

Book Extract

Shamsur Rahman glows in the constellation of contemporary poets writing in Bangla as the brightest star. He is a legend in his life-time. For over a period of 50 years his poems have been echoing the hopes and aspirations of the Bangalees of this part of the world and have caught the imagination of the nation in his shimmering stanzas and lines. On October 23 Shamsur Rahman turned 72, still writing profusely and depicting into his poems our pains and sorrows and dreams for a better world. On his birthday The Daily Star wishes the poet a long and blissful creative life.

The Poet in Arms

By Syed Najmuddin Hashim

Putting labels to a poet's work seriously limits him. Thinking on Nazrul as the Rebel circumscribes the range and sweep of his genius. I often think of such labels as something in the nature of the French Government's Appellation Controle stuck to wine bottles, which guarantees the quality of the grape that goes into the making of the end-product. It is even more so in the case of Germany, which has a more comprehensive quality-testing system than that of the freewheeling French. Judging from the growing impatience and intolerance of a growing section of fundamentalist edict-mongers, I often have nightmares about someone sticking a surgeon General's Warning to writer's work pronouncing it injurious to morality and such-like extraneous and irrelevant considerations. For the present, we can safely state that appellations identifying a predominant aspect of a creative intellect's work may be useful, if, of course, it is not over-stressed and/or over-stretched.

Thinking of Shamsur Rahman, the volume of whose poetry and prose threatens to outstrip that of Tagore or Nazrul, immediately brings to my mind one of Bengal's outstanding film-makers and certainly its most committed, Riwitick Ghattach, whom I came to know in Dhaka and Delhi in 1974/1975. He typified to me the once widely-held belief of an artist or writer as one possessed. The reasons why the handsome and well-groomed poet was conjured up by the unkempt, wild-eyed and ill-clad film maestro, are not far to seek. I still remember that during the Delhi International Film Festival in December 1974-January 1975, Riwitick telling me in my room in Qutb Hotel, with his jaws pugnaciously thrust out. You are always a partisan, either for or against. "When I quipped that he sounded like a Hebrew Prophet with their 'Whoever is not for me, is against me,' Riwitick countered. "After all, Moses was a great Prophet, and one of your prophets too, but to me his most endearing quality is that he went up the mountain top to question God. He would take nothing for granted even from Jehovah! He said about his classic celluloid rendering of Addaya Malla Barman's Titas Is the Name of a River shooting the film gave him an opportunity to mix with the unlettered folk living on the banks of the Titas, and listening to the heartbeat of the land and the children of nature. It was like worshipping his Mother-land.

Both as a life-long combatant and as a

devotee of his mother and the dearly-beloved native land she represents, Shamsur Rahman has a spiritual kinship with Riwitick Ghattach. Another kindred spirit is the octogenarian and ailing Shaikat Osman, The frail Sufia Kamal still flickers like an undying flame, but the other two crusaders in the people's cause -- Quamrul Hasan and Jahanara Imam -- died fighting, their heads bled but unbowed.

Shamsur Rahman donned his suit of armour pretty early in life, and he has set up an unbeatable track record as The Poet In Arms for over four decades. In Hasan Hafizur Rahman's 21st February, published in 1953 commemorating the martyrs of the Language Movement of the previous year, Shamsur Rahman is given pride of place among the young poets who rose in protest against the wanton killing of students and youth in Dhaka. Their only crime was demanding due place of honour and status for the Bengali language, spoken by 56 per cent of the people of Pakistan as compared to 6 per cent who spoke the favoured emigre language -- Urdu. His untitled poem for an almost clandestine publication, promptly suppressed sassing, has been largely ignored in his subsequent selections and collections, and was a last-minute addition to his Political Poems published in 1988. Nevertheless, his distinctive accent is unmistakable, as is his blazing anger and inconsolable grief.

Use your red-hot tongs to tear out my two eyes so that the full moon's effulgence.

And my country's corpse drained of life-blood can no longer flicker at the edges of my eyes.

He was to revert to that rebel chant sixteen years later in February 1969, marking the mass upsurge that forced open the prison doors of martial law and freed the people's undisputed leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Kazi Nazrul Islam's exhortation during the British occupation of India to "break down the iron doors of the prisons" still inspired the Bengalee nation. Shamsur Rahman wrote

To live means
To march in unison, shoulder-to-shoulder
In massed processions,
To raise the flag of defiance,
To protest injustices
By raising clenched fists
To the high heavens.

