SHORT STORY

The Story That Got Away

SHAHADUZZAMAN (Abridged and translated by Sonia Amin)

'Honourable One, on which side are you? War or peace? 'Son, I favour peace - because during peacetime a son digs his father's grave; and during war a father digs his son's.'

I chose the above dialogue between Heraclitus and his disciple as the opening of my story. It fitted well with the plot of tale I wanted to write: a tale about Bangladesh's war of liberation. But I had to put down my pen several times while writing it, torn by doubts. Wasn't it somewhat risky, this attempt to write a story on the liberation war, the subject of so much discourse, after such a long time? But then undaunted, I plunged ahead, fully aware of my limitations as a writer, and of my experience and creative imagination. My plan for writing the story was to base its plot on the real-life experience of a freedom fighter. Once I could fill in the outlines, I felt that it would make for a

The scene of war was to be a remote, mountainous area of Bangladesh where a small band of Mukti Bahini guerrillas had taken shelter after a furious firefight. They had been forced to abandon operations after running out of ammunition. Having lost their way, they found themselves marooned in a valley at the end of a deep forest. To their utter dismay, they have discovered that the only point of escape from the valley was being guarded by a small camp of Pakistani

The hours lengthened into midnight. It began to rain heavily. Their empty stenguns lay by their sides as the listless warriors gazed into the darkness. Slowly they woke up to the danger of their situation, that the first light of dawn would mean capture by the Pakistani soldiers. What was to be done? Each one silently realized that there was only one way out of the predicament. There was a single bomb left-- of a kind that destroyed its target and thrower at the same time (whose particulars I was going to research later). But who among them would volunteer for this suicide attack to save his compatriots?

At this point in the story I had thought of providing a life sketch of each of the freedom fighters. Their thoughts on life and death, inner conflicts, and all that. There would be an attempt to present the ethos. culture and family relations of our rich, complex society. The description would dwell on the night, the dense jungle, the foreboding hills, the unceasing rain. On the approaching dawn and the subdued excitement among the small group.

Of course, interspersed in all these, the focus would be on one particular youth-- an idealistic newcomer who was always in the forefront of every operation. Word had it that he looked forward to a glorious death in battle. But he was worried that such glory was going to elude him. When asked, he claimed to be an inconsequential member of a large family of eight children, and felt that this war was the greatest event that would ever happen to him.

On the night the story unfolds, the youth would be face to face with himself for the last time. The bomb would appear as a means of noble sacrifice to him. Slowly his hand would reach out for it. He would pick it up and run towards the Pakistani army camp. A few unbearable, hushed moments. Then the sound of an explosion in the distance... and the freedom fighters would heave sighs of relief. On their way out they would bear the corpse of their brave comrade on their shoulders.

At the end of the story the relevance of the quotation from Heraclitus would become clear. The youth's father would appear to dig his son's grave. His cries would rend the air: 'He deceived you all. He was my only child.

I told myself, when filled out, this thin frame would yield a fine story, replete with the grandeur, pathos and romance of the liberation war. It would contain elements of tension between the individual and society, and most important of all, it would depict the sacrifices made by individuals in the War. The presence of the bereaved father on the scene would add the right note of drama. My mind filled with satisfaction at the prospect. I jotted down the main points in a notebook. However, when a few days later I sat down to write it I felt a strange unease. The initial excitement gave way to doubts: the theme seemed childish and naïve; the deception behind the youth's being an only child was unconvincing; besides, the surprise conclusion was, to my mind, an overused literary device. No, this was not a plot worth pursuing. I felt a twinge of embarrassment for having dreamt up such a clichéd plot in the first place! Abandoning this story, I started thinking afresh.

This time, I said to myself, the emphasis would not be on the plot. There would only be a hint of a story line--just enough to give it a form. I would resist the temptation of spinning a good yarn and



instead try something new by eschewing conventional narrative forms. The narrative would be fragmented, non-linear, the language different. Lyrical, lazy prose would be avoided. It would have to be more stern, somber and dispassionate, punctuated by symbolism. I focused my thoughts on a different kind of freedom fighter. He would be somebody whose life before, during and after the war, had undergone several evolutions. The theme of the war could be gradually depicted through the experiences of this character. I would take the reader into the character's stream of consciousness, would fashion an antinarrative. So I jotted down points again with the aim of structuring these into a proper story.

