

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 airily 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?"

"Byash, 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 loungily languid on the sparkling spot-less 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.

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 *tupī*, these people have taken to wearing cultural *tupīs* 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 it is frightening and deadly for us artists-writers-cultural activists to witness these *tupī*-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

invisible. Today I will laze around sit down light a cigarette twirl a glass of wine in my hand. I will drink all my life's sorrows then listen to a cassette of Chaurasiya's flute, Zakir Husain's tabla. I will dance crazily to the tabla's beat. Forget all identification by uniform. Listen to Beethoven set sail my soul to Mozart's symphonies, then sell my soul to Mephistopheles listen to Wim Venders' open laughter and think it's possible to laugh like this. Gather all spells unto me and be spellbound, and make-do with life in the urban jungle till I stumble upon a villagey a very villagey life fragrant with rain-sweetened earth sit in a tiny shop by a culvert and smoke a *bidi* and exult as if I just came into this world oh what a wonderful life.

A page from **Saleem Al-Deen's*** Journal

17/05/2002

It is stifling hot on the campus. Every year when it is this hot I think of buying an air cooler. But I don't, thinking I can get by just like everybody else under the fan's whirring blades. Sweating like the devil, I think, let it cut me, that if I give in and cover from Nature's sternest face, then there will come a diminishing of one's life force.

The morning light has so much gold in it that it seems like autumn. On the cloudless distant horizon the golden sun blazes forth and in its midst the campus's *radhachura*, *jarul*, *krishnachura*, mahogany leaves and the thatch roof of jackfruit leaves glitter.

The *jarul's* purple colour chased me all over the place when I was young. It would seem to me as if I had drunk the colour. Compared to this particular hue, the rest of the earth's colours seemed trivial. I got the inspiration to write *Shakuntala* from this colour. I thought of speaking like Kalidasa and thinking like Goethe. *Shakuntala* is a jarul-coloured woman. And during this time if I saw somebody wearing a purple sari, it felt wonderful.

Krishnachura was never my favourite flower. A single tree with that many flowers felt more like a braggart than an actual flowering tree.

What I loved was the *radhachura* back in those days when I was a student at Dhaka University. There is ample reason to like its colour; in it there are traces of colours grown on the fringes of autumn's, of Hemanta's, blooming mustard flower. They are related to the lovely-hued *shonajhuri*, though it must be admitted that the *shonajhuri* in terms of colour is nearer to the petals of the mustard flower.

But what I really wanted to say is that these flowers keep blooming and flourishing beneath the blistering heat of a blue summer sky. What is intolerable to Man is life-giving to these flowers. What we find unsatisfactory they find joyous. Why? To remind Man how far he has fled from Nature--to remind him that, with their varied colours, it is within Nature, and heat, that they grow and prosper. And that it is Man, pressing bark on to his body, who is abject and artificial. That is what the flowers--red, violet and yellow, all stretching to the horizon--proclaim to me: Hey Salim, come next spring we want flowers that have bloomed from your plants.

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...

***Salim Al-Deen** is a playwright and teacher at the Jahangirnagar University.

From **OKKHOR**

Morning

Khairul Kabir

Grasshoppers leap to and fro delightedly in the courtyard
Mother expects it will be very hot today.
Father, after his prayers, has gone visiting the house of dew,
The calf, tethered in the shed by the cowherd,
Unable to drink milk since morning,
Is bawling for its mother...

Marshland

Qamrul Mehdi

On the raft of a water hyacinth
The snake's white egg
Floats away with the water's roll.

In the reticent light
Distant swarms of fish fry
Leap and dance upstream.

On the tip of the wide-awake islet
The stork-like white catkins
Tuck in their legs and sideways glance.

In the dawn-washed wind
Ashar's cloud is a coloured dove;
The water's heart is a dove's reflection,
The water's heart is cloud-coloured fish.

