



‘Won’t Sareng come home?’

Shahidullah Kaiser was a Bangladeshi novelist, journalist and political activist, who delivered medicine and food to the freedom fighters as part of the Liberation War efforts in 1971. On 14 December, 1971, he was picked up by the collaborators of the Pakistani military and executed. The following is an excerpt from the martyr’s novel A Seaman’s Wife (Sareng Bou), translated into English from Bengali by Syed Najmuddin Hashem and published by Prothoma Prokashan.

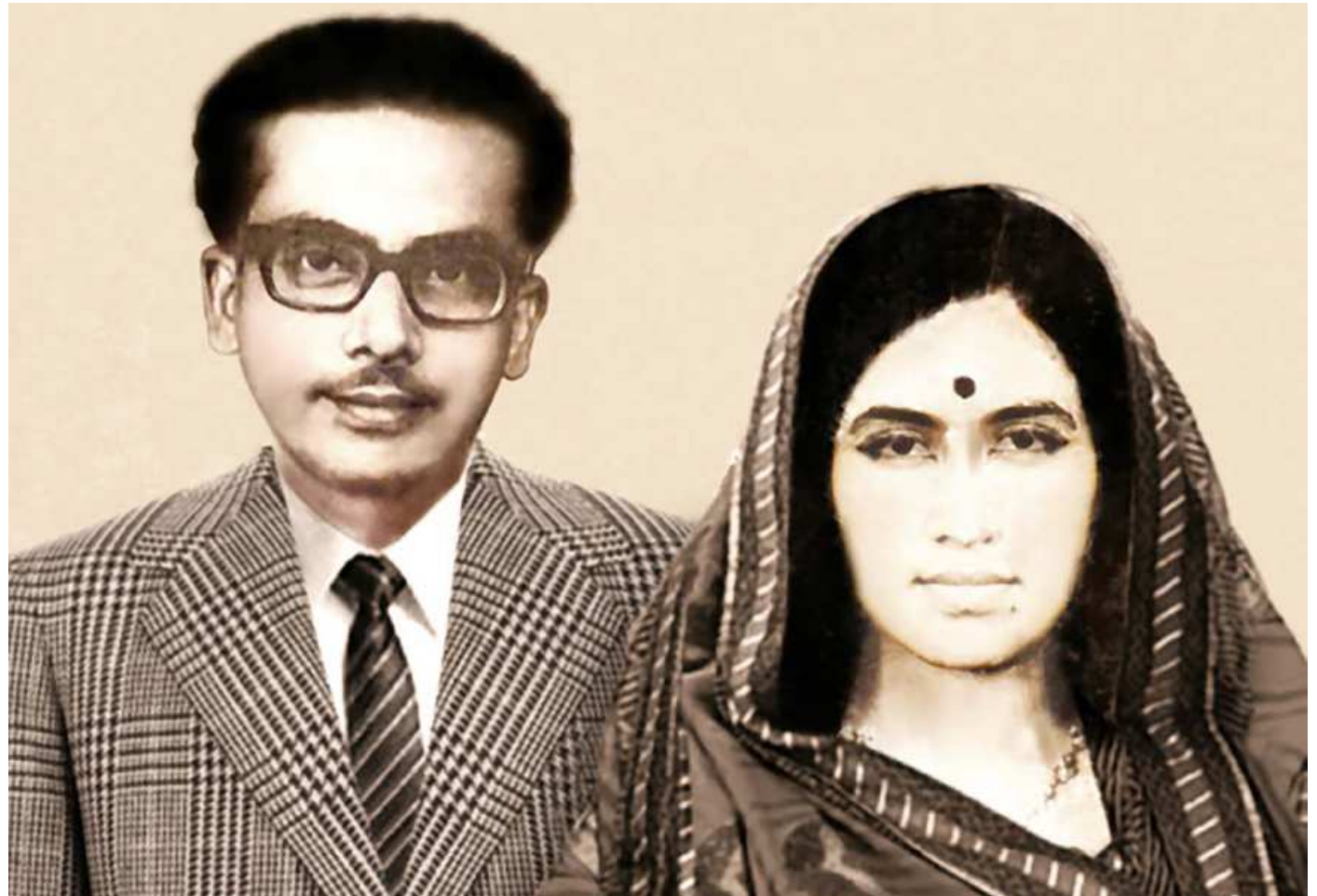
Whatever her worries, however enormous her anxieties, somehow as soon as she went to bed, all these would be pushed aside by the remembered face. Kadam’s face seemed to make her forget even the pangs of hunger, the insults heaped on her during the day. Such magic was in it. Nabitun had not seen this face for over three years. Yet, on this dark night, the image of him was very clear to her. Those strong arms, that romantic smiling face.

