

obituary

Shaukat Osman

by Osman Jamal

SHAKAT Osman was the most eminent literary and cultural figure of Bangladesh. Throughout his long career he fought tirelessly against religious obscurantism, fundamentalism, military authoritarianism and political corruption. He was a crusading spirit.

In the mid-Forties he wrote two novels which appropriated the hitherto largely unacknowledged life of the Bengali Muslim peasant and the urban poor for modern Bengali literature. He was instantly lauded as Bengal's most notable Muslim writer, and went on to publish over 80 volumes of fiction, plays, verse, criticism, translation, autobiography and juvenilia.

Osman's first novel, *Janani* (1944-45), remains arguably his best. Set against the rise of communal politics of India, it can be read as an affirmative experiment in the possibility of Hindu-Muslim unity.

Azhar is a pious Muslim peasant, but his best friend is Chandra, a toddy-addict, low-caste Hindu fisherman cum part-time impresario. Their relationship is sometimes mediated by Azhar's little boy — through whose eyes the author often sees the world, giving it a certain charm. The other theme of the novel unfolds after Azhar's death, when his widow Dariabibi's heroic struggle to support her children and protect her honour ends in tragedy.

A chunk of his next novel, *Adam's Children* (1946) — which was never

completed to Osman's satisfaction (he called it "a torso") — captures with stark realism the life of the city poor. The writer's own life in Calcutta gave him a privileged perspective.

He was born Sheikh Azizur Rahman in Hoogley, West Bengal, in 1917, into a Muslim family, to a father whom he described as a peasant-artisan. At the age of 13 he went to Calcutta to continue his secondary schooling at Madrassa-e-Allia, living in *Jagir lodgings* — an arrangement whereby young indigent students stay full-board with a family while tutoring their children. After matriculating, he supported himself while studying at St Xavier's College for an Honours degree in Economics, and gave extra tuition in order to send money home.

During this period of his life, he later reminisced, he had "lived half-starved for months on end and on some days went without food." He had his first full-time job as a poster writer after taking his Masters degree in Bengali in 1941, and later that year he was appointed lecturer in Bengali at Calcutta Government Commercial College; this was a government post he would hold at different colleges until retirement in 1972.

Following the partition of India in 1947, Osman opted for Pakistan (the eastern part of which became Bangladesh in 1971). He was posted to Chittagong and subsequently Dhaka. Though he wrote several volumes of short stories based on his experiences of his adopted country, he probably never got to know it intimately enough to



write a full-length novel in a realist mode.

Osman was a committed writer and he saw his commitment in terms of opposition to the pursuit of aesthetic goals, which he spurned as self-indulgence. This was not entirely without regret. In *A Dialogue With Self*, his alter ego speaks thus:

In the face of an unbearable present, you have wasted all your energy in producing ephemera. Your activity is limited to the pursuit of the bubbles of national life: You have not learnt to dive deeper "in search of the exquisite pearl".

In his fiction, Osman worked in two distinct modes. His early realism gave way to an allegorical manner presum-

ably under political pressure but, as he wrote to an old student, from 1962 onwards he never allowed his "flag of protest to be brought down."

That year he published *The Laughter of the Slave*, a thinly disguised attack on Ayub Khan, Pakistan's then military ruler, who sought to bribe the nation's intellectuals into submission. Osman finds in Haroun-el-Rashid, the mythical king of Baghdad, an allegorical prototype.

One night the king is enchanted by laughter he overhears during one of his nocturnal rounds of the city. The source turns out to be a slave in the presence of his beloved. The king removes the slave from his original home, gives him a life of luxury and commands him to rehearse his laughter, but the man, now estranged from his loved one, denies him the pleasure and dies tortured.

Osman occasionally returned to a realist mode, as in *The State Witness* (1985), a story of corruption whose theme is migration from Bangladesh to the Middle East. While the first two chapters, mute "testimonies" of two characters awaiting trial in prison cells, are continuing evidence of his power of realistic observation, the third chapter offers a humorous account of the trial where the lawyers deploy the *sharia* (Islamic law) to denounce serious criminal charges as un-Islamic.

During the last years of his life, seeking a wider audience, Osman wrote a weekly column of folk-style verse and song for a newspaper, in which he deployed irony, satire and his character-

istic humour; he also wrote his autobiography, *Rahnama*, which was serialised in *Janakandha*, the most prestigious national newspaper.