The White Shirt was written in 1970 after the devastating cyclone and tidal surge which killed some half-a-million people. It also made the Bengalee people aware of the utter callousness sharpened into weapons of resistance by Maulana Bhashani and Sheikh

Mujibur Rahman. The poem, one of Shamsur's greatest, says

Alas, what fell incantations
Haves the Maulana uttered?
His eloquent hands flash out repeatedly
Like quivering spears,
The Maulana's flowing white shirt
Swells quickly, billows out.
As if with one spotlessly white garment
He anxiously seeks to cover the shame
Of the scattered, unveiled, disrobed

corpses.

The previous year also he had written

about another white shirt Asad's Shirt, as a

mournful dirge to a youthful martyr

How it flutters

With no respite

In the sun-scorched stretches

Of our parched hearts,

At every muster of conscious people

Uniting in a common purpose.

Asad's Shirt today becomes

Our pulsating heart's rebellious banner.

But it were the bullet-ridden days and nights of his own description during the nine tortured months of 1971 that Shamsur Rahman finally won his spurs as a partisan and a crusader, which roles he continues to fill even today.

After the fateful night of the treacherous Operation Searchlight when Pakistan's so-called disciplined army of mercenaries, equipped with the latest and most sophisticated weaponry cracked down on the unarmed Bengalees in Dhaka, Bengal gave birth to a hitherto unknown phenomenon the guerrilla. And Shamsur Rahman was quick to greet him. In a somewhat whimsical tone, he wonders how he looks, and moves and behaves, whether his head of wild locks is framed by a saint's hollow. But the emotions of a captive people, taut as a stretched spring, gather into an emotive

For you and our future
Now go hand in hand
Stepping boldly forward.
We hear your footsteps echo everywhere,
Of you dispeller of our agony,
You are my blood-brother,
Of newly-born son of mine!

The task of Pakistan's occupation army in their eastern colony was a hopeless one that of holding down a basically peaceful people roused to a white-hot pitch of fury by the wholesale and wilful butchery, rape and pillage for nine long months. Shamsur Rahman lamented like the slave-poet sitting by the

rivers of Babylon who "hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof" and wept when he remembered his mother

land. Shamsur Rahman was in internal exile in the land of his birth. He has related in a recent television interview (after an absence of seven or eight years from the government-controlled medium) how, fleeing from the marauding hordes he wrote For You, O Freedom & Liberty. Your Are at one sitting while sheltering in a village:

To win you, O freedom
How many times more
Do we have to wade
Through a sea of blood?

How often have we to burn

In the red-hot furnace

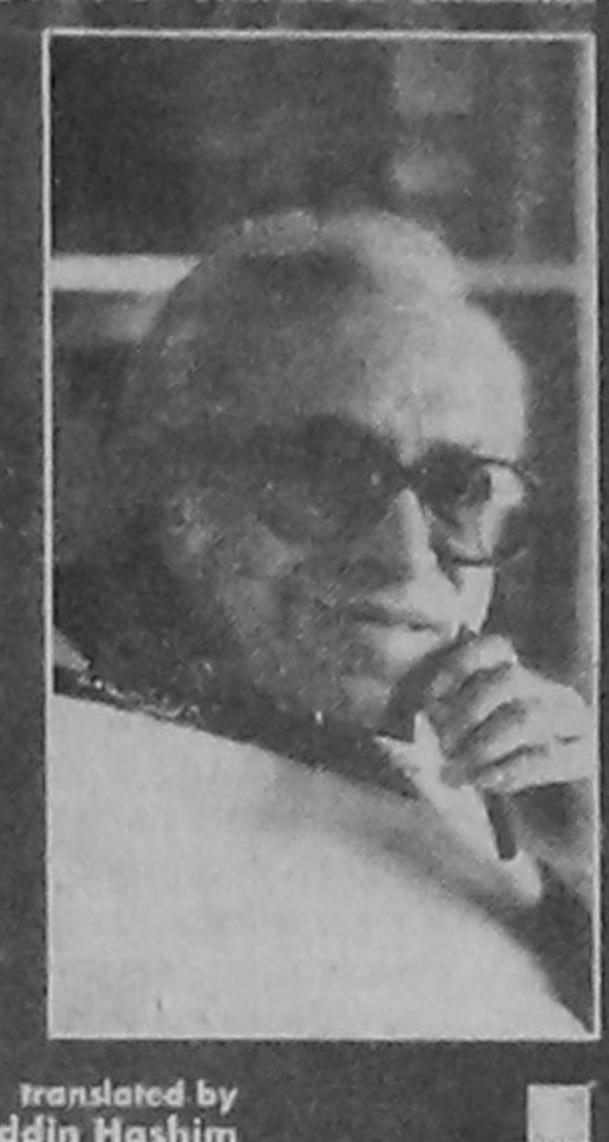
Of our blazing forests?

