

SHORT STORY

Before The Monsoons Come (concluding Part)

MAHMUD RAHMAN

It would take two more years for Moni to finally get his precious object of desire. He picked out the black Raleigh from the rack of shiny bicycles at the store on Nawabpur Road. When they brought it home, he jumped on it and circled their colony of apartment buildings. He was eager to show off that he was an expert rider.

One afternoon he told his mother that he was going to bike over to Selim's house in Azimpur. She flatly said no. He could only ride in the compound.

He said, "Fine then. I won't ride this bike anymore."
"Then we can sell it off."
"Go ahead. See if I care."

Of course his mother didn't sell the bike and Moni continued to ride in the compound. Then he brought a new plan to his mother. He agreed not to ride on the main road just outside. But what if he walked over to the side road across the way and then rode up and down that little road? She conceded, but Belal would have to walk over with him.

His brother soon got tired of this new chore. Within a week, Moni was walking his bike over by himself. One day at the end of that side road where it intersected with another major thoroughfare, he asked himself, what would happen if he took off from there? Without hesitating, he sped off and wound his way along three major roads, passing through at least five congested intersections, and arrived in triumph at Selim's flat.

His mother never found out. He continued to make a big show of walking the bike in and out of the compound. Over the next year, Moni explored many neighborhoods of the city, including the entire university area.

By the time he was sixteen and enrolled in intermediate college, Moni had a full life away from home. His mother only worried if he stayed out so late that he missed dinner or got drenched in the rain. One stormy day in the monsoon season, he passed by the offices of the local Red Cross. A group of boys were loading a truck with boxes of supplies. He stopped to inquire and they told him they were headed out to Sirajganj in the north. The Jamuna had flooded and people stranded. Moni entered the office, spoke to the man in charge, and offered to join a relief team. When he returned home and told his parents, his father readily agreed but his mother was hesitant. She asked him to be careful. He was surprised that she let him go so easily.

Perhaps it was because he wasn't following in his brother's footsteps. Around this time revolution was in the air. Belal had chosen a full involvement in militant politics. Moni chose to be with a small group that organized relief expeditions and weekend work camps, efforts his brother sometimes derided as 'social work.'

But after March 25, it was no longer a matter of what choice any single person made with their individual lives. Belal became a marked man. Their father paid a harsh price for his son's choice.

Though his mother hoped to see him alive again, Moni was convinced he was dead. The Pakistanis were not reported to be keeping prisoners. Even those who had not chosen rebellion were targeted. People who happened to be in the streets when the military convoys came rolling down. The entire Hindu community. Bengali soldiers like Moni's uncle Zia had never sympathized with Bengali nationalism, but it no longer mattered what their opinions were. The choice Moni had made, however, would yield an unforeseen opportunity; the refuge he found with his mother on Naodubi.

More than a month into their island stay, Moni asked the men who had gathered in the afternoon if they could tell when the rains would come. Very soon, they said. One old man stroked his beard and said he could tell from the texture of the air that the monsoons would break exactly seven days hence. The others said he was right sometimes. The old man reminded Moni that the days of the daily launch run from Golachipa were nearly over. Once the rains arrived, the service would become irregular. There had even been years when the boat had not returned for the entire monsoon season. The men warned Moni that if he needed anything from the town, he should take the trip the very next day.

Moni nodded but his mind was not on supplies. He could not stomach the thought of being cut off for months.

After they had eaten dinner, Moni joined his mother on the verandah on the ground floor.

"Ma, I... we can't keep staying here. I... we should go."
"Where?" She looked at him, her face calm in the fading light.
"India. Back to Dhaka. Anywhere but here. I feel utterly useless."
"But we are safe here. There are no soldiers. And you know how much the villagers appreciate what we are doing."

"Yes, they do. And as you suggested, someday we should come back and do what we are doing, but properly. Now it feels like we are just passing the time while the country is burning."