Nabitun drew Akki closer. She let her head rest on her bosom and pressed it hard against her breast. In her sleep, Akki snuggled closer to her mother. The child slept on. The mother lay awake.

Wide awake, her mind strayed after. Who knew on what distant sea Kadam had set sail? Nabitun had heard that to these seas there was no end, no limit. Even those ships were not ordinary ships. They were bigger than even Lundar Sheikh’s double-storied house and floated on the water with the help of intricate machines. They rode easily on waves which seemed to reach the sky.

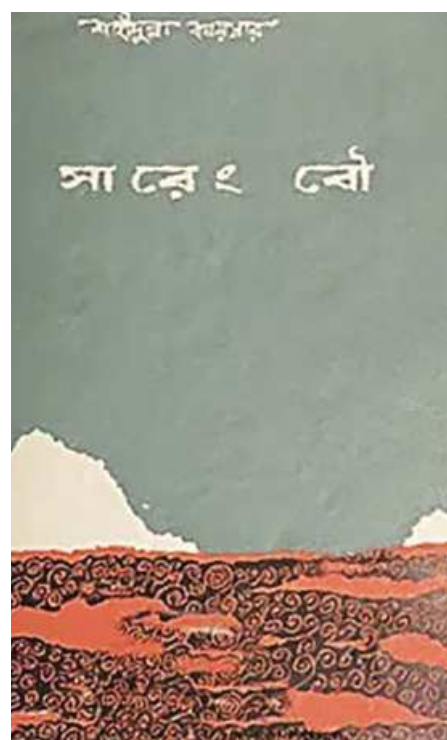
Even thinking of these things used to fill her with wonder. To think that her Kadam was a sareng on one of these ships, that he pressed the buttons and handled the machines. If only she could see him once, riding on the crest of the sky-high waves. It had been her wish for a long time.

The more she thought the more she felt confused. She just could not visualise such enormous vessels floating leisurely on limitless expanses of water. Her mind refused even to imagine such a marvel.



Shahidullah Kaiser and his wife Panna Kaiser.

PHOTO: COLLECTED



Original cover of Shahidullah Kaiser’s book Sareng Bou.

And how would it? When she had been very small, small enough for her father to fondle her on his lap, she had gone by boat once to her maternal uncle’s house over the river Kayal. What a river that was. One could not see the banks. There was only water and water. Nabitun had been dazed by the sight. Truly people said: “One who crossed the Kayal, made his wife a widow by noon.” But even this Kayal was nothing compared to the ocean. The Kayal beside the ocean was like a ribbon of water, or at best the drain behind the Sareng House.

Suddenly Nabitun felt a pain in her heart. Was Sareng still alive? She had heard that blows of those high waves and collusion with hidden blows of those underwater rocks smashed the ships. Nor there were banks close by to which one could swim. No, no she would not even indulge in such thoughts. But when she went to sleep, along with other thoughts, this would inevitably come to her mind.

Suddenly Nabitun pricked her ears. Something was scratching against the bamboo partition. Was it a cat? No, it was not a cat. There were two blows against the bamboo wall. Then there was a sound. One, then another and then a few more.

Gujaburi had told her to keep her door

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open two hours after midnight. Could it be that bastard Lundar Sheikh? She was fully awake. She sat up. Reaching her hand towards the head of her bed, she picked up the hatchet she kept there. She shouted, “Which scoundrel is that?”

As if hearing her voice, the sound stopped. Also the scratching on the partition. Now she felt certain that this was none else but Korban. He had been eyeing her recently. Besides, he had made this sound on dark nights a few times previously. Again there was the sound.

This time it was soft and came from the direction of the door. There were also a few taps on the door.

“I am warning you, I’ll hit you with this hatchet.” Nabitun called out the warning in a loud voice, but it did not stop the ringing blows on the tin door.

“What shameless rascal is that? With a wife at home, what scandalous going ons are these? Just wait, I’ll cut your ears off or my name is not Nabitun.” She quickly came off the bed and flung open the door.

Even in the dark she made out a man, even darker than the night, go running with loud steps towards the East House. What rash courage on her part! Opening the door in this pitch dark night! Supposing instead of running, the man had grabbed her? What could she have done? Quickly shutting the door, Nabitun came back to bed. She was still trembling furiously.

But how much longer could she protect herself like this? Such persecution, such want, and such temptation? How long could she guard herself against dangers from so many directions?

Tears flowed onto her chest. Into the silence of the night went her sobs and the soundless question, “Won’t Sareng come home?”