

column by Syed Manzoorul Islam

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## Second Thoughts

**G**ABRIEL GARCIA Marquez's *Strange Pilgrims*, a collection of 12 short stories, is prefaced by a personal account of how the stories were written (or not written, in case of some that found their way into the waste basket in various stages of incompleteness). In the preface, or prologue, as it is called, Garcia Marquez talks about the difficulties of organising a short story, first in the head and then on paper, and recounts how he tore up otherwise finished versions that he didn't like. For many writers who consider revisions or rejections of a first draft a sign of writerly weakness, Garcia Marquez provides quite an incentive: "good writers are appreciated more for what they tear up than for what they publish," he says, quoting someone, whom he doesn't name. What he didn't say however, is whether he also sent otherwise perfectly finished novels into such pilgrimage (Garcia Marquez's term) to the waste basket — although by his own account, writing a novel is easier than writing a short story. The novel provides the greatest challenge at the beginning, but once that hurdle is crossed, everything else is a song. "All the rest is the pleasure of writing, the most intimate, solitary pleasure one can imagine ..." The short story is, however, quite another thing. "It has no beginning, no end. Either

it works or it doesn't." Our experience as reader tells us that mostly it doesn't, but the pity is, the writers won't see it that way. Hence the great glut of perfectly unreadable (and unworkable) short stories that survive just as long as the paper on which these are printed. What a waste of these!

The Uruguayan novelist and short story writer Juan Carlos Onetti described writing a story as a (mostly futile) exercise of building a house on shifting grounds. Syed Mujtaba Ali, the great humourist said it better: writing a short story, he would say, is like catching eels with greased hands. Easier done than said — in his own case though.

I consider the Prologue to *Strange Pilgrims* the 13th story in the collection. It has a strange power to move the reader, as it unfolds a series of intimate portraits of Garcia Marquez as a writer and as a man who looks at death with the eyes of a beggar or a sage who has nothing to lose or who is simply beyond the arithmetic of loss and gain. He once saw in his dreams that he was attending his own funeral. It was an occasion of grief, but strangely, everyone was in a festive mood. The dream gave him plot for a story; it would have been quite an attractive story if he had written it down, with its surrealism or magic real-

ism: but it refused to take the shape of a finished product — that final shape always alluded him. It is surprising how, even after the plot was handed to him on silver platter, Garcia Marquez still failed to spin his web. He has his excuses, some of which he mentions in the Prologue, but the real reason may just be that he saw his dream as something that has no beginning or end.

As I was reading *Strange Pilgrims* on a train bound for Kulaura, I suddenly had a vision of a carnival where a great many people had turned up with drums and cymbals, dressed up in their Sunday best. It was not any of the stories however, but his Prologue that put the vision in front of me. The revellers were milling around laughing, joking and singing snatches of old songs. The carnival was taking place — where, else, but in a graveyard, with festoons and banners fluttering in the wind and streamers lacing up the space between trees. The occasion was Garcia Marquez's burial; he was lying in a plush lined mahogany coffin — one that has a mirror on the inside of the lid — and looked quite peaceful. Festive mourners had queued up to have a look at the famous dead, and the crowd included Garcia Marquez himself, with a Havana cigar dangling from his mouth. He stopped for a while, eying the peaceful

face of the dead and its reflection in the mirror. His voice almost regretful, Garcia Marquez said to the man next to him "Dying means never being with friends again."

The man nodded in agreement. "I know," he said, "since I am recently departed from my friends."

"You are being missed. Surely missed," said Garcia Marquez, patting the man's back. He then locked his hands with his, as people do in political parades, and led him away.

My vision of the carnival — an extended version of Garcia Marquez's description of his own dream (and his own funeral) brought together Garcia Marquez and — this is where my vision turns rather bizarre — Akhteruzzaman Ilyas, who died in the first week of January. Ilyas also had dreams of his own demise and funeral; but he too couldn't write, a story based on the dreams. As I read the Prologue, I remembered Ilyas's dream; and suddenly the two images coalesced.

