan Pamuk, Amin Maalouf, and Yusuf Idris, to name a few in modern times, or going back to the "masters," in Kahil Gibran, Al-Aqqad, Al-Mazni, Taha Husayn and Tawfiq Al-Hakim, who laid the foundations of modern Arabic prose.

The novel as a whole is a recent phenomenon in world literature compared to poetry and plays. The novel as a genre is considered to be essentially a creature of, by and for the urban middle class. It is here that Mahfouz's life and time in Cairo paved the way for him to become the chronicler of this crowded metropolis and form a bridge between the present and the past, the living and the dead.

Mahfouz Naguib in his own words

"My position on everything I have read throughout my life and my readings include the Ancient Egyptian and Arabic heritage as well as English and French creative workswas, as far as possible, a neutral, unbiased, one. This in the sense that all these cultures are, in the last analysis, human cultures, produced by man, and I am as entitled to the English (literary) heritage as I am to the Pharaonic heritage. In other words, all these cultures belong to me in my capacity as a human being. And if you were to ask me to enumerate my favourite works in order, you might find among them an Ancient Egyptian work, a French one, a third that is Arabic and a fourth that is English. When I read I allow myself to love what seems worthy of love, regardless of nationality."



Arabic literature. For the first time, the Arabic novel was successfully written within an urban setting. *Zuqaq Al-Midaqq* (Midaq Alley, 1946) skillfully negotiates the tension between traditionalism and modernity based on Midaq Alley, and revolving around its central character, Hamidah. Mahfouz cleverly uses Hamidah as a metaphor for Egypt. If Mahfouz's published novels from the 1940s were path-breaking, the *magnum opus* was still in the offing: The Cairo Trilogy.

This trilogy deals with the traditional subject matter of novels mentioned at the beginning here: preserving the experiences of the urban middle class. It can be termed as an extended poem that narrates the decline of patriarchy in Egypt between 1917 and 1944, Egypt's struggle to come to terms with the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the nationalist movements of 1919 (Palace Walk), the British Negotiation of 1924 (Palace of Desire), and political events between 1935 and 1944 (Sugar Street).

Mahfouz published six novels and collection of short stories between 1961 and 1967. These were all experimental and influenced mainly by the works of Jean Paul Sartre. *Al-Liss Wa Al-Kilab* (The Thief and the Dogs, 1961) narrates a story of a person driven mad by the desire for revenge. *Al-Summan Wa Al-Kharif* (Autumn Quail, 1962) addresses Nasser's failure to rehabilitate intellectuals of the Old Regime. *Miramar* (Miramar, 1967) is Mahfouz's outcome of the spiritual crisis he found himself in after the "humiliating" Six Day War.

During the late 1970s, Mahfouz's work came under attack for his support for the 1979 Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty. However, the masses kept on reading his books. In 1985, he went back to his "Pharaonic" roots with the publication of *Al-A'ish Fi Al-Haqiqah* (Akhentaten, Dweller in Truth) where he narrates the life of a Pharaoh through the eyes of people who knew him years after the Pharaoh dies.

The crowning glory for Mahfouz and the Arab world came in 1988 when Mahfouz was declared the Nobel Prize Winner for Literature. Mahfouz's first comments after he heard that he had won the prize will echo in anybody's mind. "My Masters deserved it more than me" referring to Al-Aqqad, Al-Mazni, Taha Husayn and Tawfiq Al-Hakim. The Nobel Prize, however, didn't come without its troubles. Mahfouz's acceptance of the Nobel Prize from the West, his condemnation of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and further events led to him becoming the target of a street attack during which he was stabbed twice in the neck in 1994. Mahfouz was 83 at the time. Although he narrowly survived, it didn't stop him from living up to his nickname of "Omega" for the unvarying and predictable nature of his daily schedule.

Where does one start? In fact, we haven't started at all. The depth and breadth of the persona associated with Naguib Mahfouz is too immense to be fully caught within this narrative. Like all great storytellers, Mahfouz helps us escape into a magical parallel world, a world that is our home. A world where anything is possible, like the *Arabian Nights* or the *Chronicles of Narnia*. And when we finally realise we have to get back, we just slip on our ruby slippers and say, "take me back home."