In 1996 he suffered a stroke and was virtually confined to his rooms by doctor's orders. It was painful for a man of his temperament — an ardent and witty conversationalist, convivial, restless and surprisingly youthful and sprightly at 80. He did not recover from his second stroke.

Kabir Choudhury translated *The Laughter of the Slave* into English in the Sixties. In 1993 my translations of *Janani* and *The State Witness* were published by Heinemann and Peepal Tree Books respectively. Three years later Penguin India published *God's Adversary and Other Stories*, an anthology of 23 of Osman's short stories I had translated over the years since I first met him in 1962 as a much older colleague at Dhaka College. Osman's short stories have been translated into many languages including German, Russian, Japanese and Norwegian.

When Shaukat Osman died, the whole Bangladeshi cabinet were gathered at his bedside in the intensive care unit. His body was taken to the Shaheed Minar, the nation's most hallowed mausoleum, for people to pay their last respects. He was buried in the graveyard where the bodies of intellectuals murdered in 1971 are laid to rest.

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fiction

The Breast

A Story by Sayed Waliullah Translated by Badrul Hassan

ABU Taleb Mohammad Salahuddin sahib considered meeting his kith and kin every now and then as a familiar and divine duty. As long as he was completely submerged in the worldly affairs, was unable to perform the duty, as he desired. Today his weight of responsibility had been relatively eased, so those obstacles were relatively reduced to perform the duty.

Whenever Salahuddin sahib went to visit his relatives, the pre-arrangement of the visit was seemed as if he had started for long trip. He never appeared suddenly to any one's house without prior information. He used to send advance massages of his visit few days ago. He informed them about the scheduled time-period, not only that he also reminded them that he neither took snacks nor habituated in betel leaf and smoking. Besides, he controlled his diet as the doctor had strictly restricted in the prescription, so he did not accept invitation for eating. In fact, it was not possible to offer him anything but a glass of water. Eventually he did not drink water without boiled in fear of aquatic-disease — hardly he touched them.

The circle of his kith and kin was rather big. It seemed that there were innumerable populations in the branches of the family relations. Nonetheless, he considered himself the guardian of all by the virtue of his grey hair and well off condition; he visited them twice or once in a year systematically by turn.

As the circle of his kith and kin was big, he had to confine in a limit. He did not regularly visit them who were beyond this limited circle. A limit had to be restricted somewhere in every subject.

Therefore, the afternoon, when Salahuddin sahib arrived at Kader's, a distant relative beyond the limit of his meeting circle without any prior information, seemed really quit a surprising incident. Three days back Kader's sixth child was born and left the world within few hours; it was not possible to suppose that he had come to express his condolence. Salahuddin sahib was himself bereaved with deep sorrow. Almost at the same time three days back, his very beloved younger daughter had died while she was giving birth a child.

Salahuddin Sahib was sitting on the only chair having back-support in the tiny drawing room placing his both hands together at the top of his stuff. Kader Mian sat a little distance away on a bedstead covered with a cool mat. His face was touched with curiosity. Silence prevailed in the room for few moments.

At last, Salahuddin sahib cleared his voice by hawking loudly and took a glance at Kader. Then his eyes moved all around the tiny room for a while. Shadow of poverty was found every-

where in the house of ill-paid clerk Kader Mian. As to mention about furniture of the room, there was nothing but the crumbling chair and the bedstead. A calendar was hung in the wall got musty for the shake of decoration. This depicted a picture of a blood-red setting sun in the heart of the river. Yet, it was outdated by two years. Accumulated dust over it was noticed in the slanting rays of afternoon. On the other side, near the door inside, a girl of about five years old was eating *Puffed rice* from a bowl sitting on the floor. The much *Puffed rice* she poured into her mouth, the much more she spread around her. She wore a dirty frock and her face was touched with dirt as well.

Salahuddin sahib was rather dissatisfied by whatever he had observed. For quit a moment, a doubt appeared in his mind, whether it would be just to place the proposal for why he had arrived at Kader's. But he understood that he had no alternative except proceeding the proposal.

Clearing his voice again, he looked straight and now said, "I have come to you with a proposal. There is none to breast feed my grandson."

He stopped after saying that much. It did not take much time for Kader to realise the underlying significance of his proposal. Nevertheless, he waited silently because Salahuddin sahib did not finish his saying then.