"So what is your plan then?" She raised her voice. "To leave me here all by myself and run off?" With the back of her hand she dabbed at the edges of her eyes. "Go, then. All the others have abandoned me. Why not you as well?"

"Ma, don't talk like that. It was not Baba's fault that they took him away. It wasn't Belal's fault either."

"Don't talk to me about Belal. He didn't care about the danger he



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put us in. He only thought of himself. Just like you are doing today."

"How can you say Belal was selfish? Whatever he did, he did for the nation."

"The nation!" She spat out the word.

"Aren't we part of the nation? If I don't blame Belal, then I have to hold your father responsible. The boy would have listened to him, but would Mr. Aziz ever control him? No, he left all that to me. He even encouraged the boy to get interested in politics."

"Belal didn't need Baba's help to get into politics. Ma, this is what most students were doing. He couldn't help but get involved."

"So why didn't you?"

"You know why. I found other things to do." Moni was stunned. He had never heard his mother speak like this. Until now, he had assumed that she, like him, understood that all the blame lay squarely on the Pakistanis. The Bengalis had won the election, and who had known that the aftermath would be massacres, disappearances, the onrush of war? Belal certainly hadn't.

The daylight had all but disappeared. Moni lit the hurricane lantern and asked,

"How can you talk like this?"

"Why not? I'm just speaking the truth. The truth you can't bear." She looked back at him defiantly. "They're both dead, you know. They're never coming back to us. You're all I have left." She started to weep.

Moni realized that this was the first real conversation they had ever had on Baba being taken away and Belal's disappearance. Was she right? Could both his father and Belal be dead? After a long, awkward silence, he said, "We can talk more about it later, but tomorrow I must take the launch to Golachipa. Tell me what we need. We need food and batteries. Anything else?"

"You're not going to sneak away, are you?"
"Why would I...?" Moni felt the blood rush into his face.
"Promise me you won't take the boat and run off from Golachipa."

"How can...?"
"Like you used to do on your bicycle."
"You knew?"

"Silly boy, of course I knew. Mothers know these things." She smiled at him. "Promise me."

He did not return her smile. "I used to make promises back then. I didn't keep them, so why should you believe me now?"

"Just promise me."
"No. You're going to have to just trust me to do the right thing."

"Brother, where are you going? You're going to the wrong boat. This way, quick, quick!" Ahsan comes to get him.

Moni shudders at what he's been considering. He's ashamed that he even allowed such a terrible thought to form in his mind. There is no way he could leave her on the island. He had never intended to do that. No, his plan was to convince her to return to Dhaka. By now, things must have eased up. She could stay with one of her relatives. The military isn't looking for her. But could she handle the daily reminder of the losses in her life? Maybe he can finally convince her that the better choice would be to go with him to India. Surely her brother Zia would find a place for her. Yes, yes, that is what he needs to do. Once she is safe somewhere, he could join the struggle.

He allows Ahsan to lead him back toward the launch. "It was the heat, got you all confused, right?" Ahsan says as Moni boards. "Brother, if you had taken the other launch, you might never have made it back to Naodubi." He looks skyward.

As the boat leaves Golachipa behind, Moni looks out over the water. The breeze over the river cools him down, drying his sweat. Within minutes, he can no longer see land on either side. Not far is the ocean. The man sitting next to him lights up a cigarette.

"So what did you buy on your shopping trip?" the man asks, pointing to the two jute bags next to Moni's feet. Moni lists off a few items. Indeed, he did not buy all the supplies his mother asked him to get. He only bought just enough food to last a couple of more days, as well as some biscuits to distribute to the children. He wants to host a little going-away party for them. She will be furious with him, but she will have no choice but to leave. She will not accept being stuck on the island without the essentials they need to last out the rains. It bothers him that he had to do something underhanded. Those days between us should be over, he thinks.

The launch slows down for its first stop. Moni's seatmate gets off, along with two other passengers. A small country boat pulls up alongside and a fisherman says he has some *ilish* fish for sale, quite cheap. Moni buys one. So do some of the other men. They comment on the size and freshness of the fish. He smiles back at them and tells them that his mother will be happy.

