

Process Of Writing Fiction

ADIB KHAN

Creativity is an enigma to most writers because a great deal of time is spent in groping one's way through areas of darkness, with the occasional flashes of illumination. These do not necessarily occur in any sequential pattern, so that a systematic analysis of the process becomes extraordinarily difficult.

There is no such phenomenon as the creative process in writing. Rather, it is a creative process which is unique and applicable to every individual work of fiction. It would be simplistic and, indeed, misleading to refer to the creative process as though it was a single system of progressing towards a desired end in writing. The term can be no more than a convenient summary label for a complex set of cognitive, motivational and emotional activities that are involved in perceiving, remembering, imagining, appreciating, thinking, planning and shaping a work of fiction.

To complicate matters, one must differentiate between process and method. It is an important point of distinction which students of creative writing sometimes find difficult to grasp. Method is related to guidelines which are often given to writers by publishers of romance fiction. It is a crippling, soulless way of creating fiction. The imagination is guided towards a certain end, usually with the male and female protagonists vowing to love each other forever in a setting resplendent with a tranquil sea and a tropical sunset.

The creative process has its inception in a writer's curiosity and interest in the unravelling of the world beyond that which is obvious in its empirical state. In his essay, 'Reflections on Writing', Henry Miller suggested that "Writing, like life itself, is a voyage of discovery. The

adventure is a metaphysical one: it is a way of approaching life indirectly, of acquiring a total rather than a partial view of the universe." A vital part of the journey is to be introspective, to turn inwards and scan different landscapes that can be barren, sparsely populated or teeming with life. One breaks the journey and waits patiently for clear sounds and distinct movements. Even when you intuitively know that there is 'something' in the maze, it is often shrouded in a mist and appears to recede as you approach it. You rarely get a complete picture. Frequently you settle for fractured sightings and fleeting images, sporadic eruptions and, occasionally, violent earthquakes because they are the factors necessary to achieve a conciliation between the belief in one's own imagination and the reality of the external world.

There is a desire to know about the mesh of human emotions and ideas which impact on social reality and its evolution, the compulsion to explore the darkness of the human heart, the wish to tap into spirituality beyond its simplistic manifestations in religion and to understand the tensions inherent in the co-existence of the sublime and the profane within us.

Writing is born from these impulses within the creator. The impulses are chaotic and unpredictable. But in that chaos is the reactor of imaginative energy. The creative process relies on instinctive judgement. You learn to accept your limitations and strengths, and accommodate personal idiosyncrasies. For instance, I have reconciled myself to the inability to plan a novel in any detail whatsoever. That is not due to a lack of effort. My sense of a central character dominates every aspect of the story in its early stages. I allow setting, incidents, dialogue, minor

characters and themes to languish at this stage of writing. My first draft of a novel is no more than a detailed outline which seeks to answer two questions. What am I saying about the condition of life through my protagonist? How has he developed as a person morally, emotionally and intellectually? Once I am satisfied that there is development and growth in this fictitious being, then I turn to structure, language and the rest of the content. This is when I strive to achieve, what Henry James observed as "the sense of felt life." There are innumerable variations in this process and the direction it takes.

Perhaps Carl Gustav Jung best summed up the enormously complex phenomenon of art in his essay, 'Psychology and Literature', when he suggested that "Art is a kind of innate drive that seizes a human being and makes him its instrument. The artist is not a person endowed with free will who seeks his own ends, but one who allows art to realise its purposes through him." The notion of being enslaved to aesthetics will certainly be familiar in varying degrees to those who create art, for which artist has not experienced that obsession which is the driving force that compels the imagination to be productive? But the understanding of that force and its process is another matter.

The creative process involves inspiration, development and evolution of ideas. Each creative effort with a new work of fiction entails an engagement with disorder. Invention demands an absorption in what John Livingston Lowes calls "the surging chaos of the unexpressed." The complexity of the process cannot be unravelled and analysed as though it were an empirical entity. It mutates as the work develops and leaves few traces of its inception for the



conscious and logical mind to understand. There is some consolation in Jung's contention that "... the creative act, which is the absolute antithesis of mere reaction, will for ever elude human understanding. It can only be described in its manifestations; it can be obscurely sensed, but never wholly grasped."