First, a passionate, patriotic, educated young man. He plunges into the war with utmost zeal. But there was to be a major difference between this young man and the brave warrior of the previous story. Unlike the former, he has no desire to die. Indeed he wants to liberate his country and enjoy every drop of freedom. He thinks 'freedom' would transform his county into a magical place.

Second, the country has gained independence. Days pass, but things are not as he had hoped they would be. He sees his dreams die one by one. He is no longer carefree, brave. He starts at the slightest noise, lives in fear.

Third, he creates a commotion one day. Devotees are returning home after prayers from the mosque. They toss coins into the beggars' bowls while passing them by. The young man, who is watching the scene in silence from afar, suddenly lunges forward and hurls the alms bowls into the street. On regaining composure, he tells everyone that the sound of the coins hitting the bowls induced flashbacks of gunfire. After this, driven by an unknown rage, he assaults pedestrians on the road, pelts cars with stones. At one point the ex-freedom fighter is transformed into a raving lunatic

Four, he is committed to an asylum and kept in chains while being treated. After a variety of painful treatment, his sanity is restored and he returns to the real world.

Five, he now is a completely different person -- confident and

composed. No longer a dreamer, but a successful businessman. Year's later, one night he is seen getting into a red Skoda in front of a five-star hotel in a drunken state

I thought this would be my window to the days of the liberation war and its aftermath. The trajectory of the young man's life was sure to evoke sympathy, and even sorrow. Indeed, I would invest this character with tragic stature. And there would be new linguistic and stylistic touches in the narrative, experiments with modern psychological forms in literature. I was quite pleased with myself for a few days.

However this rosy mood began to fade as I began to feel the stirring of the dark panther of negation within me. It started to maul at all my well-thought 'positives'. I began to feel that the self-conscious and erudite style contemplated would look contrived, lack spontaneity and honesty. I also had second thoughts about the protagonist himself. Would not his transformations appear melodramatic, to say the least? Could the simple truths of the liberation war be illuminated through him? Moreover, wouldn't my representations by constrained by my own class character? And would I be able to reach the height of tragedy envisaged? Was sorrow a necessary function of the death of some thoughtless dreams? No, there was no tragic grandeur here. I felt quite helpless, but did not abandon the project. I began to contemplate the matter night and day, till one day I had a dream

I dreamt that a house, where I (now transformed into a young man) had taken shelter during the war, was surrounded by Pakistani soldiers. The air was rend by horrible screams. We were being marched out of the house by gun-wielding Pakistani soldiers. Before we could gather our thoughts, they began to shoot us and we fell onto the ground one by one. I lost consciousness. Regaining my senses after a long while, I saw that I was buried under a heap of corpses. There was blood everywhere. By a quirk of fate, I had been spared, I was alive. I stood up from the pile of corpses and began to run for my life. The Pakistani soldiers, standing at a little distance, saw me. One of them shouted 'Murda bhag jata hai!' They started shooting at me, but I was running as fast as the wind. Soon the sound of the firing

Maniruzzaman(6), his son, his

nephew and another gentleman

tussling desperately with the sol-

diers, who were dragging them

exclaimed to me: 'Didi, do you

see how they are pulling at our

This was my first meeting with

her. They had just moved in into

the flat on the second floor on

your husband, otherwise they

might kill him. Just now they've

March 5th. I said: 'Give them

away. Mrs Maniruzzaman

menfolk!

ceased, and after running a great distance I reached a lonely spot. My throat was parched. I kept on running. And then came upon a man. 'Please, can you give me some water to drink?' I panted. 'My family

has been killed by Pak soldiers. They surrounded the village. A tremendous bloodbath.

The man looked at me blankly. He kept on walking in the direction he was going. Then he turned towards me, 'Why shouldn't there be bloodshed? Can't you see the foetus of freedom?' I started running again. I came upon another stranger. Cupping my palms in supplication I entreated, 'Please sir, give me some water to drink. I have been on the run for a long time. A fearful war is taking place on the other

But strangely enough, he too uttered a few words as he kept on walking: 'War? What war? This is a fight between two dogs.'

By now I was beside myself with thirst. My ribs were heaving with pain. After going a bit further I came upon a young girl in a lonely village. She was naked except for a fishing net, her eyes vacant with hunger. I begged her for some water. 'Where will I find water? Can you trap water in a fishing net?' she replied. And then the girl froze into a still life picture

I kept running, my thirst now unbearable, till I spotted a lovely lake beside a double-storied house. I rushed to the inviting water, but on reaching it saw that it was really blood. A stream of blood came from the house, crimson drops trickling down into the lake. Who was in that house, from whence came the blood?

