

## A SHORT STORY

**F**or us there is no surprise ending to this particular story: our man Kasimuddin, who has travelled to Dhaka from Jaleswari, will be thrown out of the National Museum; he will be run over by a blue minibus; the driver of the bus having been brutally manhandled by an angry crowd, will be taken to a hospital where he will give a statement to the police that the dead man deliberately ran into his bus, as though he was determined to commit suicide, and it was so sudden that he could not put his break on in time to avoid the man's death. What Kasimuddin himself has got to say about this, we have no way to ascertain now; where no question will ever reach him.

He was an ordinary man. He never said his prayers. He smoked cannabis. He visited cheap women in the bazaar whenever he had some extra cash. As is evident, he was not a God's man; and so we can not even hope that someday he will appear in some of our dreams to give his version of the accident, like we have heard from our elders that such and such pious soul had returned in other people's dreams from the nether world to reveal this and that.

But why did Kasimuddin go berserk inside the National Museum? Why did the guards collar and throw him out so violently?

This year some boys came to me from Jaleswari where I was born. They wanted me to participate in a poetry reading session dedicated to the martyrs of the language movement of February 1952; that I could not accept the invitation is another story and irrelevant to this essay; but when I said I am unable to, explained that I am already committed to three poetry reading sessions and seminars in Dhaka on that particular day of the martyrs, it was evident from their faces that the boys from my home town did not believe me. I had a sneaking suspicion that they took me for a heartless man, a man who has made it big in the capital and does not want to be bothered by his humble past; to mend matters I invited them to tea and delicacies, and encouraged them to light hearted conversation. Soon tea came; I heated up their plates with cakes and sweets. They began to eat with embarrassed gratitude. Good nourishment makes a man love this life a little more; it whispers to us that this life is an interesting situation after all.

Inevitably death is the other side of life. We hear about death everyday; we witness it, we read about it in newspapers; we hear about it on radio and we remember our dead occasionally. On a day when fog envelops the morning I think of deaths in my family: the fog appears to me as shrouds of the dead, still and cold.

There are stalls galore in the Ekushey Book Fair. Those selling books exclusively are not all of them publishers — only some are. Following we take a pick from the books that the big houses brought to the fair. Most of these titles were published on the occasion of Ekushey. All of these were in the year ending February, 1991.

**Ahmed Publishing House** published 12 new titles on the occasion of the Ekushey Book Fair '91.

Mandrapshoptok — novel by Humayun Ahmed.

Shagotom Bhalobasha — novel by Alauddin Al Azad.

Biggaan Aley Choley, and Rohoshyer Shesh Nai — Popular science by Abdurrahman Al-Mutti.

Ashorjya Desher Kotha — fairytale by Nurul Islam Khan.

Pordeshay Porobashay — travelogue by Mahbubur Rahman.

Probashir Smritikotha — travelogue by Abdul Mahmud Khan.

Amader Ate Bangladesh — by Subrata Barua.

Akattarer Dhaka — by Selina Hossain.

Bangalikey Kay Bachabey — political commentary by Dr. Sirajul Islam Choudhury.

Good Earth — by Paul S. Buck, translated by Abdul Hafiz.

The Grapes of Wrath — by John Steinbeck, translated by Kabir Choudhury.

**The Bangla Academy** has published about 70 academic, literary and research oriented books since March 1990. Following is a selection from the big list.

Sri Roy Bindu : Kabi-O-Kabro — by Dr. Muhammad Shahjahan Mia.

Society and Politics in Bengal — by Shawkat Ara Begum.

Buddhadeb Basur Kobita — by Mahibub Sadek.

Works of Md. Wazed Ali — edited by Abdul Mannan Syed.

Works of Kazi Abdul Wadud (2nd part) — edited by Abdul Haque.

Biggaan-O-Dorshon — by A. M. Harunur Rashid.

Works of Md. Barkatullah (2nd part) — edited by Md. Abdul Quyyum.

Works of Md. Enamul Haque — edited by Masood Musa.

Ekal-O-Shekal — novel by Sarwar Jahan.

Shahitya Shangskriti — by Dr. Nilima Ibrahim.

Smrite '71 (3rd part) — edited by Rashid Haidar.

Shahnamma of Ferdousi (1-6 part) — translated by Moniruddin Yousuf.

Boris Pasternak — by Mobbasher Ali.

Annya Jater Fashal — translated by Abdul Hossain.

Irish Rupokotha — translated by Abdul Salam.

**Beauty Book house** published two novels by Rashid Karim on the occasion of the Ekushey.

Chini Na — Rashid Karim.

Padotoley Rakti — Rashid Karim.

**CHALONTIKA BOIGHAR** published 6 new titles on the occasion.

Bango Bhongo-O-Shamprodaik Rajniti — by Badruddin Umar.

Shomipeshu — novel by Fayed Ahmed.

Hochi Minh-er Kobita — translation by Fayed Ahmed.

Shiraj Shikdaracharachon Shonkon (4th part).

Muslim Jahan Kon Pathay — by Sh. Rahmatullah.

Kingbodontor Bangla — Dr. Ashraf Siddiqi.

**Jatiya Shahitya Prakashani** published some 21 new titles on the occasion.

Mahadeb Shaha : Premer Kobita — Md. Rafik.

Jibon Amar Bon — Mahmudul Huque.

The boys belched loudly and entered the land of the dead, at least one of them. He asked me if I remember Kasimuddin?

Kasimuddin? Yes. From the last year's 21st February.

He did not elaborate further. I failed to connect this man with our glorious day of the martyrs.

He was from our town Jaleswari. He was a small green grocer. His pitch was just outside the general store of Chandi Babu. Remember?