The process can begin suddenly and in any shape or form. It can be a yearning, an image, a sighting, a fragment of a dream, a snatch of a conversation or an object. As a casing point, it is pertinent to scrutinise John Fowles' explanation of how he came across the idea for his novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. In an essay titled 'Notes on an Unfinished Novel', he outlined the beginning of his process of creativity for the novel: "The novel I am writing at the moment (provisionally

entitled *The French Lieutenant's Woman*) is set about a hundred years back... It started four or five months ago as a visual image. A woman stands at the end of a deserted quay and stares out to sea. That was all. This image rose in my mind one morning when I was still in bed half asleep. It corresponds to no actual incident in my life (or in art) that I can recall". This exemplifies what Alfred Whitehead said about "the state of imaginative muddled suspense which precedes successful inductive generalisation..." There is a maddening vagueness about the beginning. It is a swirling chaos, a fear of confronting a monumental problem, dissatisfaction and what Voltaire chose to call "constructive discontent". Yet instinct tells the writer to follow it and nourish it, or as Stephen Spender observed: "a dim cloud

of an idea which I feel must be condensed into a shower of words."

Any insight into the process of creativity is fragmented, but it does lead to some understanding of the rebellious and erratic workings of the imagination. Experience teaches one not to despair that the imagination cannot be regulated to be productive in conformity to a working schedule.

Ever since Plato recorded Socrates' contention in *Ion* that a "poet is a light and winged holy thing, and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and reason is no longer in him...", there has been a mystique surrounding the creative writer and the process by which works of literature are shaped. Renaissance philosophers, in particular Nicholas of Cusso and Pecco Peccino, developed the

idea of the human link with the divine through creativity. In fact, Nicholas of Cusso contended that the capacity of a human being to use his or her imagination to continue the process of inventing the world accounts for the nobility of mankind. And if one were to believe Plato in *Phaedrus* and Shakespeare's *Thesus* in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the writer is either mad or in the company of madmen and lovers.

Historically, creativity and madness have been linked because of that elusive phenomenon of inspiration. In the creative process, there are two stages that need to be distinguished the moments of inspiration, when ideas and suggestion appear in consciousness, and the moments of expansion or development of such ideas. The problematic part is inspiration because it is not in our control. We cannot decide to be inspired at a moment of our choosing. Nietzsche, in *Ecce Homo*, describes the moment of inspiration when "something profoundly convulsive and disturbing suddenly becomes visible and audible and with indescribable definiteness and exactness. One hears one does not seek; one takes one does not ask who gives... There is the feeling that one is utterly out of hand... Everything occurs without volition..."

Whether the inspiration that appears at the threshold of the writer's reflexive consciousness is an impression, an emotion or a fantasy, it is 'already there' in the creative process. What eludes an analysis is the origin of the inspiration.

Twentieth-century views on creativity, it seems, have clung to this mystical notion of creativity's link with the irrational or the supernatural. William Faulkner observed that an "artist is a creature driven by demons... He has a dream. It anguished himself so much he must get rid

of it." James Joyce said that "an artist is the magician put among men to gratify capriciously their urge for immortality." And more recently, the American novelist, Tim O'Brien, wrote an essay, titled 'The Magic Show', in which he claimed that whatever we call the process of creativity, "it is both magical and real." The unanswerable question that must consistently bother anyone involved with creative writing is: 'Is there an altered consciousness during creativity?' Of course, one must not forget Coleridge and the circumstances in which 'Kubla Khan' was written to mystify us even further. To complicate matters, both Freud and Jung contended that creativity is a process that occurs outside consciousness.

God, demons or magic? Is it at all possible to find logical and definitive explanations for what transpires in the creative process? I doubt it. We do not live in an age of absolutism, but in times dominated by one of 20th Century's enduring legacies of Physics Werner Heisenberg's 'Uncertainty Principle'. We can theorise and speculate without making definitive pronouncements. Aspects of the human mind continue to be elusive to rationalists. But we must take T. S. Eliot's advice and not "cease from exploration."