Throughout the nine-month-long

Holocaust, he wrote volumes to arouse the

consciousness and consciousness of his beleaguered

THE DEVOTEE, THE COMBATANT Selected Poems of Shamsur Rahman



translated by
Syed Najmuddin Hashim

The Devotee, The Combatant Selected Poems of Shamsur Rahman

Translated by Syed Najmuddin

Hashim, TK. 125.00, pages

91, published by

Pathak Shamabesh

people, inspiring them to fight the alien occupation and keep their tryst with destiny which came on 16 December, 1971. In From the Prison Camp, he wrote:

But Little do they know
That in the leaves of the trees,
On the footpaths,
In the bird's feathers,
In the eyes of women,
In the dust of the roads,
In the clenched fist
Of the unruly child
Of our ghettos,
I always see
Burning,
A word called
"Freedom"

The dispossessed Bengalee in those grim days from March to December, 1971 could no longer consider his home his own castle. This crowning indignity and shame is echoed in Shamsur Rahman's Occupancy Right:

But all of a sudden
I have lost
The occupancy right
To my own house,
In every room
Making himself quite at home,
I find
A total stranger--
Clad in Khaki
A carbine in his hands.

The plight of the bulk of the Bengalee nation who were held hostage in those dark days is mirrored in his No, I Shall Not Go:

I'd rather stay with those
Whose days and nights
Are forfeit.

Tarry with those
In helpless agony
Who nevertheless await,
Seem fated to always await
Death in a row.

The parallelism with recent planned genocides elsewhere is inevitable, as in How Many Mai Lais?

Nowadays
Whichever way I turn
My listless eyes,
Countless Mai Lais
I see
Burning.

In Bangladesh.

As in Hitler-occupied Europe, so also in occupied East Pakistan, the dead were everywhere and even after a quarter of a century, mass graves in the Bangladesh country-side are being unearthed by diligent teams of the United Cultural Front. The dilemma for the Pakistani occupiers, who were trying to mislead world public opinion, is faithfully portrayed in How will You Hide?

Or else at the banquet
In honour of foreign dignitaries,
Behold, clinging
Like stubborn fungous weeds
Amidst the plates and dishes,
In bowls of chicken soup,
In spotless serviettes,

The numberless gory dead--

The slaughtered men, women and children

The Liberation War's demands on restive youth often out-weighed the demands of love. And in Pledge Shamsur Raman writes

Call me not in vain,
I am in no mood
To seek your shy proximity,
Which is reminiscent of Faiz Ahmed Faiz's celebrated lines in Urdu

Do not ask of me, my love
That love I once had for you
For there are other sorrows
in the world than love

and other pleasures, too.

But there the similarity ends, because the dozens of Pakistani poets played a less than heroic role in 1971. He sided with the ruling military junta's infamous crack-down on unarmed civilians by renouncing the "Lenin Prize" in protest against the staunch Soviet support to the cause of Bangladesh!

The euphoria of independence gained in nine months bloody war was short-lived. For those who opposed the Liberation of Bangladesh, from within and without, coalesced to murder in cold blood the architect of freedom, along with his entire family within three-and-a-half short years. So, Shamsur Rahman had to resume his role, suddenly rendered more difficult, of the keeper of the nation's troubled conscience. Oppression, exploitation, misrule, inequity, deprivation and destitution inflicted by a succession of usurpers triggered some of Shamsur Rahman's darkest and most belligerent poems for which he had to pay a dear price.