She will swallow her anger and take the time to cook the fish in the way she knows he likes. He can almost taste it now. As he savors the fish in his mouth, he knows why she didn't want to flee the country, why she insisted he bring her to this remote place. It wasn't simply to get away from the clutches of the soldiers. No, it was because she has no intention of ever letting him go. She might be able to endure life without his father or Belal, but she would fight to the death to keep him close to her. Even if he convinces her to leave Naodubi, he knows their fates are bound together. He could not walk away. He still dreams of making it across the border, but each new occasion he considers that scenario, he fails to imagine what it is he would do once he gets there. At his mother's side, though, his role is clear.

Mahmud Rahman is at work on his first novel.

The Ordeal of English Departments in Bangladesh

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The English departments in Bangladesh universities, both private and public, generally offer BA (Honours), Master's, and also higher degrees. Most of them have syllabuses that cover studies on English language and literature.

But ill fares the land of English departments, and this article discusses the issue in terms of five interrelated problems; a) *Faulty Perception*, b) *Uncompromising Element in the English Culture*, c) *Sloth*, d) *The Demographic Imbalance*, and e) *The Pedagogical Crux*.

Faulty Perception

Our colonial legacy has taught us to look at English, to paraphrase Homi Bhabha, as signs for wonders. I think our students seeking admission are simply carried away by their fascination for the cultural superiority English enjoys in our society. Going back to my student days, I remember that I chose English deliberately over Bangla, in which also I had qualified for admission, because I thought by reading English I would be thought of as a superior student. Just as I had no idea why I was taking admission in English, except for this overwhelming attraction for English, admission seekers today likewise have no notion about either what English literature means or what learning the English language means. So, the primary motivation for choosing to study English Literature and Language, which has to come from a student's genuine liking for it, is missing here.

A great many student also come to read English because their parents have wished them to do so. Many guardians who have taken English as signs for wonders, but couldn't study English themselves, and so send their children to study English as wish fulfillment. Still others send their children, especially sons, to study English because of the greater job opportunity available for English students. Many more, and here I may be excused for saying so, send their daughters to study in the English Department as it would enhance their prospects in the marriage market. A suitable girl being constructed for a suitable boy. Many girl students, decked with beauty and charms and a comparatively duller head, just enter the department and go out by the marriage door without completing their degree.

This infatuation has grown out of rather a misplaced perspective regarding the status of English in Bangladesh. The geo-historical and socio-cultural reasons which have turned English into a link language in India do not exist here so as to enforce the use of English as an essentiality in everyday communication. The status of

English here is that of a foreign language, and not of a second language.

The Uncompromising Element in the English Culture

English Departments in the public universities teach the traditional canon of the English literature, with, nowadays, the addition of post-modern, critical theory, Diasporic literature and new Englishes. Many private universities however contain a lot more courses on business English and linguistic areas than on literature. I remember Francis Rolt, who taught English at Chittagong university in the late seventies (he was also a novelist whose book *The Last Armenian* was a love story centered around the church at Armanitola, Dhaka) surprised our academic committee by wanting to drop Shakespeare from the syllabus. He argued that teaching Shakespeare to students who couldn't even read straight English was impossible.

At that time I thought Francis spoke blasphemy, but now I think differently. The core courses of English Literature have become impossible for the students to deal with since their basic command of the language is so poor. The core courses of English literature have become impossible for the students of literature to deal with. Their basic language skills are too poor. A certain number of students have in them the sensitivity for literature, but their language skills are so faulty that they can't express their opinions. Others may have the language ability to a moderate degree, but they don't enjoy imaginative writings. Students who have both language skills and literary acumen constitute a tiny minority in English departments, in the range of 1 to 2 per cent.

