

SHORT STORY

MASHIUL ALAM (translated by Asrar Ahmed)

1. The OC of Alphadanga Thana extends his hand and says, 'Come in, Mr. Humayun, please take a seat. I caught two of them and handed them in. Hopefully, by the end of today or tomorrow, I'll have the remaining four-- you should have told me before that it was your case that was pending. People like you are heroic children of the country.'

Humayun looks around and sees that his thatched house has shrunk into a little box. One side of it has risen up, and the bed is slanting against it as if it will slide on to the floor, and then keep sliding down until it slips beneath the thatch wall and sinks into the river.

Humayun is no longer surprised. Bizarre things are happening in his life all the time these days. He turns on to his side.

Now the ghosts come. They crowd Humayun, surround him on all sides. One of them says, 'Humayun, you filed a case against us. We'll slit your throat and throw you in the Madhumati river.'

Immediately two others them cry out loud in unison, 'We need your house and land.'

Humayun turns over to the other side and spies a knife, a sickle, and a Chinese axe gleaming in the sunlight. He responds in a quavering voice, 'I have commando training.'

The ghosts start to whisper among themselves. Humayun makes a noise to chase them away, but it's not an easy job to chase away ghosts. They enter his head and start a terrible clamour: sharpen their knives, bang their swords, noisily drive trains, *jhakkar, jhakkar*, shunt goods trains back and forth on the tracks, piercingly blow whistles, cut up people whooping all the while, then throw their corpses into the waters of the Rupsha river.

The ghosts wickedly shout, 'Humayun!' But no sound seems to come from Humayun's throat.

At that very moment, in the middle of the silent and lonely afternoon, the postman knocks on Humayun's door and asks for a glass of water. He hands Humayun an envelope and asked for tips. The boy bursts out when Humayun hands him five Takas: 'Are you giving alms to a beggar? Give me twenty Takas!'

Humayun feels embarrassed. In spite of his desperate financial straits, he isn't a miser. Unfortunately, he doesn't have any more money. He offers the postman some *chira* and *gur*. The postman throws back his head and grits his teeth: 'Do you think I'm a beggar?' He leaves the room stamping his feet on the ground. Humayun opens the envelope and reads the letter.

'Dear Mr Humayun, after we published a report in our newspaper about your sad situation, an expatriate Bengali in London sent some money for you to us. We would be grateful if you could kindly come and collect it.'

Humayun puts the letter in his front pocket, stretches himself and lies down again. Again, flocks of ghosts enter his head. The waters of the Madhumati rise, the sky takes a deep breath and comes down to squat on its heels. Humayun lies flat on the creaky bed. He murmurs to himself, 'I was a commander. Prime Minister Tajuddin shook hands with me. The commander of sector number nine, Major Jall, once danced in joy holding me on his shoulders. The Indian Air Force sent a helicopter for me. I walked over bags of gold belonging to the Biharis in Khalishpur. The manager of Khulna Paper Mills gave me his jeep. Somebody took the jeep for a little while, but never returned it. I have

no regrets. Somebody once played with my gold-handled revolver, put it in his pocket and left with it, I don't remember who. Never counted up the money gained and the money lost (I lost my father)....'

The pye-dog barks in the empty courtyard. The motherless calf cries out hungrily. The dead jasmine flowers have dried out to thatch, they lie like pieces of straw. Yellow leaves fall on the dead pond. The cruel airless afternoon watches silently. Humayun turns over again and goes to sleep on his side.

2. With fifty crisp fifty-taka notes in his hand, thirty-two years after he surrendered his guns, Humayun now feels the urge to buy a pistol. He wants to kill the ghosts with this pistol, the ghosts that want to evict him from his home, from whose attacks only Fate has ensured that he has narrowly escaped thrice before. He can't get any peace. He is going to blow away the skulls of those ghosts one by one. Their disturbances have forced him to send his wife and only daughter of nine years to another village.