To be continued

POEM

Poems of Shamsur Rahman

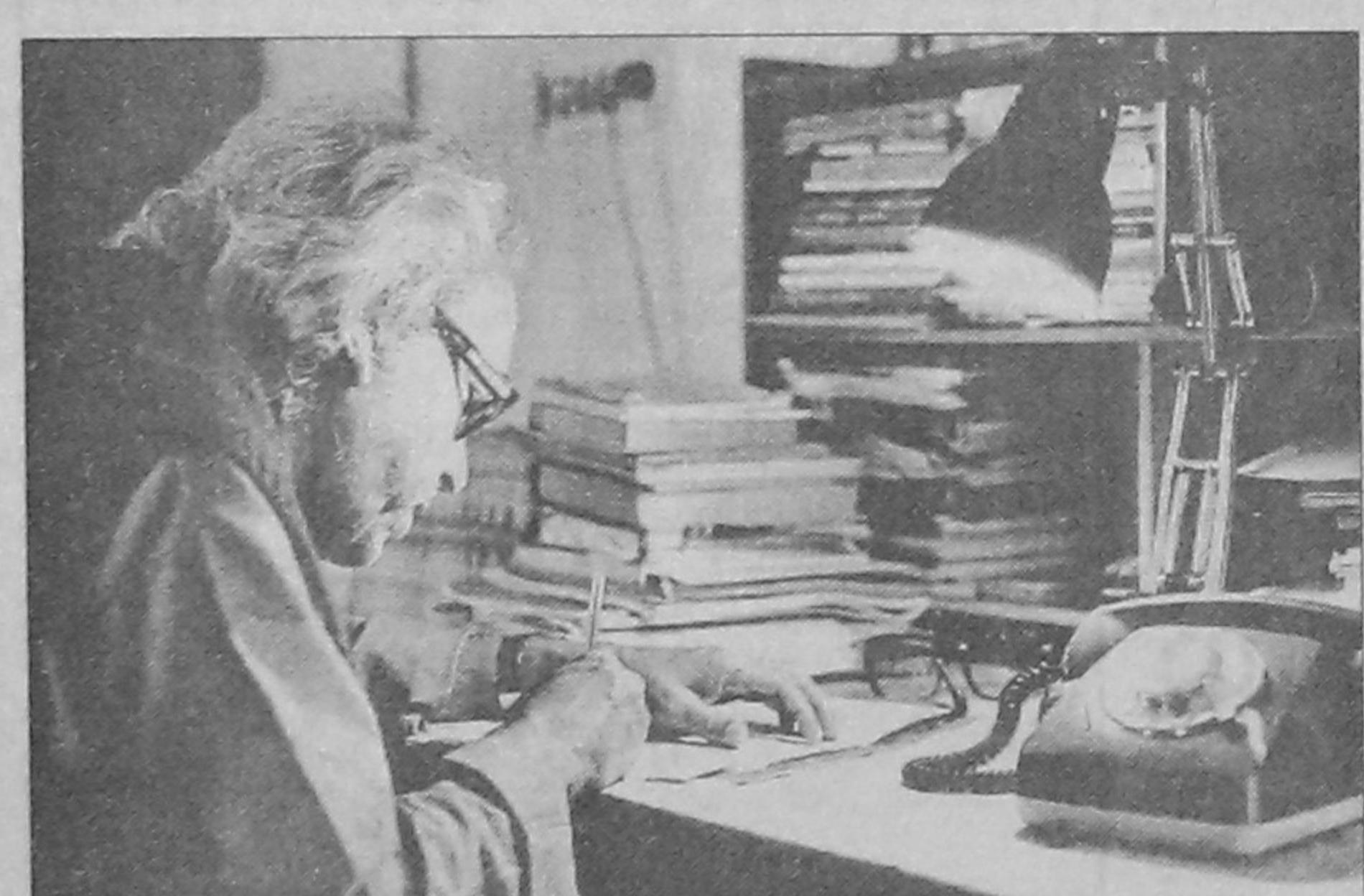


Photo courtesy of M. A. Taher

A Wish

Translated by Fakrul Alam

If I live for more than four decades
I'll be writing.
If I live for less than two decades
I'll be writing.
If I live for one more decade
I'll be writing.
If I live for two or four years
I'll be writing.
If I live for one more year
I'll be writing.
If I live for another month
I'll be writing.

To Rabindranath

People say poetry has fallen on hard times in Bangladesh. In particular, since you died the figure of poetry has lost all loveliness and grace. Only ruggedness and obscurity Surround it now. All around it one sees wastelands. Why the hungry mouse is startled by moonlight on the skull The flower of the cactus can in no way comprehend.