But the magic doesn't simply end here. It's the depth of his metaphor and allegory that transcends Mahfouz beyond his native Cairo and the Arab world. It is here where Mahfouz's genius rests. Egypt may never be able to produce another pyramid. Egypt may never be able to produce another Naguib Mahfouz. And, like the Sphinx, his legacy will continue to protect and haunt all Arabia for as long as we can tell.

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Book Review

Bringing Islamic intellectuals to the Bengali-speaking world

AFSAN CHOWDHURY

Islami Chintar Punorpothon: Shomokalin Musolman Buddhijibider Shangram (Reinterpreting Islam: The Struggles of Contemporary Muslim Intellectuals) collated and translated by Rahnuma Ahmed; Dhaka: Ekushey Publications Limited; May 2006; pp. 464; Taka 375.00

Islami Chintar Punorpothon, which deals with the challenges facing Islamic intellectuals globally, is probably the most significant book now available in the Bangladesh non-fiction market. Prof. Rahnuma Ahmed has carried out a stellar task in bringing together the high end intellectuals of contemporary Islam to the Bengali speaking world in a superbly produced book. It is all the more relevant because Islam as an intellectual process is overwhelmed by emotionality in Bangladesh leaving the intellectual space relatively deserted.

Rahnuma Ahmed has completed this difficult task of collecting texts and writings on Islam thanks to the Internet - with a great sense of responsibility. She has translated the gathered conversations successfully to make them very easy readings. The representation range from global personalities like Amina Wadud and Tariq Ramadan to the less known activists like Abu Zahza and Khaled Abu-El Fadl. It's now up to us to open the book and be introduced to the rainbow world of Islamic intellectuality.

Discourses and challenges

This volume provides opportunity to review the different streams of Islamic thought that has emerged in different parts of the world including those that are challenging established Islamic positions from within its own corridors. For example, El-Fadl who teaches law at the California University takes on the Wahabi claim that they have the sole right to interpret sharia. He insists that they don't even "understand laws". He goes on to say that Wahabism is "an autocratic dogma bereft of love and humanity". While he wouldn't be very popular with Wahabi theologians it also shows that the internal world of Islam is hardly monolithic. Amina Wadud, who created a global stir by leading a mixed gender prayer is also a scholar of high repute. She speaks with passion about the liberating influence of Islam and says that it's the post-modernity of the last 200 years that influenced her search within the Quran to locate the space for liberation of societies and individuals, especially women. To her, the right to lead a prayer is as fundamental as her interpretation of Islam as a faith of liberation. Amina Wadud contests the notion that only men have spiritual supremacy and she draws her reasoning from both the logic of Quran and early Islamic practices.

Lily Zakia Munir, who comes from a long line of Indonesian Islamic scholars, says that there is a need for a sensitive interpretation of the Quran which goes beyond the simple legalistic one. "If one is to achieve the objectives of the sharia, then I would suggest that one needs to go beyond the sharia barring a few ritualistic and religious aspects and create a new *tarikah* (path)."



It is these dramatic intellectual journeys in Islam that has been presented in this book and made it such a rich effort. Rahnuma Ahmed has gone to great lengths to make the book as comprehensive and reader friendly as possible. The notes at the end cover a large area of philosophical, religious and functional aspects. Each piece is introduced by a convenient biography and e-mail addresses are also attached in many cases. This is more than a book; it's a key to a world of knowledge which for many has remained distant despite links of faith. Readers must decide what they think of the scholars and activists and their idea about Islam. Tariq Ramadan of Freyberg university, Switzerland who has granted and then denied a visa to teach at an American university is also an explorer who represents the obvious conflicts in Islamic thoughts that have arisen as a result of ideological, generational and political clashes. It's a clash not just of civilizations but also of intellectual wars fought within civilizations. Faith and dogma are not in consonance with the exploratory space of religions. However, the attraction that intellectual subservience offers is also enormous. For a religion that its followers believe is the final one, and by extension the greatest, has issues that will put many thoughts in contest if not in confrontation with belief. This book presents those who are trying to chart a course in this endless and often very turbulent sea.

By collating, translating and writing helpful notes on this fascinating world, Rahnuma Ahmed has opened a window that lets us see the armada that is sailing on the sea of Islamic intellectuality. It is a contribution which makes Rahnuma an intellectual activist of a very high order indeed.

Afsan Chowdhury writes for a number of South Asian newspapers and magazines.