Water! Where could I find water? Looking around I saw in the distance a group of men digging a canal. Surely there was water there. I ran towards it, but stopped with a shudder when I saw that the river was full of huge crocodiles gaping at me with open jaws. I fled

By this time I was beginning to feel very tired in the dream, trying in vain to seek shelter and a way to quench my raging thirst. But I realized that I would not wake till the thirst had been quenched. But where would I find water? That was the question plaguing my thoughts.

Then I saw a group of men coming towards me, this time with a banner in their hands. A banner bearing a crescent and star. As I tried to get a better view, suddenly everything began to grow dark. Black spilled on to the canvas of the dream. After a long while the sound of soldiers marching past reached my ears. Whose footsteps were these? Pakistanis? Bangalis? Were they still looking for me?

And then the images dissolved into a procession of people shouting slogans in a protest march. I whispered hoarsely 'Brothers, sisters. I want water.

They echoed back, 'We want the downfall of the tyrant.' A truck appeared from nowhere and ran over the people in the procession, crushing them under its wheels. The procession broke up and men started to flee in all directions. I climbed on top of a wall and found myself in a splendid room where a beautiful woman reclined on the carpet watching the erotic gyrations of a foreign-looking dancer on the small screen. I went up to her and humbly drew her attention to my bleeding body. 'Madam, there is a terrible war raging outside, and I have been running for hours. Can you give me some water to drink?'

She clapped her hands and cried out with joy: 'War? O what fun! Where?' And she rushed to the window. From behind her I saw that the procession outside had re-formed. Some were shouting joyously 'Downfall,' while others were burning an effigy of the head of state. But the effigy was that of a Bangali! I looked around the room. What country was this? I looked outside. Which time period was this?

I walked out on to the street. The procession had now dissolved and individuals were walking away toward the horizon, which was lit by a faint glow. I could not tell whether the light was heralding night or

Finally, I woke up and felt my throat was dry. I drank my fill from a cool pitcher. I felt exhausted, as though I had travelled many decades through time, through history. But in my dream the liberation war had receded from timelessness to present-day events, had ended in unresolved questions and doubts, in twilight. It had not been able to transcend the vagaries of history. I thought, what kind of story could

So I decided that my story on the liberation war would have to wait

Shahaduzzaman is a Bangladeshi writer. The above has been translated from his collection of short stories, Koyekti Bihobol Golpo. Sonia Amin teaches history at Dhaka University

Murder in the Teachers' Quarters

(Excernt from Ekatorrer Smriti by Basanti Guhathakurta. Translated by Meghna Guhathakurata)

I don't know how long I had been asleep, but around twelvethirty - one o'clock we awoke to the sound of gunfire. 'Does this mean that the war has started?' I asked my husband(1). He replied noncommittally: 'Oh, that's nothing sounds like the boys practicing.'(2) Gradually the sounds drew near, very near. I then brought Dola(3)) into our bedroom, onto my bed. I switched off the light in her room. leaving only the green bed light on. A little later there were flashes of light, accompanied by terrifying sounds. And what sounds! Our house started to shake as if in an earthquake, with the windowpanes rattling. Calling out to Swarna(4) to join us. I stripped off the bedsheet and laid it under the bed, where the three of us huddled together with our heads down. Swarna did not heed my call. 'If I have to die, I'll die in my own room,' she said. We called out to Gopal(5) too, but nobody came. Dola's father told her, 'Listen Dola, the war has begun! During wartime this is the way one lives in trenches. Eating, sleeping, defecating...everything done in the same place. What we were hearing was no ordinary gunfire. It sounded very heavy. The skies over Jagannath Hall lit up from time to time and the hall itself seemed to be rent apart by the sound of heavy machine-gun fire. What was missing were human sounds. How could there be any, when every other sound, of human beings, of birds, was being drowned out by the sounds of guns. From time to

time one could hear cows lowing. They were almost certainly the cows owned by the gardeners of Jagannath Hall, calling out in helpless terror. And the crows - the rulers of our neighborhood's trees - where on earth had they flown to? I fidgeted underneath the bed, wanting to get up and look outside. but both father and daughter held me back. As soon as the gunfire subsided a bit, on hearing a hissing snake-like sound I leapt up. This time they could not restrain me. In an instant I was at the window that faced the outer gate, drawing aside the curtains just enough for me to peep out. My husband, pulling me back by my hands, said: 'Keep your head

