



AFSAN CHOWDHURY

The poet was a product of history's need for a public voice

In the end the people claimed him. Instead of waiting for the State to officially honour him, the people chose on their own to celebrate their poet who had given life to their collective imaginations. Carried on the shoulders of his admirers rather than the governmental representatives, he was buried beside his mother's grave. It was a commonplace, humble and deeply affectionate residence to have taken up for eternity.

In his death, he came closest to the people who loved him for making their simple thoughts extraordinary through the magic chemistry of poetry. In life, and more so in death, he was their poet; for those who had read him as well as for those who chose simply to admire him. There may be greater poets but few so close to an entire nation's identity. It's in this description that Shamsur Rahman joins the company of immortals.

Shamsur Rahman belonged to the poets who came to the forefront in the 1950s, triggered by the *Bhasha Andolon* of 1952. Most of them were bound between the covers of possibly the most significant literary anthology of the Bengali people to commemorate the battle of 21st February 1952—, published the following year. Edited by his school friend and poet Hasan Hafizur Rahman, this class of '52 contributed their verses, written with raised fists signaling the birth of a new history.

Shamsur Rahman, Alauddin Al-Azad, Obaidullah Khan, and many others were there. Not very many times has politics been served by a greater set of cultural and literary luminaries.

"First song before the second death"

As a new flag was being waved within rebellious Bengali souls chafing under Pakistan rule, many turned to political activism but Shamsur Rahman kept his distance. He was not removed from politics but neither was he a political organizer as many other writers were. He was primarily a poet in whom politics, love and the

Shamsur Rahman : Poet, poetry and the people

awakening of an existential consciousness lived together. In his first collection of poems, *"Prothom Gaan Ditto Mittur Agey" (First Song Before the Second Death)* he explored themes of love and death mixing Greek and Indian myths with equal ease. Western imagery and Modernist ideas are deeply embedded in him. Telemechus and Odyssey became recurring motifs, including his 1970 collection, *"Niraloke Dibborath"*, his most formal set of poems.

Shamsur Rahman was both urban and urbane, not apologetic about his love for city lights. He was anchored in his land but not in the village. He wrote about the fading older parts of Dhaka and its bustling energy, and steered clear of the rustic images that illuminate and glorify rural Bengal in the poems of Al-Mahmud, Obaidullah Khan and others.

It helped him reach hitherto unscaled heights in Bangladesh poetry as provincial Dhakamirroring the poet's work grew into a ramshackle, half-crazed city. In his youth the sound of horse hooves were louder than the horns of motorcars but that soon gave way to a messy urban din. He captured this transition, the product of deliberate state investment to generate a middle class between 1958 and 1968, with an élan and honesty that became his most arresting set of poems.

In his second poetry collection, *"Roudro Korotitey"*, Shamsur Rahman may well have peaked. Neither the poet himself nor his contemporaries may have ever matched the genius glowing in that slim volume. Here he dwelt on the angst of a "meaningless life" with as much ease as he mocked dictators—*"Icchey tar icchey"*—or described the pleasures of domesticity. In a long poem titled *"Dukkho"* he described "sadness" through a series of sequenced images. He found "sadness" in rolled trousers to newspaper headlines to a child's book of rhymes and pornography and so on, finding eloquence in everyday

imageries. This style was personal and populist at once, and connected him to readers easily. This style, his 'signature' voice, was to be his ever after, which, along with his "Swadhinata" poems made him the public poet after 1971.

The later poems may not be his best but were the most adored by a people who identified with the clear and robust voice speaking about their own preoccupations.

"What are you searching here so desperately, Shamsur Rahman?"

The private poet and his personal poems, often much better crafted, were therefore eclipsed and have suffered from a degree of obscurity. A good example is the long-ago-published (a pre-1970 collection titled *"Biddhosto Nilima" - The Shattered Sky*) where a collection of 14-liners explored the private universe of this now most public of poets. In its introduction he wrote, addressing himself, "What are you searching here so desperately Shamsur Rahman?/ saying this someone departs into the deserted garden./ I scream 'please answer me' but there is only the silence of the vanished/ The blue sky that I have loved all my life/ is swiftly crumbling and falling apart/ like the rotting flesh of a festering wound."

The above lines were written by a poet almost unknown to his various readers. Here his personal agony rules over other emotions and obligations and he can step back to deal with his personal demons. In this collection he takes on the many voices of his private self, such as that of a pilot who wants to fly away from a terra firma he abhors. Another is titled "autobiographical" where he confesses to his incurable loneliness.

There are a host of memories here, bringing the perennial lamp post lighter, the dying jockey and such other souls into his poems. They are brothers of his long lost, poetically famous creation "Bacchu", the one person who can move him from "apni" to "tumi" to "tui" through a hierarchy of intimacy like no one else can. They are denizens of a beloved and lost past who emerge like a chorus of actors talking about love, fate and tragedy, his own and that of his world. Such poems don't lend cheer to an angry procession but

speak of the poet and his internality, the essential intimacy between himself and his poetry. Around this time he also wrote *"Asader Shirt"* or *"Safed Punjabi"* (on Maulana Bhashani) and this was the poet's other self. It was more noticed, read and defined him to a public that needed such a poet at that fateful moment of their history. It seems the definitive Shamsur Rahman was already being constructed by his readers and perhaps even the poet was not in control of this process. History was dictating his literary persona.

