

Dhaka's Little Magazines: part rage against the machine, part duck in the meadow

KHADEMUL ISLAM

I stumbled on Dhaka's little magazines quite by chance. I was the sole idiot at a hen party, late night, three women thoroughly enjoying themselves by being airy dismissive of men, S. D. Burman on the CD player, when I spotted the corner of a small magazine cover peeking out of a handbag.

"Whassat?"

"Bash, a little magazine," one of them replied, blowing a huge smoke ring at me.

"Can I have a look?" I asked, feeling like a clod sitting on the divan with shoes on while the women were all bare feet languidly languid on the sparkling spotless floor.

"Sure. You can keep it if you want." And blew another one at me.

I came home with it. Read it. With difficulty, clumsily, end to end, since Bangla ain't my forte. The result is this page.

So what is a little magazine?

It is part defiance, part hatred of the Establishment (literary, political, cultural, everything, man!) and poetic meter (which is always closely allied to the existing social order), part pretension, part jagged little pill. It is experimental writing, penury, hipster lingo, true love, ulcers, weird moons, vehemently wagging forefinger, daal bhat, khichuri during the monsoon rains, cotton saris, slasher art, summer sweat, glastnost, perestroika, let a hundred flowers bloom, and poems poems poems poems.

Dhaka's little magazine scene is vibrant, sketching compulsively, lovingly, obsessively from the university market at Shahbagh the transplanted urban Bangali sensibility: the purple jarul, the rage against the machine, the duck in the meadow, the cop with a fat gut, the corrupt diction of official poets, the need to be taken seriously. One of the editors of a little magazine heard of my interest in them and enquired testily: why is this guy taking an interest, to raise the circulation of his damn page?

His assumption: I am literary editor of the biggest-circulation English-language national daily, ergo I am part of the bourgeoisie propaganda mouthpiece machine, part of the gone-to-hell Establishment, a man to be distrusted on sight, you know, one of Them.

My conclusion: I love it. It is the perfect attitude for a little magazine editor. I would be suspicious of the credentials of the little magazine editor who liked me. They should all disdain national dailies and post snipers on the roof. They should all distrust English in Dhaka, its class affiliations, its inverted snobbery, its flat rhythms unconnected to the soil, its frequently tired, repetitive, unimaginative phrases.

Cheers to them all!

Below is a random sample. We will bring more of Dhaka's little magazines on this page in the coming months. Maybe. Maybe not. You understand what I'm saying.

From BIBIKTO

Who should not write (for little magazines)

Bibikto is always opposed to and will forever be on guard against two classes of writers: 1. the fundamentalist, and 2. the amateur aesthete incapable of love.

1. Not just the religious fundamentalist, but the political and the cultural fundamentalist too. Like those who take shelter in religion, those who do the same in cultural, political and literary arenas, taking advantage by forcibly occupying a weak space and turning it into a business, by using these areas for their own ends; like those who wear a *tupi*, these people have taken to wearing cultural *tupis* and are busy reaping the benefits, the accolades that come from wearing white flowing robes, and who have betrayed the fundamental concept; just as it is harmful for religion when a number of folks go to and fro to mosques yet are merely participating in a meaningless ritual of dress without truly believing in its precepts and ideas, so too is it frightening and deadly for us artists-writers-cultural activists to witness these *tupi*-wearing cultural mullahs. The evidence for this is present everywhere in our society, and it is largely due to this falsely-garbed poet-writer-artist that the average citizen is gradually losing respect and love for the arts, why the space for such activity is diminishing. It is now necessary to banish these so-called artists from our midst, reject them utterly. For the sake of the arts. In order to advance the true cause and to promote a healthy state of affairs.

2. Many of us fill our diaries with poetry (on innumerable topics) without knowing head or tails about it. Not that we are saying that it is necessary to know absolutely everything, but we are telling them-- those who write merely to memorialize happy occasions, those who write in the cause of empty aesthetics in order to present somebody with a gift or some such similar gestures, and while we do concede that one or two of their writings may indeed have artistic merit, yet in the aggregate their activities--these "artists" incapable of love, the etching of their inauthentic dreams and desires, writings without commitment--is indefensible. They should stick to where they belong doing anthologies, in the newspaper supplements of various national holidays and festivals, in the pages of the dailies of the petit-bourgeoisie.

We at **Bibikto** welcome the fresh, the essential, the creative--the truly new endeavours.