What is important is the willingness to search the labyrinth of the imagination. For in that quest lies self-awareness, exposure to one's own personality and the knowledge of who and what we are as human beings. Our evolution through life is itself a process and not a method. The process of creating any form of art is a metaphor of the bigger picture, one that we use to make sense of what makes us tick.

Adib Khan is a Bangladeshi-born Australian novelist.

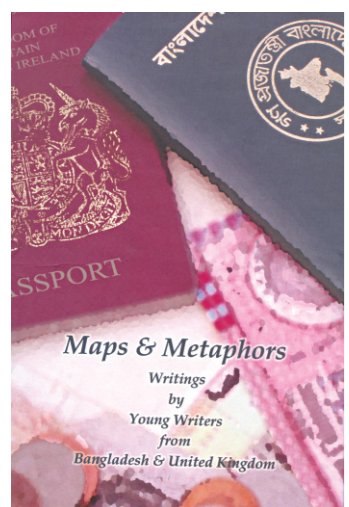
BOOKNOTES



Dhaka Publications

JAVED KHAN

Maps and Metaphors: Writings by Young Writers from Bangladesh & United Kingdom, compiled and edited by Dinesh Allirajah; Dhaka: British Council; 2006; pp. 88; Tk. 80



The British Council, Dhaka in 2003 began a program called Connecting Futures, to enable creative interaction among young British and Bangladeshi aspiring writers (the latter group was named Brine Pickles). As June Rollinson, Director, British Council Dhaka, writes in the Foreword, "part of the idea was

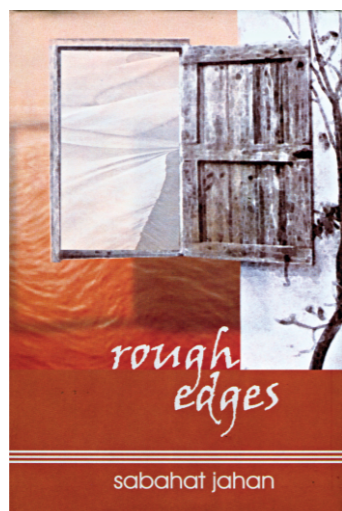
to promote contemporary British writing in Bangladesh". This publication is the product of two workshops conducted between members of the two groups in Dhaka and in the UK in 2005 and 2006 under the guidance of the "UK performance poet and short story writer Dinesh Allirajah". It contains poems, short stories, and 'performance' bits. Below are two samplings from among the 45 pieces published. Anna Steward writes in her poem 'This Week': *The temperature is falling all over the country. Light-rains shower the Irr-Boro fields till noon. Bottle gourds, radish, turnip, brinjal, jhinga And green bananas grow sweet and plump...*

While in 'User Manual of a Writer', Tanvir Hafiz notes: "Assembly: The head comes in a separate box. Please open the box and place it on the support unit and rotate anti-clockwise. The completed unit needs no battery to start, but may require a kick to the head."

Quite a few of the writers/contributors in this anthology show promise. It is a laudable initiative taken by the British Council, and they should keep up the good work.

rough edges by Sabahat Jahan; Dhaka; writers.ink; 2006; pp. 86; Tk. 200.00

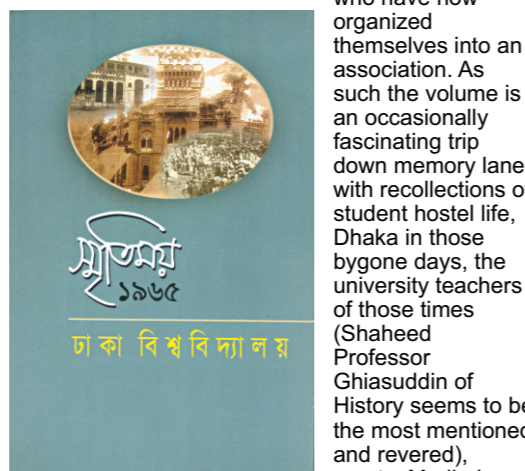
This is a book of poems, a first publication from one of Dhaka's younger poets writing in English. She completed her higher education in the United States and since 2004 has been living and writing here. The book blurb informs us that one of her poems won Baylor University's Beall Poetry Festival Award in 2002. Almost all the poems, written in the first



person singular, refract personal experience and reflect a feminine sensibility. She is also fond of writing the short poem, as in 'Cheap Talk': *I didn't hear the rest of the conversation. The connection was bad, Although you were sitting across from me In a living room crowded with memories.*