Something was lost even as something was gained in this transaction. One wonders how the poet felt about this.

The poet of Swadhinata and his second birth

1971 was the most momentous year of our lives and even more so in the case of Shamsur Rahman, who spent that particular year of exile in his own land. The poem *"Swadhinata Tumi"* became the literary anthem of an entire, occupied, and subsequently liberated, people. It competed with, and overwhelmed, all other poems that Bangladeshis recite to become the most treasured and popular piece of literature of the majority of Bengalis.

If its literary ancestor was his private poem *"Dukkho"*—elegiac, romantic, ironic—*"Swadhinata"* was written with broader strokes, spontaneous and direct. It also heralded the second or *ditto* Shamsur Rahman, who would set aside literary explorations and became the voice of a populace imprisoned in their own land.

In this second birth after 1971, the poet was identified more with gatherings and discussions where rebellions were declared more than *addas* where literature was spawned. Of his contemporaries, many were more political and some were even activists, but they would ultimately become part of the crowd while Shamsur Rahman represented it. If he voiced the middle class angst of the individual when he began his journey as a poet, he ended up as the poet who represented the collective self of his people. What he said mattered because that's what everyone wanted to say.

No litterateur ever got so close to the crowd and yet the poet kept a distance of sorts. During the anti-Ershad movement he peaked in this persona and become the literary lion, and though many voices joined in it was his voice that exemplified the collective roar. Where the crowd ended and the poet began became blurred. The poems became the crowd.

His private and personal thoughts receded as his public identity became almost completely dominating. He was the spirit of opposition to autocracy, Islamic fundamentalism, corruption, power politics and all the other ills that have befallen the populace. He too was helpless in many ways but he fought back and the attack by a group of fanatics on him became a symbolic attack on a people. No politician can claim this representation but Shamsur Rahman could because he was the embodiment of something both strange and sublime. He could usually describe what people felt better than they could. In the end he became the people, moving from representation to personification.

A very public death, the final hurrah

In his final days, the relentless media light on him, which denied him all privacy from the day he was taken to the hospital, was inevitable. The most intimate agonies of the poet and his family were beamed to millions hooked to cable TV. Shamsur Rahman was a public poet and now he could not have the luxury of a private death. The public that had sought him out now claimed him fully and the millions who grieved for him claimed that right too. He triumphed completely in death and became part of those who read him and also those who remember him without knowing his poems. He had gone beyond the world of poets and into the crowd. At his funeral, people came from all strata of life and every corner of the land to participate in this most genuine of mourning rituals and funeral in our history, saluting their own poet, their own struggle, their own song.

Many years ago he had written, addressing the powerful as a poet of the denied: "I shall not know to whom this skull belongs/ whether to a clown or a king and it doesn't matter/ but I shall know that I will remain the eternal witness of your cowardice." (*Roudro Korotitey*).

He had not only become the trusted witness of his time but its chorused voice of protest as well.

Shamsur Rahman lies in peace, triumphant.

Afsan Chowdhury writes for various South Asian newspapers and magazines.

Shamsur Rahman: The rains he brought, the storms he caused

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

What struck you at the outset about Shamsur Rahman was his humility. But, then, all poets are supposed to be humble. Not all of them are anyway. But in Shamsur Rahman humility, the principle that greatness was a point where men let go of their ego and of their pretensions, worked rather well. He was every inch a decent man, like so many other decent men we have known, in this country as well as outside it. In South Africa, Nelson Mandela's advisers have regularly had a hard time trying to convince him that he does not have to stand up every time a visitor drops by. They have failed to stop him from doing that, which is why there remains an abundance of decency in him.

Much the same was true of Shamsur Rahman. In his dealings with people, men and women he did not know and yet who knew him well through his poetry, he was every inch an emblem of politeness. When I met him, one on one, for the first time at the Bangladesh Festival in London in July 1999, he swiftly put me at ease. On my way to welcome him at Heathrow, where he was arriving with Syed Shamsul Haque and Nirmalendu Goon as part of a team to speak for his country's arts and culture in what was to

be a month-long festival, I was not sure if I could demonstrate the kind of etiquette he expected from people like me. But once we met, it was a different story altogether. He was soft-spoken. He had a childlike smile playing on his lips. It was an attitude that opened the floodgates of greater respect for the poet in me.