Salahuddin sahib took time to elaborate the proposal. He had never seen Kader's wife. However, he had heard that she was really a healthy woman. A mother of five children, still she never fell sick. Besides, she had taught five children walking and made them being to speak by breast-feeding only. Her children had good health too. The girl sitting at the door was very dirty though not lean and feeble at all. Furthermore, he also heard that she was a kind woman; she had boundless kindness and affections for others. All these were very good news. Yet considering the present deserted condition of Kader and his wife, he had hesitated to give the proposal in an out-right manner. But in this case, his hesitation did not prolong.

"I have heard that by the grace of the Almighty your wife's health is quite good. Would she agree to feed breast milk to my motherless grandson? I hope, if she would, I could bring the child right now." Salahuddin sahib shut his eyelids for once only to open again. He said with an authoritative voice, "Why don't you go and ask your wife?"

Kader went and he remained sitting like a statue putting his hands together at the top of the stuff. Before that, he looked around the room once again, he also looked again swiftly at the dirty girl. The expression of dissatisfaction appeared at his face again. Had he done the right thing by giving the proposal? He took a silent deep breath of uncer-



tainly. Yet he understood that, once had he proceeded the proposal, then it was worthless to think otherwise.

When Kader returned he looked at him anxiously. Immediately he became sure after watching the impression at Kader's face. He stood up striking the stuff of the floor for twice or once. His spine was strangely straight even at this age.

A half-pucka road was before the door. He stood there for a moment and thought something anyway. Now he explained the issue solicitously, which was important to explain at the very out-set.

"In fact, the doctor advised to give bottled milk. I do not believe in all those modern system. A suckling baby should have breast milk, this is the very rule of the nature."

Thereafter all on a sudden, he took a deep breath at once and controlled himself immediately. He could show such self-control even in deep sorrow, because many violent storms had learnt that, whenever unpearable sorrow came down on man's life then man had to think of his duties first. He should not break down then.

At that moment, he raised his eyebrows at remembering his son-in-law's condition. He was broken down like tender grasses with mourning. What would he do? It was he, who had to think about everything, who had to do everything.

Before he got into the car, "A nurse will come with the baby," he said.

The same day Salahuddin sahib brought his baby grandson in the evening. A nurse accompanied him. The nurse took the baby inside and he kept his ears alert sitting in the drawing room. Whether had Kader's wife changed her mind in the meantime? Nothing could be predicted with certainty about a grief-stricken woman. Thereafter, a little while latter the nurse stood silently beside the door

displaying a row of her black teeth, and he could understand that Kader's wife did not refuse the baby. There was no reason of doubt indeed. Who could refuse a suckling baby? Neither she: the woman who was overwhelmed with sorrow by just loosing her baby.

While getting on the car, Salahuddin sahib waited for a moment, he said, "If your wife needs medication and diet I will send a doctor."

There was a sign of deep satisfaction in his voice. Even in such a deep sorrow, there was a scope of satisfaction due to a little success, due to a little happiness, due to a bit of good performance. Everything had happened for the eternal kindness of the Almighty, he thought.

He got into the car sitting straight; his vision was facing the front.

Kader's wife Majeda had good health. Though she was short-stature but her body was incomplete nowhere. A mother of five sons indeed, nevertheless her body was tight, a bit fatty but nowhere it had to loose appearance.

The nurse entered the room and Majeda at first feebly looked at the bundle of cloth in the lap of the nurse. There was a tiny face inside the bundle. Eyes of the baby were shut with deep sleep. The dark sleep of his mother's womb had not finished yet. Thereafter, Majeda's eyes started to shine suddenly. She forwarded her hands and excitedly said, "Bring him, give him to me."

Majeda could understand this morning, it seemed her breasts were swelling and enlarged. She became doubtless that mysteriously liquid was storing drop by drop before the nipple for a new life. So the sorrow which was dimmed by three days, became sharpen again. For whom were her breasts swelling like that? The child of her own womb was not alive any longer. Was the nature that cruel? Could not she watch anything? Not only that it seemed the nature, as if had started to criticise the mother overwhelmed with sorrow. At one moment, she thought this was un-

just; this was very cruel. She supposed: she would not be able to bear her swelling breasts due to milk weight. While Salahuddin sahib brought the proposal she has to realise suddenly a secret command in her swelling breasts. Yes! Nature is the creation of God, so she had thousand for eyes: she understood everything, she could see everything whichever men could not; she could understand everything whichever men could not.