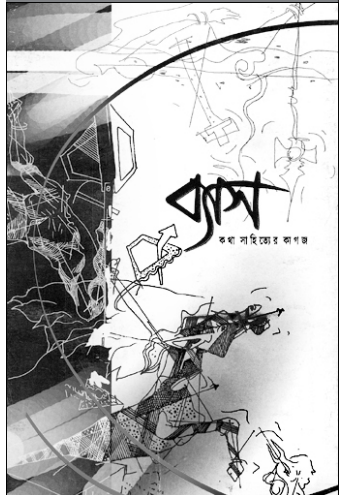
From **LAST BENCH**

Mymensingh Rust

Saif Ibne Rafiq

1. The mobile cannot be reached at the moment. Normal for water to flood in rain-impeded Dhaka. A smoky rickshaw speeds towards the TB Hospital. In the distance Mamoon can be seen hazily in Muktagacha. The brothel is being patrolled by the city crowd. The rain-wetted *ornas* of working women burn as garments. Dhaka's night stays awake under the infinite oppression of the cash box at Cash & Carry Pharma.

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.

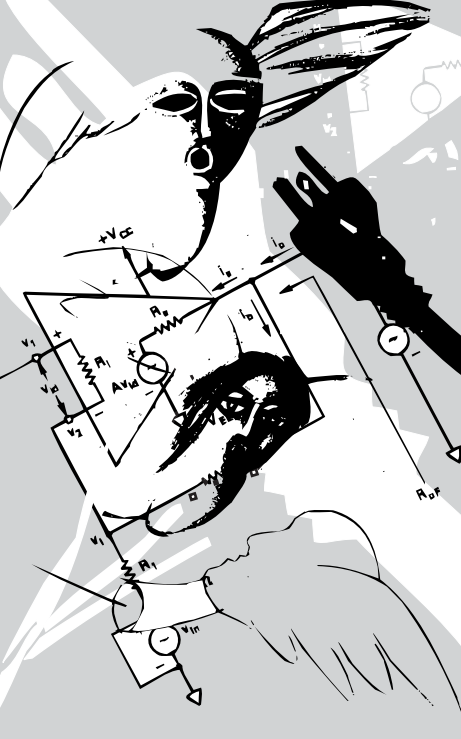
'Sowhat?'
'The wife...'
'*Mashallah!*'
'It's all because of you.'
'Eh?'
'I think she married me because of all those stories I told her about you. Me, I am nothing. How could she be interested in me?'
She shot me a sideways glance from among the crowd.
I managed to keep a straight face.

Above us and beneath us, innumerable underworld spirits prowled--a veritable congregation of ghosts! There seemed to be a commotion by 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 SCS! 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 bet too sure about that.'

A third planet swam into view, throwing us off our orbits. My foreigner friend, redfaced, 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



2

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 SCS! 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 start time.'

'Don't task me.'

'Fine. Any idea how far we've 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 night or day, morning or evening.'

I felt like a little breakfast and enquired, 'Any odd chance if you'd know a place round here where they serve food, minus the E.Coli?'

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. 'I bloody well 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

2. Between the rails the track
Rusty slogans flow in the stream
When Memory is unconscious, total silence
Swings languorously, gently.
Green lights at the crossing--the train is hurtling.