From DAARKAAK

Editorial

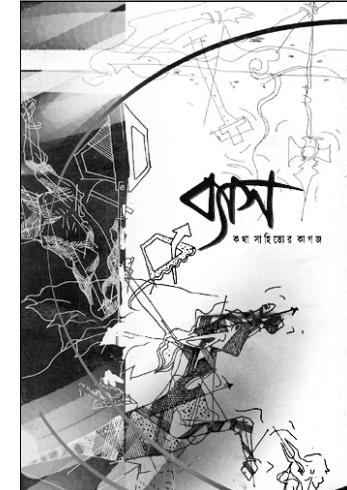
An immense hunger on the road, in traffic signals, dustbins, in front of shopping malls, on footpaths;--on the wall is pasted Comrade Moni Singh's birthday poster, immediately beneath it on the back side, a brilliant white alter, of the same poster are two sleeping two-day-old twin children like two innocent sacrificial animals before a goddess. Past them walks by Shahbagh. Inside the box of the breast pocket is an imprisoned flame.

Identification by Uniform

Aisha Jharna

The moment glasses are removed from eyes gone is the 'teacher teacher' look. Once I cross the school's boundaries and melt into the crowd I become

SHORT STORY



SUBRATA AUGUSTINE GOMES

1

I met her in a churchyard-on All Souls' Night. Her newly-wed husband, a great admirer of mine, introduced us, addressing me (or maybe her, I am not sure since all around us crowds swirled and parted, and even though everybody was whispering, or perhaps because of it, because of the hum that surrounded us, it made every word indistinct, and only later I came to know that she and I were namesakes!) 'This is the one, Rasu!' She smiled and walked away.

'So?' he said.

'Sowhat?'

'The wife...'

'Mashallah!'

'It's all because of you.'

'Eh?'

'I think she married me because of all those stories I told her about you. Me, I am nothing. How could she be interested in me?'

She shot me a sideways glance from among the crowd.

I managed to keep a straight face.

Above us and beneath us, innumerable underworld spirits prowled--a veritable congregation of ghosts! There seemed to be a commotion at a graveside. I went close and saw it was one of my relative's. It had sunk in by a few feet, and a horde of family members were busy fixing it. One relative, standing aloof, was overheard remarking, 'The ground was soft, don't go for the EIDE I said, use SCSI instead. See now what you've done. Even the motherboard is at risk...'

She reappeared before me.

'I've heard so much about you from your friend--seems to me I know you by rote.'

'O lucky me!'

'Don't be too sure about that.'

A third planet swam into view, throwing us off our orbits. My foreigner friend, red-faced, short, stood in front of us. An intensely funny man, loved by all because he could make us all roar with laughter. Me included.

'Good evening your ladyship. Pray tell me, which bus do you use to commute?'

'Pirjangi. No. 6.'

'Heavens!'

'It's kind of strange,' she said to me.

'What is?'

'That you *really* are a person--flesh and blood, phlegm and bile. I hadn't thought it possible.'

'You shouldn't jump to conclusions, ma'am,' my foreigner friend muttered, 'especially in a necropolis, on All Souls.'

She looked taken aback. Or maybe merely wanted us to have that impression.

Ascension

SUBRATA AUGUSTINE GOMES

And then, without warning, she doubled her pointer into a half-hook and prod-ded it into the tip of my nose. Instantly, a blisterran riot.

'Funny!' she exclaimed, bursting into semi-hysterical laughter, 'Your friend's funny!'

'That, heh heh,' my friend laughed 'goes without saying. But you should light a candle on my grave before you go.'

It is either the third or fourth quarter of the moon. A huge jet flies low overhead. In the distance is the evening star.

Oh, how I wish this evening I was at some market by the pier on the banks of the Kaliganj river...

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I set off before sunrise. On foot. Local rickshaws seldom agree to take me as a passenger. Besides, it was five in the morning. There was no rush.

The *raison d'être* for this dawn passage was the dream that had woken me up last night, that my relatives were lowering my corpse into the grave and that same relative of mine had again suggested SCSI. I had voiced my objections 'No, I'm not willing to have more than three eternal mates--my motherboard wouldn't support it.'

Your fatherboard will,' he had retorted.

And right when I had opened my mouth to reply, something like 'please keep my dead father out of this,' a clod of earth had strangled my breath and, dear God, woken me up. Not being particularly keen on dreaming again, I had jumped out of bed and remained awake.

In spite of my leisurely pace, I arrived at Pirjangi an hour or two early. The bus, however, was already there.