Majeda held the baby to her bosom and stared at him with a steadfast look. Her body shivered repeatedly with an indomitable emotion. Soon the baby started crying. At first, Majeda was struck with amusement. The baby inside the bundle could cry; she had as if not thought about that. Her child without crying a bit had returned to the deepest darkness from where he had descended. Had Majeda thought that she took her own dead baby on her lap? The nurse was not sitting so far, she was putting betel leaf into her mouth from the cold belt around her waist.

The baby got hungry, feeds him breast milk," she said.

Majeda's eyes shined again, an obscure gentle sign of laughter appeared. Of course, she would feed the baby with breast milk. Milk had been collected in her large and prominent breasts as if with the cheering of a waterfall. There was pain of collected milk in her breasts. The pain was the pain of life itself; whatever was collected in her bosoms in the form of nectar of love and affection could not be visible in naked eye. She remembered regarding her other children, whenever the sound of crying baby reached to her ears, automatically milk would had come put by nipples, at the same time compression and expansion used to start in her lower abdomen. Now she supposed her nipples were wet likewise by the sound of the baby's cry, similar compression and expansion was felt started in her lower abdomen. It did not matter, though the baby was not of her own.

The nurse said again, The baby becomes tired of crying. Won't you feed milk to the motherless baby?

This time she undid the buttons of a torn, a bit sweating deep red coloured blouse with a swift gesture and opened a breast. She held the nipple into the mouth of the crying baby and he started suckling worriedly.

A few moments later, suddenly the child cried out loudly with a sharp voice. The crying declared only about the deprivation and failure. The nurse looked frowning at Majeda. The scenario she observed, her frowning became more evident. Majeda sat looking straight, as if her heart was not beating, as if she had no attention to the baby's cry.

What happened? the nurse asked. Majeda did not answer immediately. And her dry lip shivered a bit. She said

with a turn down voice, "Milk is frozen." The child did not get a drop of milk. Majeda supposed her both breasts suddenly turned like hard stone due to the frozen milk.

The next day in the morning, Salahuddin sahib came after the *Fazre* prayer to get news. While Kader entered the drawing room, like the other day he was sitting putting his both hands together at the top of the stuff and looked at him for once; but he did not ask him anything directly. In fact, he did not feel like to ask any question. He pricked up his ears to hear they cry of the child. Since there was no sound from inside, he considered the silence as the sign of satisfaction of the child's suckling. Kader yet not understood the complicity of his wife's milk feeding, so he did not say anything.

Salahuddin sahib straightened the stuff striking it noisily. He would not wait any more today. With an air of getting up, without looking at Kader, he said, "After the *Fazre* prayer in the morning while I was about to read the *Ozifa* an idea came to my mind. I have some land property in Munshir Hut, those are field of paddy crops. I want to register a portion of those by your wife's name. I hope she will not disagree."

He stood up just saying this sparing no chance for Kader to say anything. The engine of the car got life at the road. The drawing room was filled with just burnt petrol's pungently aromatic scent.

Before getting into the car, raising his stuff unnecessarily towards the sky, he said, "Fish, meat and vegetables will come from my house for some days. The nurse knows how to cook good food."

In the afternoon, the nurse sat with the crying baby spreading her legs in the narrow verandah behind; there was an impression of worrying at her face. Majeda also failed today to feed the baby milk even trying again and again. This was the fourth day of the baby's life. He did not get a drop of milk into his stomach after his birth. The nurse fed him water with a spoon, but appetite could not be appeased with water only. Yet, she knew that a newborn baby could survive for several days even in sound health without taking anything. Nevertheless, if a baby of four days did not get anything into his mouth, it was a matter of worrying. Majeda was sitting motionlessly inside turning her face to the wall. Her eyes were shut; lips were dry. She did not button her blouse after being failed to give the baby milk just before. Now she felt her opened breast like a weighty stone. It became doubtless to her that milk had been frozen in her swelling breasts, so nothing was flowing down. But why did her breasts become like that? Could that be possible that milk was collected for her own baby only, since the baby was no longer alive, had her milk frozen like that?

To be continued