Sudhindra and Jibanananda are dead; Buddhadev seeks solace In translations. Shamar and Shuvash are mere echoes In memory's corridors now. Some others have survived Storms and floods and have ascended to secure thrones, Although those who have recently taken up helm and skull On flowing rivers have been unseasonably stranded On sandbanks all of a sudden. And those who love flowers Have settled on putrid ones to celebrate spring.

Like newly planted seedlings needing sun and rain We too needed celestial succour all life long.

Your brilliance thus illuminated our sunseeking Consciousness, irradiated our talk of politics, our loving.

As if in princely eminence when on midday Birds ceased to sing you never heaved a sigh. As if Bolpur's blazing summer didn't tire you out Or in a parched voice you never cried out for water As if the death of your beloved son Shomeer Didn't dim the fire in your bosom or the bewitching Always elusive mythical deer didn't delude you ever It was an imposing figure that you cast on countless souls!

Though the rose's sharp thorns pierced the azure of Rilke's being; He had his bath at midday and lunch too; his hair had felt The touch of a comb; his heart too was devoted to a woman.

You have given my days the glow of poetic words My nights you have filled with the sparkle of songs All my lifelong you've given me the magic spell I needed to burst through the formidable phalanx Of the fabled seven charioteers. You've given me The assurance to shatter the barbarian's outburst With the drill of my intense indignation!

You've emboldened me to walk the open road of symbols And to enter the fields of joy and the wide world. You've swept past the avowed atheist's secure defenses With such pure lyrics of devotion and god's love. I'd rather not wade in waters where toads croak; I want to be part of the immense ocean. In trying To soar like you I may keep falling into the mud; Nonetheless, I console myself: being the cuckoo Of the mudflat will give my life some meaning!

Crows

No footmarks on country roads. No cows grazing In pastures; all cowboys have vanished, the rugged narrow Strip of land between plots are barren, trees by the wayside are hushed. Scorching sunlight everywhere; only the crows are quivering; only the crows!

Mother

Translated by Sudeep Sen

I never ever heard my mother sing, barely remember my childhood, nor her sweet lullabies that lulled me once to slow-sleep.

Before spring touched her youth, storm fanned her frolic, allowing her to playfully pick mangoes. Perhaps then, a song struggled to flower, to emerge -- its rhythms plaited, entwined, couched in afternoon's eve, lest it signalled elder's ear or notice.

Even long after marriage, my mother stayed nestled under father's shadow. I cannot recall any note -- tappa or khayal -- ever touching her own ear, just the routine songs of daily chore -- scaling fish, grinding spice, recoating courtyard's surface with fresh mud -- weaving my shirt's unravelled threads back

before placing it gently, on the clothes-rack. With love, she sent me out to play, with love too, she caressed her hair. In spite of my intimacy, I didn't know whether she ever sang.

Her own secret songs, hoarded forever in the sorrow-drenched wood of our family-chest -- where

Sudhangshu Will Not Go

Translated by Syed Najmuddin Hashim

From amidst the plundered temple And the burnt ashes of the homestead A disinterested voice reaches Sudhangshu-- "Will you go then, in the end?" At the day's end Sudhangshu searches frantically Among the ashes For ownership deeds, broken glass bangles The inert box of a married woman's vermillion-- The scattered beads of troubled memories.

The voice says, "The looters have robbed you But haven't left, they are lurking around They are wrapped around your daily life. The animal-visaged executioner Bides his time Under the vampire-wings of terror. Even then, do not go Sudhangshu."

The sky's blue is not yet fled. The trees, with their gentle ways Still fly their flag of deepest green. The brimming river Still shakes her waist.

Like a wanton gypsy girl. Sudhangshu too will not go Leaving this sacred land Like a warrior defeated in battle For destinations unknown.

For A Poem

I go to a tree and say:
Kind tree, can you give me a poem?
The tree says: if you can pierce
My bark and merge with my marrow
perhaps you will get a poem.

I whisper into the ears
Of a decaying wall:
Wall, can you give me a poem?
The old wall whispers
In its moss-thickened voice:
If you can grind yourself to powder
Inside my brick and mortar
Perhaps, who can tell,
You may get a poem.