'Salamalaikum, chief,' I hailed the driver, 'When do we start?'

'When the passengers are in, of course. No profit driving an empty bus, is there?'

'None whatsoever. But I was just wondering if there was a scheduled starttime.'

'Don't task me.'

'Fine. Any idea how far we've got to go, though?'

'Don't have any idea what's far or near,' the driver shrugged. 'Other than the fourth dimension, don't know a damn thing. All I can tell for certain is whether it's mightor day, momingorevening.'

I felt like a little breakfast and enquired, 'Any odd chance if you'd know a place roundtherewherewe'reservefood, minus the EColi?'

No sooner had I stretched my left leg out of the café than I saw my admirer flying towards me.

'You had breakfast already?'

'Nothing special.'

'But why? What did I do wrong?'

'How can I answer that?'

'Why did you come to the bus station, and not to my flat?'

'I thought that was what was agreed upon.'

He started to cry. 'Bloody hell can never find the right word at the right moment, but you do know me, don't you?' he said, blubbering.

I kissed him on the lips and hugged him. Euphoric, he wagged his tail and tugged

me along.

'Nottoworry. Westillhaveanhourinhand,'hesaid, panting.

'Even if we hadn't, what would there be to worry about?'

'She's cooked something special for you. Turtle meat.'

I was startled.

'I know. First time for me too. She ate this dish at some friend's or some place. It was heavenly she said.'

'Where do you get turtles?'

The fish market. Nowadays you get turtles instead of prawns here. I hear turtle shells are worth their weight in gold in some foreign countries. But I am telling you things you know already. You were the one who would talk to us about remote places--remember when you told us that Guam or some other godforsaken country survived by selling birdshit?'

She smiled askance.

'And how are you, sir?'

'Feeding mean avatar, ma'am?'

'It's hardly a sin to feed an avatar an avatar. After you've eaten, imagine, you'll be an avatar doubled.'

'I never thought turtles could be so delicious...'

'Actually, they are not. If you don't believe me, just buy one from the market and try giving it a bite before it bites you, that is.'

'Sorry, what I wanted to say was that a turtle cooked by you...'

'That isn't true either. If I cooked a turtle for your silly friend here, nobody except he would dare try it. Not even another turtle.'

'Are you saying?'

'Yes, I am.'

'Never knew I had such hidden qualities.'

'Does a pepper know how hot it is?'

'Doesn't get a chance. Ends up in some Asian's stomach, achlong before that happens.'

'Now, that's an apt saying, a most apt saying!'

She reappeared before me.

'Well?' my admirer inquired.

'Well what?'

'How does it feel?'

'Feels like feeling well. Though at the rate the foreigner is rocking them, I fear they're all going to fall asleep from laughter before we're even halfway there.'

'That's good in a way,' she observed. 'If all they did was stare out of the window at Nature, they would go to sleep at the picnic spot.'

'And where would that place be?' I asked my friend.

He looked at his wife, and she, speechless, in turn gazed deep into my eyes.

'I like the arrangements, mate, well done!' I said to my friend, and he melted into a sherbet. I drank him in a single gulp and he was finished for the rest of the story.

4

On the ferry, after the passengers had stepped out of the bus for some fresh air, the driver's whistle blew and as everybody scurried to jump back in, signalling the quay was near, she manhandled me into the restroom and put a finger to her lips. 'Shhh!'

By the time I collected my wits and gasped out 'What the...?' the ferry had moored and the bus pulled out.

We got off the ferry and she, while blowing an aerial kiss to the vanishing bus, solemnly proclaimed, 'This is my destination, sir.'

'But this is unknown country to me,' I said hesitantly. 'Is there a good spot around?'

'Wherever you are is the best spot in the cosmos for me.'

'Aha, for you maybe, but...'

We hired a sampan at the nearby marina and floated midstream and sang: *yadidam hridayam mama tadasu hridayam tawa*. And behold! Our boat took off towards the heavens *yadidam hridayam tawa tadasu hridayam mama*. We rolled and walloped on clouds of gold, silver and diamond. *yadidam hridayam mama tadasu hridayam tawa*. Higher and higher and higher we went *yadidam hridayam tawa tadasu hridayam mama* tressed past Venus, overtook Mercury and burned into the Sun.

Subrata Augustine Gomes is a Bangla short story writer currently living in Australia. Translated by Khademul Islam with the help of the author from **Byash** little magazine, where it appeared under the title 'Meraj.'