down, you'll get shot!' I saw a convoy of army jeeps advancing slowly from the direction of Rokeya Hall and coming to a stop in front of the barricade at the crossroad. An officer got down and with a single pull of his hand tore off the chain around our gate. Immediately afterwards columns of soldiers swarmed in and went up to all the floors of Building Number 34. And started to violently kick at all four doors of the two flats on each floor. What a terrifying sound! The ears were deafened by the sounds of bullets and gunfire! In the meantime an officer smashed the window of my daughter's bedroom, ripped open the netting with his bayonet, drew aside the curtain and looked inside. Both the green bed light as well as the light in the south corner of the garden were on - no room in the house was therefore completely dark. Thus, though our heads were under the bed, our feet were showing. No sooner did he spot

(1) Dr. Jyotirmoy Guhathakurata was Professor of English at Dhaka University and provost of Jagannath Hall at the time of his murder.

(3) Nickname of Dr. Guhathakurata's daughter Meghna Guhathakurata, the translator of this article. She teaches international politics at

the feet than he rushed to enter my garden from the west. All of this took place in a matter of moments. I took my husband's punjabi from the clothes rack and handed it to him: 'They have come to arrest you, get ready.' Both of understood that they had come to get him. He said: 'Take Dola into the drawing room and lay her down.' Gopal, from his room above the garage, was signaling to us not to open the door. But I had no choice, since Dola, clutching a pillow to her chest, had gone to the drawing room only to find that its door was being hammered on too. She ran to the verandah. In the meantime, the officer again with a single pull wrenched open the kitchen door, roughly shoved Swarna out into the garden and entered the verandah. I stepped forward. He asked in Urdu: 'Is the professor here?' No use lying to him, I thought. 'Yes,' I replied. He said. 'I have to take him away.' I caught hold of the officer's hand and asked. 'Bhai. where are you going to take him?' He avoided looking at me and instead with his eyes downcast on the floor, stepped forward along the verandah, slowly spinning out the words: 'We'll iust take him.' I followed him. walking behind as if it was his house. I said: 'Now that you are inside the house, why are they still trying to break down the front doors?' He rang out an order, shouting out a name: 'I am here, Yaqub! Stop breaking the door!' Immediately the kicking and

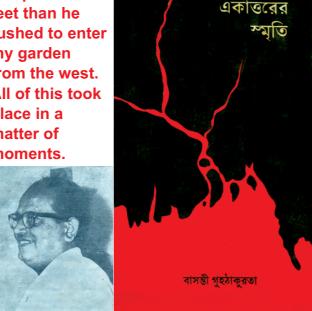
banging stopped. Moving towards my bedroom, he asked: 'Are there any young people here?' I replied,'I have only one daughter.' 'All right, the girl has nothing to fear.' I entered the bedroom to see that Jyotirmoy standing with the punjabi still in his hand. The officer caught hold of his left hand. I pulled the punjabi over Jyotirmoy's head and said: 'They have come to arrest you. The officer asked him, 'Are

you the professor?" My husband replied evenly:

Yes. 'We have to take you,' the offi-

cer said in Urdu. Again, in a measured tone

No sooner did he spot the feet than he rushed to enter my garden from the west. All of this took place in a matter of moments.



Jyotirmoy asked: 'Why?' But without any further ado, the officer grabbed hold of Jyotirmoy's hand and pulled him straight through the verandah and out into the back garden. I grabbed a pair of my husband's sandals and ran after them but they were gone by then. When I returned to the house I saw, through the netting on the front door, Mrs. Maniruzzaman standing on the stairs above me, while in the landing below Dr.

taken my husband to the cantonment.' Right then, two shots were fired outside. My daughter held her hands to her ears. The officer came back to our flat and began to break the lock on the door to the dining room. It was a Godrej lock, which I opened for him. Then he methodically searched the three bathrooms, one after the other. Entering Dola's bathroom, he said: 'Where is Mujibur Rahman?' Dola replied: 'We don't know

him.' In response he barked at her so harshly that my daughter instantly clutched at me. Then they went out again through the garden.

When I was in our verandah

with my daughter, about eight shots rang out in our stair landing. I rushed to the door netting in time to see the soldiers marching away. Dr. Maniruzzaman was lying next to the front door of my drawing room while the other three were lying in a heap near the door of 34-B, groaning. Blood was flowing everywhere. Mrs. Maniruzzaman cried out: 'Look at what happened, didi, you said they wouldn't kill, but see what they have done!' What could I possibly say to her then? They were all crying for water. Dr.