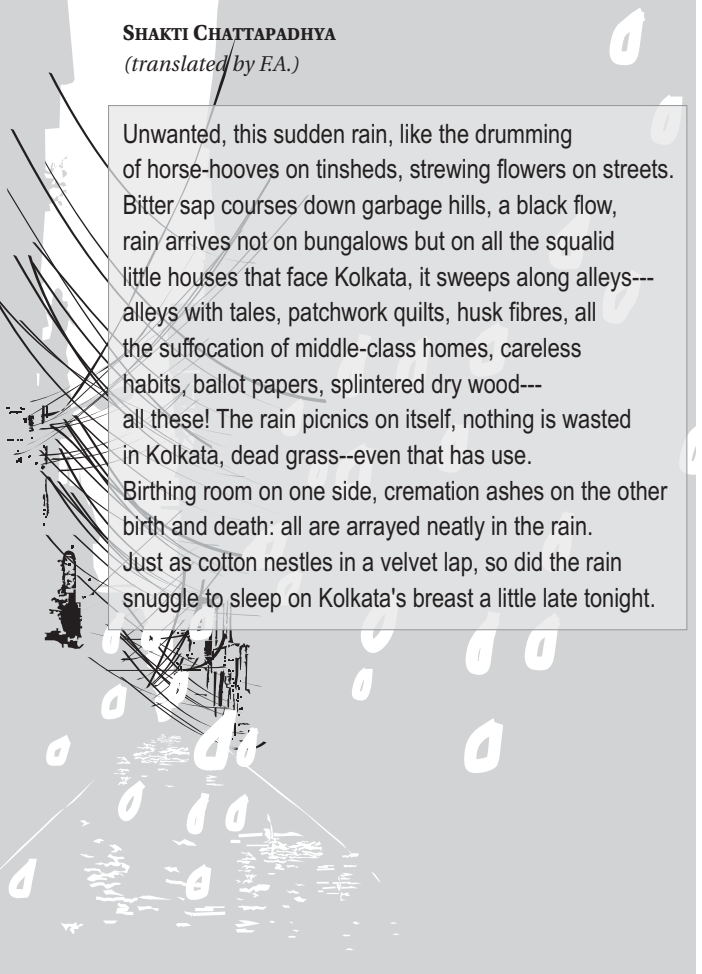
3. Who knows when the 8 o'clock train is to depart?
Unchecked privatization.
Groups of schoolgirls walk along the tracks.
The rich city leases village markets in its ads.
Rail track meets rail track in a spider's net
The city is touched by the city's grasping, oppressive pull.

4. Baskets doorsills buildings tremble on rails
69, Master Siddique Road
meet in the dark at the rail lines. A conspiracy at the crossing where green is face to face with the one-eyed Pragoti Express.
The ecology of metal
Khokon's *kolkī* mouth suffocates the station. A simple art
Mamoon's shadow comes to rest on his own chest.

Dear Dhaka Residents: beware of the khaki-and-blue dogs

On certain nights they are red-eyed dogs. Trolling the city's streets the untrustworthy patrol car spreads terror and fear. Graft-laden potbellies; on the Metropolitan's feet the police bureaucrat's dancing anklets. The gleam of metal polish in their dancing movements. Demon boots in a noontday march parade: on the sergeant's face is the black market sunglasses within the surplus budget's Om falls the radiant noon.

Rain on Kolkata's breast



SHAKTI CHATTAPADHYA

(translated by FA.)

Unwanted, this sudden rain, like the drumming of horse-hooves on tinsheds, strewing flowers on streets. Bitter sap courses down garbage hills, a black flow, rain arrives not on bungalows but on all the squalid little houses that face Kolkata, it sweeps along alleys--alleys with tales, patchwork quilts, husk fibres, all the suffocation of middle-class homes, careless habits, ballot papers, splintered dry wood--all these! The rain picnics on itself, nothing is wasted in Kolkata, dead grass--even that has use. Birthing room on one side, cremation ashes on the other birth and death: all are arrayed neatly in the rain. Just as cotton nestles in a velvet lap, so did the rain snuggle to sleep on Kolkata's breast a little late tonight.

virus in C.

'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 are 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 this wife, and she, speechless, in turn gazed deep into my eyes.
'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, 'Shh!'

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 tadastu hridayam tava*. And behold! Our boat took off towards the heavens *yadidam hridayam tava tadastu hridayam mama*. We rolled and wallowed on clouds of gold, silver and diamond. *Yadidam hridayam mama tadastu hridayam tava*. Higher and higher and higher we went *yadidam hridayam tava tadastu hridayam mamas* treamed 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'.)