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## reflections

### Of Jayalalita's Saris, Imelda's Shoes

by Kazi Fazlur Rahman

**A**CCORDING TO A recent newspaper report, the police while searching the house of Jayalalita, former chief minister of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, found 10,500 saris. The list of her possessions also includes items like 28 kg gold, 800 kg silver, 91 wristwatches and 19 cars. But it was the number of saris that I found truly mind-boggling — something even transcending the colossal vulgarity of the shoes of Imelda Marcos, the wife of deposed Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos.

I don't expect to see a display of Jayalalita's saris, but I was one of the crowd visiting Malacanang Palace, the presidential residence of the Philippines, immediately after the Marcoses left it for their exile in Hawaii. The objective was to see the display of 2,700 pairs of shoes left behind by Imelda. In this department, Imelda beat Jayalalita by a huge margin — the lady in Tamil Nadu is reported to have only 700 pairs of shoes.

The stupefying image of 5,400 shoes arrayed in row after long rows is still vivid in my memory after more than ten years. I am reasonably sure that a display of 10,500 saris will be far more awe-inspiring.

Let's look at it somewhat systematically. The basic premise is that one just can't put on two saris at the same time. However, it will be reasonable to assume that Ms Jayalalita having been an actress in her younger days is used to changing saris rather more frequently than the more home-bound females.

Four changes of saris a day should be a reasonable number. Thus, if she changed saris four times a day and never wore the same sari twice, it would take her somewhat more than seven years and a half to work through her collection.

This, of course, presupposes that she would not buy any new sari during this period — surely an unrealistic proposition given the highly addictive nature of the practice of sari-buying. (Ms Jay-



alalita has reportedly forsworn the wearing of gold ornaments after her release on bail, but there was no mention of her renouncing any addition to her collection of saris.)

In all fairness, it must be said that such profligacy is not an exclusive trait of the female of the species. Kheireddin Ismail, grandfather of King Farouk of Egypt, was reputed to have a collection of 3,000 concubines in his harem. Was just the act of putting together such a collection an end by itself?

Or to give a more recent example, the Sultan of Brunei, one of the richest men in the world, had a palace built for him containing 3,000 — give or take a few dozen — rooms. How many of these he, his family and even

his guests could use at a time? He could have all the citizens of his tiny country, for one night each with single occupancy, as house guests in a period of three months or so.

The pursuit of excess on a truly prodigious scale can take many forms. Many a hunter would routinely kill hundreds of wild animals and thousands of birds a day sending many species to extinction or near extinction. Even in case of edible species, they could not expect to consume even one-thousandth of all the game they shot.

Or consider the case of the Saudi Prince — he later rose to greater eminence — and report of his gambling losses running to tens of millions of dollars a night that used to be routinely splashed in the

western press in the sixties and seventies. There must be others trying to emulate his example even now.

One need not pass any moral judgement on how these individuals acquired the means enabling them to indulge in such vulgar ostentatious display. Jayalalita might have earned fortunes (whether reported to Income Tax authorities or not) as a highly popular actress and Marcos, as he claimed, might have indeed discovered the gold horde of the fleeing Japanese generals. Rulers of oil-rich kingdoms and their kins, of course, exercise their right of the sole ownership of all of nature's bounties within their domain.

The issue that should interest us is one of psychology or even the metaphysics involved in such instances of apparently mindless excesses. Is it a matter of purchasing choices — one may never wear all the 10,500 saris but having the collection empowers one to choose any one of them at any time. The same might have applied in case of Khedive Ismail's collection of ladies.

Or does such behaviour arise from a compulsive display of megalomania, perhaps tinged with infantile exhibitionism? Perhaps such a display gives one a delusion of omnipotence, and also provides a sense of security, particularly for those from a background of deprivation. In any case, it is more piteous and banal than evil.

Bangladesh society traditionally discouraged too conspicuous display of wealth. Avarice was considered as a deadly sin. Ostentation generated contempt and derision, even if in muted form. Unfortunately, things are changing, and very fast. We seem to be producing our own devotees of the grotesque although it may take our homegrown variety some more time to scale reach the pinnacle of vulgarity already reached by Jayalalita, Imelda et cetera. Yet a hundred and forty thousand taka Eid dress heralded a 'promising' beginning.