Learning a foreign language means learning a foreign culture. Our students, I think, often miss out on this notion. In the public universities' English Departments students seeking admission have very high scores in SSC and HSC examinations, and because of their thorough rote learning of grammar rules they are found eligible for admission in the Department. Most of these students, on entering, find both the atmosphere of the Department and the cultural milieu of an English department not entirely to their taste.

So, they either turn very passive and mute, shy like potatoes, or turn upstart, cultivating a fashion, after they pass out, of wearing a three-piece suit even in hot summer, as teacher, advocate, or government official.

There's a core element in English language and literature which is more amenable to an urban-based culture than to a village-based culture. For Dhaka University English Department perhaps this problem of getting

culturally-attuned students is less than it is in other public universities, as Dhaka has always a greater concentration of urban-based families. This is not the case with, say, Chittagong University, which because of its ungody distance from the city is shunned by parents from the city. The private university English departments are luckier in this respect as they also get more students from city-based families, with a more English-friendly cultural environment.

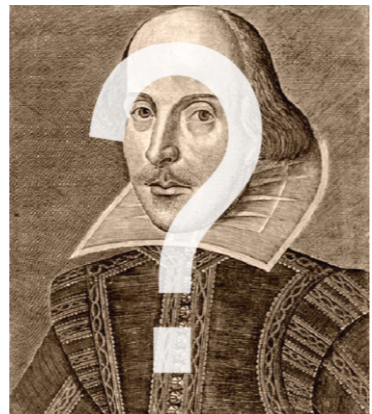
Sloth

Teachers in most of the English Departments as equally demotivated. The better ones suffer from this inertia, which results from their realization that no matter how much effort they put in to excel in their subject, it is not good enough in the context of English departments abroad.

A promising and talented English professor in a Bangladeshi university may find it difficult to keep up with the advanced developments that other English faculty members in other countries, say, India, are making. So some degree of frustration is rooted in him thereby, and it burns him further as he knows that he can't do anything about it, as the infrastructure facilities he is given to work in are at the best minimum. India, for example, has many established publishing houses that bring out English texts and critical texts on a regular basis. The books published find a ready market, too.

I think much of the problem why an English academic scholarship hasn't grown here lies in what is termed in linguistic pedagogy as 'mother tongue interference'. Many brilliant teachers of English have been cleft by this, and which may not often be obvious, extraordinary tension between Bangla literature and English literature. I don't know whether English teachers in India or Pakistan suffer from this nagging bite of the conscience, but in Bangladesh, as Bengali is a substantial literature on its own, and, as I have pointed out, that English is not a need but an exercise here, therefore, a university English teacher given to serious thinking about life, society and literature, does often remain conflicted about which medium he should express himself.

William Radice, noting this tension to be present in Bangladeshi writers in an interview with *Kaldhara*, a literary journal from Chittagong, said that



does English literary scholarship indirectly suffer when whole faculties write not in English but in Bangla? I think this is an unanswerable question.

Demographic imbalance

This is a general problem in Bangladesh educational sector. After independence people have increasingly aspired towards higher studies. Every parent want their sons/daughters to get a Master's degree. Many more students are coming for admission in the universities than there are logistic facilities available for them: dearth of classrooms, accommodation and food, lab and computers, teachers and books are a constantly felt problem. To meet this structural problem many colleges all over the country have been permitted to open Honours and Master's programmes without enough teachers and enough libraries, resulting in the steady deterioration of the standard of higher education. This has given rise to another more crucial problem, which is that many more

students with very poor educational background/s are seeking higher education, thus creating an imbalance between quality and quantity.

In this respect the English departments have been directly hit, because in no other subject perhaps the gap between desire and ability is more acutely felt than in English. In the Arts faculty English is always preferred by the admission seekers as their first choice, but by any pedagogical judgment the students who qualify as the best students in the admission test are not good enough to undergo a rigorous graduate program in English.

The Pedagogical Crux

The motivational factor which I seem to have implied as resting in an interest in literature is however facing a challenge from more modern notions of communicative discourses. Books and syllabuses are published and recommended which show a surge of English studies sans literature.