But Humayun knows that it is now peacetime. There is no war going on in the country. There are courts; there is a rule of law. But even if they fail to protect him, Humayun can't use the pistol to protect himself. The custodians of the law will chain him and take him away if he uses it. The honourable judge will sentence him accordingly in the name of establishing the rule of law. What will happen to his nine-year-old little girl? Humayun feels helpless.

Putting the money in the secret pocket of his trousers, Humayun goes out of the house. A sudden hot breeze burns his eyes and face. It awakens the fear of the ghosts in his mind, and he straightens up. Sweat starts to gather on his temple, and the skin on his strong, forty-six-year-old hand gradually become wet. In the blinding sunlight, he suspects every person on the road to be a ghost. He remembers the pistol--that little golden-handled pistol.

Humayun walks on carefully. First he thinks of walking just like any other ordinary man, but the very next moment changes his mind. He marches forward like a soldier, with his back straight and hands hanging on both sides. But his fear doesn't leave him, pads softly



behind him like a hyena. Humayun knows for certain that at any moment the ghosts will leap on him.

At the mouth of the underpass, a bus, failing to run him over by a whisker, goes by shame-faced. Humayun turns his neck to see the driver grinning at him, showing all his teeth. He goes down the stairs of the underpass cursing the driver. There's very little light here--the ghosts have destroyed the lights. The underpass is just a tunnel for them--everybody here is a ghost. Humayun walks fast--he wants to get out of here and into the sunlight. Unfortunately, his time is up: Three ghosts surround him right in the middle of the underpass, where it is the darkest and most fearful. Humayun comes to a halt. His nine-year-old daughter's face floats up in front of him, the same way he had recalled his mother's face when Pakistani gunboats and machine guns had barked in the Pashur River in the Sundarban forests.

One ghost brings out a glittering knife. Another, while putting its hands in its pockets and baring its teeth, says, 'Miah bhai, out with the money.' All of a sudden, just when the third ghost opens its mouth to say

something, Humayun, suddenly again a commando after thirty-two years, grabs the wrist of the ghost who holds the knife, spins around and twists it. Using his knees and both hands he jams the wrist and breaks the ghost's hand with a cracking sound. The ghost gives out a heart-rending scream. The knife falls out of its hands with a clatter and bounces three times on the concrete floor. The other two ghosts slap their bum, twice and quickly run out from the underpass. People rush towards Humayun: 'Bravo, Bravo,' they shout joyously. Humayun lifts the ghost with the broken hand onto his shoulders like a newly-slaughtered goat and climbs up the stairs. 'Here, take him,' he says, breathing heavily, to the law-enforcing officer standing at the mouth of the underpass.

'Good God!' shouts the law-enforcing officer, 'What in heavens name have you done? This man is dying!'

The crowd of people spring on the ghost with the broken hand. They tear his body into pieces and then leave, each in his own direction.

'You come with me now,' orders the law-enforcing officer.

Humayun runs and jumps into a passing bus. The law-enforcing officer takes out his walkie-talkie and reprimands a nearby colleague. The Pegasus Bus speeds Humayun towards Gabtoli.

3. Evening falls on the Alphadanga market. The ghosts of the day go to sleep. The ghosts of the night stretch their hands, yawn and crack the joints of their hands and feet.

Humayun gets off the bus and steps inside Sikander's shop for a glass of water. Sikander smiles at him. 'Mia Bhai, you're now famous. You also have some money now, so why don't you pay off your debts?' Sikander's words travel with the air, and creditors flock to Humayun, who takes the money out from the secret pocket of his trouser and starts to pay off his debts. Humayun owes Sikander ten thousand takas, Ibrahim seven thousand, Sulaiman three thousand, Belal seven hundred, Azimuddin five hundred, and Mujibur three hundred... Humayun freely distributes the money like a zamindar. There's a satisfaction in his smile, joy always floods his soul when he gives something to somebody. After paying the creditors at hand, Humayun was left with three thousand takas. He starts to walk back to his house.

All of a sudden the lights go out. An owl screeches harshly. The sound of a bat's wings mingled with that of his own footsteps startles Humayun. He turns and calls out, 'Sikander.' There is no response. Humayun starts to walk back towards Sikander's shop. Two ghosts come out of the dark and stand in front of him. They put their hands in Humayun's armpit, hold his hands in theirs and force him to walk to an even darker place.