## interview

### A Storyteller Speaks

**M**oinul Ahsan Saber is one of the finest storytellers to emerge in the field of post-war fiction writing in Bangladesh. Saber, now 37, made his debut in the mid-seventies. And has already had about 45 titles to his account. From his very first work he has been maintaining a rare balance, successfully uniting elements that are otherwise conflicting — social commitment, artistic judgment and a sizable readership, which is by any standard quite an achievement. Seldom does a serious writer get more attention than his popular counterparts; at least in his lifetime. Whenever a new book by Saber appears, it receives rave reviews. Top literary critics of the country regard Saber as a significant writer. At his Eskaton Garden flat, a few days before he got the Bangla Academy Award '96, Saber spoke with Abul Kashem about his favourite writers, beliefs and the elements that contributed in the shaping of the writer in him. Excerpts:

**Abul Kashem: Social conflicts are foregrounded in your novels. Why?**

Moinul Ahsan Saber: I want to know the social position I belong to. Life is full of conflicts. Personally, socially everyone has to face a lot of conflicts. I want to depict reality in its full context. To do that I realize that I have to reveal the conflicts.

**Do you think that writers can change the society?**

I don't. Because readers are middle-class people. Bourgeois can never change society. They are always in favour of the *status quo*. If you want to change the society you will have to go to the masses. But the masses don't read literature. Then how can you change the society? What a writer can do is at best to mould the thinking pattern of a class. He can modify some social norms, but he can't give it a new shape.

**What is the theme of your highly acclaimed novel *Simabaddha*?**

The relationship between man and nature. The impact of nature on human relationship. It was actually a combination of three stories written on different occasions.

**Some say *Kabek Lethel* is your best novel. What's your comment?**

I think it's one of my best write-ups so far. In this novel I have tried my best to depict the true picture of our war of

independence and its aftermath.

**But no woman character is highlighted in *Kabek* ... ? What if someone accuses it as a misogynist view?**

There is a woman character. A teenage girl who was raped by a Pakistani army officer. Though the scene is short it takes the story to its climax.

**Your *Pathor Sonoi* sparked controversies. What was the real cause behind it?**

The book was a blow against the fundamentalists and anti-liberation elements of our society. They were the ones who really attacked the book with nonsense reviews. But the irony of fate was that when I wrote the book in 1989 they remained silent. They hit the book when it was televised.

**In this novel we see a hedonistic young girl of the upper class who frequently changes lovers. Finally she got her reply. One of her lovers raped her and had it recorded on videodisk. What do you want to say by this story?**

It was not the main theme of the story. It was just a coincidence. The main theme of the novel was about the pollution of our moral values. And I also wanted to show the rise of the defeated force of the War of Liberation of 1971.

**As the son of a renowned poet how**

**did your writing style develop?**

In my childhood I was good at football and cricket. But gradually I discovered that I was destined to be a writer. I thought I was made of literary stuff. This set me soon to the writing table. Before my father's death in 1985, I published at least ten books. I was only 25 then.

**You are a writer, a journalist and a publisher. How do you synchronise so many occupations?**

I always wanted to be a writer. But you know, one cannot make a living off writing here.

**What is the condition of creative writing in the country?**

No one patronizes a writer here, neither the government nor the private entrepreneurs.

**You have received the Philips Literary Prize for your *Simabaddha*. Do you think prizes can help?**

It can. If only the prize money is handsome.

**How much do you think is a handsome amount?**

It should be at least Tk 2 lakh for a national prize.

**Some of your books have been on TV. Do you have any fascination for TV?**

No, I haven't. I want to be remembered as a writer.

**Do you think critics have a role in**

**establishing a good writer?**

I think so. But I have to say with regret that in this respect we are in a sorry state.

**Why do you write?**

I want to express what I believe and what I see.

**What attracts you most — tragedy or comedy?**

Tragedy. We live in a tragic society.

**Are you satisfied as a writer?**

No. A writer can never be satisfied. But sometimes I feel happy to a certain extent.

**What kind of a society do you want?**

I still believe in socialism. It is my conviction that only a socialist society can bring freedom for mankind in the true sense of the term.