There's no harm in that as long as students show an improvement of their language skills. But the students who come to take admission to Honours courses surprise the teachers by their ignorance of such basic knowledge of grammar like subject-verb agreement in the simplest order, the third person s inflexion, the apostrophe to indicate possession, and capitalization. We often come across expressions like 'He have', 'They has', 'napoleon' (with a small n), 'Boxer and Clover are two horse', and mixture of tenses. All this now happens, I believe, and which didn't happen before, is due to a dearth of supply of literary pieces to the students.

Communicative approaches to language learning, based on electronic equipment, can't be successful here as most of the educational institutions are void of these facilities.

Furthermore the Unit System Admission Policy in public universities has meant students ticking off a set of multiple choice questions, which does not either judge their cognitive knowledge or their language power.

After joining Premier University, Chittagong in 2003 I, along with my colleagues, took extreme care in crafting the syllabus. To make up the speech deficiency of students, we encourage the students to talk in English, and keep all their academic activities under constant surveillance. We hold monthly seminars on a regular basis which are run by in-house faculty as well as by teachers from other universities, including some from Dhaka University. These seminars have proved largely fruitful.

But in a private university most of what you do is compromised on admission, at least in the beginning phase. It has to be done, because

if you admit fewer students than many of them might drop, and the department will face the prospect of becoming emptied of students. For a private university this prospect is disastrous. It's not unlike a shop, which attempts in every possible way to catch customers. Once the goodwill is established, the shop then can run on a regulated method.

Another problem lies in recruiting teachers. The good young teachers don't want to stay in a private university because of job uncertainty. They even prefer teaching in a government college away from the city instead of a private university.

The Solution

English departments cannot run without an English literary canon. The syllabus may be highly modified so as to include writers from the postcolonial phase, but there has to be a mainstay English literature component. So how do we motivate students into reading the books from the syllabus? One way is to enrich both library book stocks and Internet access. Unaccountably students have developed the habit of refraining from carrying texts into the classroom. This must be discouraged by making books available to them from the library, even through photocopy, or asking them to procure the books from the market. Oxford, Cambridge, and other noted publishing houses publish texts suitable for students. These should be imported in abundant copies.

I personally used to shun notebooks written by the likes of Ramji Lal and company, as they drastically curb the students' imaginative response to literature, but recently I've begun to think that they do benefit the students, and, by extension, an entertaining idea of requesting my colleagues in Bangladesh to undertake similar projects.

Finally, the notion must be clear that students are reading English and the literature in it for growing an independent frame of mind freed from any colonial hangover; as George Lamming says in a different context: "... for English is no longer the exclusive language of the men who live in England. That stopped a long time ago; and it is today, among other things, a West Indian language."

However, that feeling is easier to perceive than to materialize, and the Irishman Macmorris's famous question in Henry the V, "What is my nation?" haunts us not a little as we think of giving space to English.

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Romance

NUZHAT AMIN MANNAN

For birthday got a hand bag, brand: fossil for anniversary it was a bottle of hot chilli paste What a pretty moon, I say He asks where? Who'd blame me if I was now a spoil sport yearning romance.

I hung around sulking for old fashioned declarations a handwritten avowal, a full-blown rose fragrant on my desk... something hidden, somewhere discreet less spicy, almost stark but more fond for sure...priceless!

Men do not write any more, I gather what a waste of time it would be to serenade when a dinner for two peppered by his cell phone chimes is all that it takes!

I would have not minded at all if he would have counted the many ways he loved me or if he lied all winter swore his love was infinite, to declare in spring his love for me had grown again some more.*

But men are done being like John Donne: they are our equals now neither worship the ground we walk on nor ask us to for God's sake hold our tongues.

Equal now, like blessed sweeteners in the place of sweethearts!

* adapted from John Donne's poem 'Love's Growth'. Nuzhat A Mannan teaches English at Dhaka University.