They reach a house along with Humayun. Four ghosts are playing cards on a table. The whole room is dark with smoke-- the ghosts are smoking cigarettes. On the wall, a clock ticks.

Out comes from the next room an officer ghost with a cigarette dangling from his mouth.

'Please come in, Humayun Miah. Courageous freedom fighter, naval commando Humayun Kabir. Please come in, take a seat. Let's settle your case. Hey there, bring in Pari.'

A young female ghost with an overripe figure walks out from the next room. Scarlet-lipped and chubby-cheeked. With a red ribbon in her hair and a hostile look in her eyes. She swings her heavy hips as she walks over and sits down on a stool. She looks at Humayun and again there is anger in her eyes.

The officer ghost looks at Humayun and laughs, his teeth like big shovels.

Humayun murmurs, 'What's the matter?

'She is a witness in your case. A very difficult case, as you can easily understand.'

'It's a false case.'

'That we know.'

'Can you tell me why you have brought me here like this?'

'Can't you understand why?'

'No. Explain it to me.'

'There's no point in explaining anything. We are very hungry, we want to eat you.'

With that, yelling and whooping, seven ghosts fall on Humayun, tear him from limb to limb and eat him. Afterwards, they belch and go to sleep.

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Dhaka Literary Life: Kaikobad at the Bangla Academy

KHADEMUL ISLAM

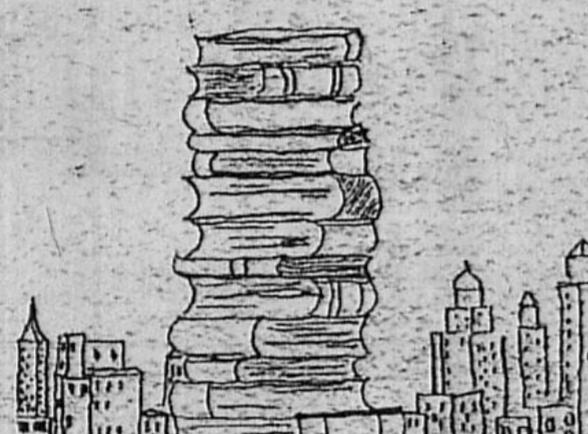
I almost didn't go, almost reflexively flipped the invitation card from Bangla Academy into the trash basket. God, no, not a Dhaka lit seminar, I thought. I remembered a few of those from my student days at the auditorium behind Dhaka University library, with 'shahitik' types gassing a glassy-eyed audience to death with windy platitudes. Then I took a closer look at the card. It was a discussion, on the occasion of the anniversary of his death, on Mahakabi Kaikobad (on his *kavya shadrona*) and the political background of that time. Hello there, I now thought reversing gears, this sounds more like it. Over the last few months I had been getting increasingly interested in Bengali Muslim poets and writers, some of it sparked by a chance encounter with Ahmed Sharif's work on Sayyid Sultan, the sixteenth-century Chittagong-based poet who wrote *Nabi Bangsa*, and where one could see the beginnings of the attempt to adapt the whole range of Perso-Islamic civilization to the Bengali cultural universe. In my slow subsequent readings on the topic, I had also come across a few mentions of Kaikobad (it was a pen name, his real name was Mohammad Kazem Ali Qureshi, born in Nawabganj thana in the district of Dhaka) as basically a 19th-century Muslim poet who had written epic and narrative poems. Now this discussion felt like a chance to learn a little more about him.

I turned up at the Bangla Academy on 21 July, as the floodwaters were beginning to show up in the city's shantytowns and streets. The discussion was at 11 o'clock. Which was mystifying: who the heck would have time to attend (present writer excluded) a lit seminar on a Wednesday morning? The Bangla Academy grounds, without the crowded lanes and bookstalls of the Ekushey book fair, looked sweeping and green in the bright sunlight. A few men sat talking lazily in the guard booth, a couple more were engaged in conversation on the curving paths in front of the old building the same British Raj white as the High Court building and the DU vice-chancellor's residence, while beyond the lush green, in the middle distance water glittered quietly. All in all, had the brown men all been in peon khaki, and a few white men with a Fort William Orientalist's preoccupied air had been sauntering about, I would not have been amiss in thinking that I had ridden a time machine back a couple of centuries.