**Any favourite writer?**

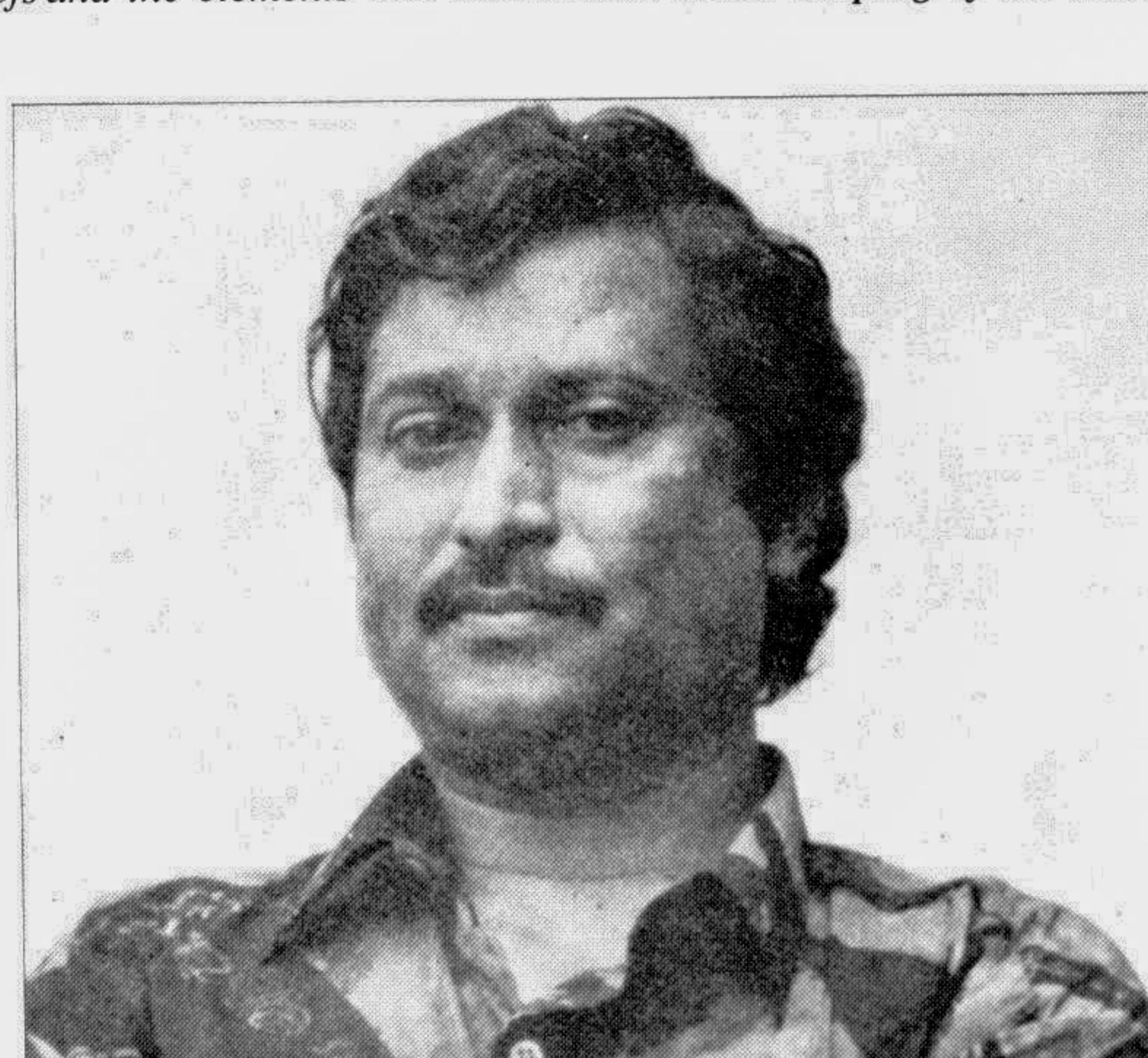
I like Erich Maria Remarque and Syed Shamsul Haq.

**Is there any writer in the country who can represent the true spirit of Bangladesh?**

Yes, he is. I think, Syed Shamsul Haq. We can regard him as the best writer of Bangladesh.

**What are the books by Syed Shamsul Haq you like best?**

Balikar Chandran (Girl's moon shuttle), Tumi Sei Torbati (You are that sword), Antartaga (From inside).



Moinul Ahsan Saber