Smritymoy 1965: Dhaka Bishwabiddaloy, Volume 3, edited by Aminul Islam Bedu; Dhaka: publisher Denis Dilip Dutta; pp. 216; Tk. 100.00.

Smritymoy 1965 is the third in a series of publications by Dhaka University alumni, 1961-65,



who have now organized themselves into an association. As such the volume is an occasionally fascinating trip down memory lane, with recollections of student hostel life, Dhaka in those bygone days, the university teachers of those times (Shaheed Professor Ghiasuddin of History seems to be the most mentioned and revered), sports, Madhu's canteen, and yes, firebrand student politics. Two of the articles are in English, and the one by Ziauddin M. Choudhury is an amusing account of a student desperately trying to conceal his wife, and marital status, from prying eyes. There are two outstanding pieces. The first one is a joyous recounting of his light-hearted student days—he was an pre-eminent athlete—by current Commerce Minister Hafizuddin Ahmed Bir Bikram, with a few memorable sketches of the politics science department's teachers in those days. The other is titled '*Baliadanga'r Juddho*', by Mahbubuddin Ahmed Bir Bikram. It is a gripping, poetic narrative of a battle between Mukti Bahini forces and the Pakistan Army fought at Baliadanga over three days in September 1971. This account should be in 1971 Liberation War historical volume/war narrative, and not, so to speak, labouring in the relative obscurity of this journal. One hopes more such writing will see the light of

day in future volumes.

Obak Alir Nishiddho Polli O Onnanno Kotha by Mahbubar Rahman; Dhaka: Hakkani Publishers; 2006; 103 pp.; Tk. 110.

Mahbubar Rahman's book is a jaunt through bureaucratic mores during Pakistan times. They are observed through the eyes of its protagonist, Obak Ali, so named due to his habit of exclaiming "Obak kandol" ("How surprising!") in response to the goings-on around him. This is the author's third publication and readers curious about the topic of bureaucracy will find themselves entertained.

Javed Khan is a freelance writer.

Portrait of an Elderly Woman Eating Breakfast

(for Nanu)

TARFIA FAIZULLAH

She eats toast with marmalade. Light streams through an open window, her hair a flame, red with henna gnawed between the grooves of her palms, restless.

Later, she billows jasmine and pungent spices as she lurches from room to room, overseeing glistening mounds of mangoes, papayas gathering solidity through her touch, red-tipped fingers pressed into yellow, grass green rinds.

How many nights I lay beside her, unmoving, a body filling with feathers; together, we listen to her husband's breathing pitched laboriously against white mosquito netting.

Now I say to her, release his tumor your tears have made cold, flinty, and rest.

For her grief I breathe no other prayer.

Tarfia Faizullah is studying for her master's in creative writing in Virginia, USA.

Abdul Karim Shahityabisharod: Rediscovering Bengal's pastoral traditions

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

You do not hear much about Abdul Karim Shahityabisharod (he was born in 1871 and his 53rd death anniversary fell this 30th September) these days. But in the rare moments when you do, you are reminded once more of the tradition he inaugurated for this country in his own, inimitable way. Of course, the Bengali cultural tradition had always been there. But what Abdul Karim — 'Shahityabisharod' was an honorific a grateful people gave him as a recognition of his genius — did was to go all over the land, the Bengal of old, in search of the roots that appeared to be lost to time and the vagaries of fortune. He was, in that sense, a troubadour who sang songs along the pastoral paths he travelled along even as he looked for the lyrics which once enriched the literature of the Bengalis.