The first floor of the modern building at the back of the old one is sunlit. Not so the seminar room, with its heavy drapes pulled tight, and ceiling lights focused on the chairs and tables on the little dais, while the audience sat in the dark. A couple of bored looking students in the middle row and some women in the front row seats, chatting. Soon some more men, mostly middle-aged, came in. One of them, favouring the close-cropped, jawline-hugging Manfred Mann beard seen on American beatniks half a century ago, the kind that Maulana Azad once kept, hustled about self-importantly, obviously some well-known personage of the local lit circle. Soon half the seats were taken. Beside me was a very old man with some sort of mechanical *tabzit* in his hand, which he kept clicking throughout the whole proceedings, eyes closed. The dais people--the keynote paper would be presented by a Professor Khaled Hossain of Jahangirnagar University--filed in and took their seats. A Koran *tilawat* was followed by an introductory speech by an Academy official, and then we the assembled listened as the professor read out his paper. Nobody else in the audience seemed to be an academic, nobody from Dhaka University seemed to be there.

It was hard to make out his words. The unvarying monotone of his mumbling delivery, the noise of the air conditioner, the clicking beside me, the two youths at the back animatedly whispering about their female classmates all forced one to strain to hear the words.

It was a standard paper apparently tailored to Bangla Academy discussion specifications. The first part was a 'quickie' tour of British-Indian and Bengal history starting from the fakir and sanyasi revolts (1763 onwards), Indigo uprising, the Wahabi and Farazi movements through to the Sepoy Revolt, the founding of the Mohammedan Literary Society by Nawab Abdul Latif, et cetera et cetera, to the Bengal Partition of 1905, the founding of the Muslim League, and then working its way down to the 1940 Lahore Resolution and thence to the events of 1947. It was routine stuff, nothing that a couple of hours with



history books wouldn't teach. Around me were people in various attitudes of listening. The slim woman announcer was sitting in the far corner, with the *tilawat* maulvi by her side, both with their heads down, both gazing deeply inward at what presumably were radically different interior landscapes. In the bright slits where curtains did not meet fully could be glimpsed green leaves dancing on branches.

I looked at Kaikobad's enlarged photo on the podium banner. A determined look on his face, as one would have to be to be a Muslim at that time, especially a Muslim poet at that. One of the pioneering few who ushered in the entry of Muslims into modern Bengali literature, one who, as Abdul Mannan Syed wrote in his introduction to the *Kaikobad Rachanabali*, almost single-handedly liberated Bengali Muslim poetry and poetic practice from the clutches of *duvashi puthi*. With a symbolism almost too weighty to bear, Kaikobad was born in 1857, the year of the Sepoy Revolt. For just as the Battle of Plassey a hundred years back had meant that effective control of Bengal passed over to the East India Company, so too the Sepoy Revolt marked the end of formal Muslim rule in India. The British were ruthless to Muslims in its aftermath--Delhi and Lucknow, the twin centers of Indian Muslim civilization, were sacked. Muslim power, nobility, educational and civic institutions, employment and offices were ground to dust. 'In our ancient capitals once so well-known, so rich, so great and so flourishing,' declared Sir Syed Ahmed Khan to the above-mentioned Mohammedan Literary Society of Calcutta in 1863, 'nothing is now to be seen or heard save a few bones strewn amongst the ruins of the human-like cry of the jackal.' And in Bengal there began at the time, and continued till the late nineteenth century, a very strong current of Hindu revivalism, something which was in the dominant Bengali literary production of the period. It was in this milieu, both its general and particular aspects, and against this dominant literary production with its biases, that from the margin Kaikobad wrote his poetry. And asserted his identity. And though the good professor's recitation of historical dates was informative enough, what he really should have done was evoke this milieu, this congruence of physical and intellectual histories.