Maniruzzaman was moaning. Mrs. Zaman gave them water. By this time the barricade at the crossroad had been cleared and the military convoy consisting of eleven trucks and ieeps sped towards the Central Shahid Minar. How much brutality had they inflicted within such a short time! After the convoy left, Swarna and Gopal came out from their rooms and asked: 'Didimoni, where is dadababu?' I answered: 'They arrested him and took him away. Here, you look after Dola.' I felt certain that he had been in the convoy's first vehicle. When I returned to the netted doorway, Mrs Maniruzzaman pleaded with me: 'Didi, please help me take my husband to the hospital!' I replied: 'But can't you hear the vans' loudspeakers saying that there is a curfew on.' I rushed back to my daughter. Then Mrs. Maniruzzaman called out: 'Didi! They've shot your husband and left him outside! I just gave him a drink of water. He seems to be all right. He's talking. If you take him to the hospital he might live.' Dola exclaimed: 'Ma. I heard Father call out my name.

Mother, daughter, and Swarna

immediately ran down the gar-

den path. Near the front gate, we saw Jyotirmoy lying on his back on the grass by the side of the building. On seeing us he said in a grave voice: 'Didn't you hear me calling you?' Dola answered that she had. 'They have shot me in the neck on the right side.' he said. 'I am now paralysed from the waist downwards. You'll

have to carry me inside.' Till now I had been letting out cries of despair. Upon hearing his words my head reeled. He had once told me, 'If ever I am paralysed, be sure to shoot me. My heart was in my mouth: Jvotirmov's father had also suffered paralysis and had died just before his Matriculation exam. It was a most painful memory for him. I thought of it now. Oh God, now the very opposite had happened: He had been shot first and paralysed second. But listening to him one would think that he had merely had a regular accident. The three of us tried to lift him off the ground but couldn't. Swarna went and got Gopal. The four of us with a lot of effort somehow managed to bring him to the bottom of the staircase leading to our front door. There was blood everywhere. My feet kept slipping on Dr. Maniruzaman's fresh warm blood. What can I say, the scene was indescribable. But it was not a time for reflection. Neither of

our doors could be pried open properly. With difficulty, we laid his bloodied body on the roped cot near the door to the verandah. I told Gopal to go and hide by the pond. He went out at a run through the gap between our kitchen and the garage to the pond behind. Then the three of us pushed the cot the entire length of our verandah to our bedroom door. Army vehicles were patrolling the area constantly, and the person lying on the cot could easily be seen by those inside the vehicles. So again, with much effort, catching hold of the mattress, we pulled it down to the floor, where the

our feet sticking out from under the bed. Jyotirmoy asked, 'Swarna, could I have a cup of tea?' The tea had already been prepared, had been kept in a flask. Swarna poured it out. Sipping the tea he told us. 'They made me face the hall (to the west) and asked my name and religion. As soon as I told them my name and religion, they shot me in the neck and I fell down paralysed.' He then asked Swarna to fold his legs and hold his knees together. But as soon as Swarna attempted to do so, both knees fell limply to each side. The nerves had been severed. He then instructed her. 'Light a hurricane lamp and apply heat to my legs.' Swarna did so accordingly. Dola started to cry and said, 'Ma, please call my principal at Holy Cross school, Sister Marian and ask her to send an ambulance. We'll take him to Holy Family.' But, oh heavens, as soon as the army had taken him away I had rushed to the phone to try and reach Birbal, the guard at my school. But the phone line had been cut. I now tried to staunch his bleeding with cotton wool. My husband said, 'Basanti, climb over the wall to the Nurses' Quarters and get two nurses. 'How is that possible! The

army men had originally seen

army is patrolling the streets. There's a curfew.' And besides, what strength did I have left in me? If something befell me what would happen to Dola? I felt helpless. I did not even have the courage to run across the road!

While we were preoccupied inside, out on the stairs Mrs. Maniruzaman, her daughter and her sister were frantically tending to their four family members. Within ten minutes Dr. Zaman died, before everyone else. The other two kept groaning till they, too. fell silent.

Postscript: Dr. Jyotirmoy Guhathakurata died on the morning of the 30th at Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

Dhaka University. (4) Swarna, a domestic help who had been with the family for 20 years (5) Gopal was the driver.

(2) He meant the students then practicing civil disobedience drills.

(6) Dr. Maniruzzaman was Head of Statistics, Dhaka University.