In a very significant sense, Abdul Karim pioneered what was essentially a movement, his own, for a revival of Bengali literary richness. He was, from such a perspective, not a creator of literature but its devotee. The arduous efforts he put into his programme of locating and collecting the puthi songs of Bengal were patently the hallmarks of a man to whom literature, or its discovery, was a defining affair. To be sure, puthi literature, a narrative form of tradition (or you might call it Bengal's very own oral tradition coming down to the generations across the years), had been part of the ambience in these parts before Karim's arrival on the scene. Bengali writers, largely belonging to the Hindu community, had left a voluminous range of work on puthi literature that only added to the diversity of literature in Bengal. So what was different about Abdul Karim Shahityabisharod's contribution to the genre, or its rediscovery? In essence, he accomplished two feats here. The first was to serve notice that even within the Bengali Muslim community, a body of individuals not particularly noted for their literary inclinations at the time, there were

indeed people who did take interest in encounters of the literary kind. And the second was the clear broadening of the canvas that Abdul Karim undertook in his approach to puthi studies. It was he who let people in on the idea that puthi literature was not a matter for the upper or middle classes to handle; it was to be spotted in the simplicity of rural life as well. In a manner of speaking, therefore, Abdul Karim journeyed far and wide through Bengal, pored over innumerable works and much history, in his unique enterprise of unearthing hidden or lost cultural heritage.

And the amazing part of the Abdul Karim Shahityabisharod story is that he did it all alone. Where the early observers of puthi literature undertook their work on the strength of external financial largesse, Karim had only himself to fall back on for resources with which to pursue his interest. He went to Muslim homes to learn about old tales that might have lain there; and then he made his way to Hindu families, to learn from them the lessons they had imbibed within their own social framework. The result was a rewarding crop of puthi culture people did not know ever existed. Abdul Karim, of course, was not surprised. He had always had that gut feeling that there were puthi treasures hidden or overshadowed in the way traditions are generally locked away until someone comes up to crack the doors open a little, to let the sunlight filter in on bygone grandeur. In *Gyanshagor* and *Gourango Sanyas*, it is the sunlight that speaks.

A remarkable quality in Abdul Karim Shahityabisharod was the careful way in which he bucked the political trends of the times he inhabited. Even as his fellow Muslim writers went about looking for an Islamic imagery to base their thoughts upon, Karim stayed honest to the calling of literature, literature as it was meant to be, all his life. Not for him the pointless craving for a literature Muslims could relate to. Karim and Kazi Nazrul Islam were perhaps the first Bengali Muslims, from the point of view of literature, to

aver, in so many words, that religion was not equipped to bear the weight of true, hardbone literature. In an era when sections of Muslims were cheerfully going overboard in their determination to rediscover themselves as born-again followers of the Islamic faith, Abdul Karim Shahityabisharod moved not at all from the secular concept of life. It was particularly in the 1940s that a group of Bengalis with pretensions to Muslim literature arose, their overriding objective being an argument for the East Pakistani literature, that was on the way. When Syed Ali Ahsan and Syed Sajjad Hossain were raucously ecstatic upon 'discovering' the Muslim literature that would underpin East Pakistani literature, Abdul Karim must have regarded such efforts as unadulterated heresy. Syed Sajjad Hussain's attempt to discover in Muslim Bengali literature shades of an earlier tradition, in Europe and that of the Celts, must have appeared risible to Shahityabisharod. Literature was not to be segmented into communal compartments. To factionalise it was to kill it, or force it into a stunted condition.

Today, fifty three years after his death — the life went out of him even as he was busy traversing the landscape of literary tradition, literally — Abdul Karim Shahityabisharod remains one of the more significant points of reference for Bengalis. He was a clerk whose interest was, as ever, the pursuit of literature. He was a man with an ego of the sort which subsists in men not unduly drawn to the worldly. He once told a friend he was leaving his uncle to handle the banalities which come with keeping worldly property while he moved on to explore the expanding and deepening spaces of the mind. The poet Nabinchandra Sen had once opened the doors for him. He simply stepped across the threshold, to leave his own footprints along the dusty paths.

Syed Badrul Ahsan writes poetry and fiction and earns a living as a journalist.