No, I did not. The boys collectively tried to jog my memory, but still I could not identify the man. I had left the town thirty years ago and though I returned occasionally, it was only for a couple of days. It was too much to ask from me to remember a Kasimuddin from among hundreds of green-grocers.

But I grew curious. Why would these boys bring up an ordinary man in our conversation? What possible connection could he have had with 21st February?

One of the boys looked visibly hurt. There was a note of accusation in his voice when he mentioned that Kasimuddin's news, along with his photograph, even if it was of his mutilated carcass, was published in Ittefaq, one of our leading dailies, and it was mentioned that he was from Jaleswari. If not the man, surely the very name of my home town should have left an imprint in my memory. The boy looked disturbed.

I could not bring myself to say that I do not read Ittefaq; nor could I observe out of deference to their innocence that what is a world-shaker in a sleepy town like Jaleswari may not be worth a casual sigh in Dhaka, the capital of the country.

Did he die? In Dhaka? I asked in a voice to match their sentiment.

Soon they came forward with the story. When they had finished narrating, I asked them, But what made him to scream in the museum in the first place? I do not understand.

Well, we are not certain, sir. Was there no detail in the newspaper?

No. Not really. It was only mentioned that Kasimuddin went berserk, he let out a long angry scream at the display counter of ancient coins. He was immediately thrown out of the building. He tried to enter again, bashed his head against the iron-gate, shouted abuse in the vilest language, but the guard refused to let him in. Then the accident happened. He went under the speeding bus.

The boys looked lost; they stopped their narration; the tea was getting cold. I poured them some, and asked, Do you know what was he saying besides the abuses?

They looked at each other; without words, with a gentle nudge, they selected someone as their mouthpiece; he of-

fered a suggestion. Perhaps Kasimuddin's dialect was not intelligible to Dhakaites and so nobody could report anything about his motivation.

But what brought him to Dhaka, a green grocer like him, on 21st February, the day of the martyrs of our Language Movement? Surely for an unemployed man like Kasimuddin there can not be anything in the celebration of the day to urge him to undertake an expensive journey to the city.

Everyone was frozen at his blasphemy: Kasimuddin went as far as the exit gate of the holy tomb, stopped, and then, turning around, he addressed the Gurkian and the believers. You, Sir, and you who lick his boots, hear you all, you come here and touch your forehead on the satin draped tomb, but the Koran says not to do that except to Allah, and yet you do that to a dead man. How come you do not loose your claim to be a Moslem by doing that?

there for the martyrs rising like a piece of heaven itself from an ocean of multi-coloured flowers on the 21st, yes, I will go and make my offerings there and salute the martyrs on the next 21st, go I will even if seventy thousand serpents chase and bite me, I shall have no regret.

Kasimuddin did come to Dhaka, he did go the Central Mausoleum for the Martyrs of the Language Movement; his son Jasimuddin who accom-

panied him reported that on 21st February there was a sea of people at the mausoleum, surging forward to make their offerings: Kasimuddin could not make any headway, begged with folded palms to the volunteers to make way for him, but to no avail. He drifted back in the sea of people. A young woman who was in a procession noticed him; she took his hand and firmly pushing the crowd, led him to the first platform leading to the mausoleum and helped him make his flower-offerings.

In great anger Syed Abdus Sultan, the Guardian of the tomb of the holy saint, rose to the pulpit of the Friday congregation and thundered at the believers.

Now you have all seen what came to that vilest creature; he made flower-offerings to the so-called martyrs like Hindus do to their gods; he was run over by a bus before you could blink your eyes; gone, gone from the face of earth which was created for Allah's and only Allah's worship; take lesson from Kasimuddin's death; repent and beg His forgiveness.

Kasimuddin was dumbfounded to discover the self-same coin behind the glass panel of the display counter at the National Museum. He could even recognise the cut mark left accidentally by one of its former wearers. He let out a violent scream and went berserk. The rest we know.

The boys told me that when the death news reached Jaleswari, Syed Abdus Sultan, the Guardian of the tomb of the holy saint, rose to the pulpit of the Friday congregation and thundered at the believers.

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Soon it was revealed that she had gone to play on the lawn of the dakh-bungalow, where visiting government officials from the capital lodged. Now an officer, seeing this pendant hanging from Kazil's neck, called her to the veranda and enquired about it.

Where did you get it, little one? Will you give it to me if I give you a new and shining coin? Look, here it is.

It was getting dark; street lights were not on as yet; Kazil tried to run away from the man's outstretched arm but before she could make a move the man caught her and snatched away her pendant.

Fear gripped Kasimuddin the man in the dakh-bungalow must be a high government official; who knows, he could be a minister of the General. How could he recover the family treasure? He picked up his courage and went to see the

guard of the bungalow who was his friend since childhood.

The guard informed him silently, by raising his thumb and bringing it down to his mouth, that the Sahib was busy enjoying his drinks and would raise hell if disturbed. But then he assured him by asking him to come back in the morning.

I will try my best, my friend. If it is with the sahib.

What do you mean by your blasted 'if'? But Kasimuddin dared not raise his voice, fearful of the man from the government. He returned to the bungalow early next morning only to find the tyre mark of the sahib's Jeep on the rain-soaked ground. The sahib had left for Dhaka.

That was five years ago. Some people had suggested to Kasimuddin that he should go to the police station and record a diary of the loss. He would have done so, but wise people instilled fear in him by saying, It is the government of General Zia, the man in dark glasses, and what does he care about an insignificant loss of an coin from a slip of a poor girl?

He will beat you till you are blue in the face.

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