And which maybe would have woken up the gentleman dozing beside me, his fingers clicking away.

The second part of the paper dealt with Kaikobad the poet--his works, his poetic temperament, quotations from his epic poems, all more or less interpreted as his struggle against the biased 'Hindu' production of Bengali literary works. Which is true--and while I had been coming across it in my halting reading of Bankim, I was startled to hear Ishwar Gupta refer to Muslims as 'jobon' or 'neray' (shaven head), his:

*Morji tera kaaje bhera
Nera matha joto
Noradhom neech nai neraday moto.*

And that about the Sepoy Revolt he had written:

*Chirokai hoi jeno British air joy
British er rajolokhii sthir jeno hoi*

Hmmmm, I thought

And there were more of them, from the likes of Rangal Bandhopadhyay, Hemchandra Bandhopadhyay and Nabinchandra Sen, all contemporaries of Kaikobad. And which is why it is easy to see why Kaikobad himself could write:

*Du charti Musalman uccha pod ai achay,
Golam'er mero ferey Congress'ir pachay...*

But this is not the whole story, which was the unfortunate impression left at the end of the reading. It is manifestly easy enough to compile such a list of quotations from the 'Hindu' Bengali authors and their literary products of the time, and no doubt to the Muslims who read them they stung like whiplashes, and still do, since by today's revised standards these lines are blatantly offensive--a thing of insults and slights, and more notably, absences, as when even in the 1967 edition of Calcutta University published *The History of Bengal 1757-1905* edited by Narendra Sen, in the chapter entitled 'Bengali Literature in the 19th Century' written by the redoubtable Dr Amal Tripathi, there is not one mention, not even a ghost of a whisper, of Muslim authors. And yet, it is a mistake on our part to read them in isolation, shorn of their proper context. Those writings were a product of the Hindu revivalism of the nineteenth century, something which was a more complex and much deeper phenomenon than perhaps is commonly realized, with strong emotional nationalist underpinnings. Perhaps in the good professor's defense it should be said that a general Bangla Academy seminar may not provide the requisite occasion, audience or venue for such in-depth exercises. But, if not Bangla Academy, who then? In any case, it felt improper for those authors to be quoted absent the above historical-analytical framework, because otherwise it just becomes a bunch of Muslims sitting in a dark room feeding off the emotion generated by such anti-Muslim lines.

And that the truth is more complex than a black-and-white recitation was hinted at in the paper itself, but not developed. That Kaikobad's model was Nabinchandra Sen, the fact that Kaikobad the Muslim found inspiration in a poetry that unabashedly reflected the Romantic world view of the orthodox Hindu. And then Kaikobad himself wrote lines like

*Aisho bhai Hindu, aisho Musalman
Aamra du bhai Bharat air shontan...*

I had a previous appointment, and so when the reading was finished, I got up to leave. But sat down again when a young man got up and recited a couple of poems of Kaikobad, one on azan and the other on Bangla language--whose meters and metaphors were that of traditional Bengali poetry and did not seem to represent any radical break with previous such forms. I finally left just as the principal discussant, a lady teacher from outside Dhaka came to the lectern--my appointment left me with no choice. Outside, in search of a copy of the paper, I met Jalal Ahmed, assistant director of the Academy, who kindly Xeroxed me a copy. And to whom right now in this piece I'm again going to say thanks. I went down the steps and out into the grounds, into the blinding sunshine, and then grinning to myself, no doubt to the consternation of observing eyes, tried to mimick an ancient Orientalist's mild-mannered stoop and shuffle over to the sales office situated at the far corner. I went through the turnstile, bought Volume I of the *Kaikobad Rachanabali* in order to read Abdul Mannan Syed's introduction in peace at home, then walked out of the gates, hailed a rickshaw, and jiggled and jiggled over broken roads thinking of Muslim Bengali poets, the ones who in the now distant past, by dreaming their dream and writing their poems, in a way started us on the road to Bangladesh, to a separate, independent homeland for Bengali Muslims.

Not a bad way to spend a Wednesday morning! Not at all!

Twenty Years After Breaking Up