And respect, layer upon layer of it, is what Shamsur Rahman was the recipient of in his lifetime. In death, that respect has truly led to the creation of a legend and will certainly endure. And yet it remains my conviction that in the last few decades, Shamsur Rahman found himself transformed into a legend not because he wrote poetry but because he showed us all that poetry could turn itself into a vehicle for the expression of social aspirations. He did not go to war in 1971. And yet he waged his own war against the enemy, nestled in the Narsingdi village his ancestors have sprung from. In the poem *Shwadinota*, he sang the song a whole nation could sing along with him. And do not forget that in *Asader Shirt*, he simply took us by the hand into what would soon become a macrocosm of struggle for us. It would be fool-hardy trying to place poets divided by generations on a par. Every poet inhabits his own time and space, and so it has been historically with all of Bengal's

poets. Despite such obvious notions of poetry and the place of poets in a historical landscape, there are the moments when we try to link the generations, one to the other. It is from such a perspective that Shamsur Rahman becomes part of a continuity of tradition among Bengalis. If Rabinranath Tagore was, and is, the face of Bengal to the world beyond the frontiers of what is today a divided Bengal; if Nazrul remains the embodiment of rebelliousness in the Bengali, Shamsur Rahman serves as the torch-bearer of a new, modern generation of poets in this country.

In Shamsur Rahman assisted a citizen deeply attached to social causes. Not for him was poetry to be recited in the arcadia of the imagination. It needed to be linked to larger causes, to literature flowing in tune with politics. He thus carried forward a movement that was, in his time, symbolized by Begum Sufia Kamal and Jahanara Imam. In Bangladesh, he reasoned, poetry could serve as a necessary and effective instrument for the propagation of secular philosophy. Indeed, poetry had to be secular. If it was not, it would not be poetry at all. Rahman's principled notions of life were temptation enough for villainous men to go after him but he was not one to be deterred by threats.

The end of Shamsur Rahman is a deepening of intellectual vacuum in this land. In these past many years we have observed Ahmed Sharif, Shaukat Osman, Humayun Azad, Araj Ali Matobbor and Syed Najmuddin Hashim transit to the world beyond the banality of our world. Years ago the young Abul Hasan succumbed to mortality. Taslima Nasreen stays away from a country that has all the time for knaves and crooks but none at all for her. And Daud Haider does not come home.

Yet poetry continues to power the engine of our collective imagination. To what extent poetry burnishes our politics and keeps the wolves at bay comes through the outpouring of grief and tribute we showered on Shamsur Rahman when he died last week. In his last few days on earth, he wondered if rains and storms would mar the quality of his dying. Now that he is dead, we recall as we read his poetry all over again the musicality of rain he brought into our lives, the storms he caused to rise in our souls.

The poet is dead. Poetry lives.

Syed Badrul Ahsan writes fiction and poetry and earns a living as a journalist

Remembering Shamsur Rahman

Kaiser Haq

The first time I saw Shamsur Rahman must have been on TV: televised poetry readings were a lot commoner in the sixties than today. The first time I actually met him was certainly in the late sixties at the Gopibagh flat shared by the poet Shaheed Quaderi and his elder brother. But it wasn't till after Bangladesh became independent that we had an exchange that might be called a conversation. Soft-spoken and hesitant of speech though he had always been, his interest was roused when he heard that I had volunteered for our Liberation Army; with childlike curiosity he wanted to hear about my war experiences. Our acquaintance deepened as my modest literary activities touched his. I recall a memorable morning when he gave generously of his time to respond to a battery of questions that my colleague Dr Shawkat Husain and I had drawn up. Some of the questions were designed to tease him a little (e.g. Would you agree that you've become something like our poet laureate?) and he rose to the bait. For some reason the interview was never published and has disappeared down the chute of time. Not long afterwards I began translating Shamsur Rahman's poetry, and eventually published a book, *Selected Poems of Shamsur Rahman* (BRAC, 1985). The enterprise seemed to give our relationship a definitive shape; some of the people I met in literary

circles came to know me as Shamsur Rahman's translator...well, as one of his translators. And now, as I try to give expression to the sense of loss that so many of us now share I feel that instead of doing so directly I should rather pay him my respects by trying to translate another poem or two.

CANINE NEWS

Shamsur Rahman

Competition between dogs and men
Having lately grown inordinately fierce,
Some of us bark a good deal
More than stray dogs, charge
With snapping jaws, make a mess
About the house. When it comes
To tail-wagging and boot-licking
Dogs lag way behind—put to shame
They stop halfway and strike
Up a hymn in praise of mankind.

Dogs are famed in all creation
For devotion to the master:
To save his life they'd sacrifice
Their own without batting an eyelid.
But men are servile only as long
As the master is powerful and strong,
Eagerly lending a hand to slash away
Gold and whatnot; but when the master's
Neck is severed, the dead
Body quietly abandoned,
They sneak out the back door.

(Translated from the Bengali 'Sharomeyo Shamachar')

THE REPLY

ShamsurRahman

O loveliest of women, you
Can of course gaze at the azure
And blithely declare,
'This sky is mine.'
But the sky will not reply.

At dusk you may hold
A camellia in your hand
And say,
'Flower, you're mine.'
Yet the flower will remain silent,
Wrapped up in its own scent.

When moonlight rushes into your room
You've every right to say,
'This is my moonlight.'
But the moon will say nothing.

If however you should look into my eyes
And say, 'You're mine alone,'
How can I keep quiet?
I'll spread the word
Throughout the universe,
'I'm yours, you're mine.'

(Translated from the Bengali 'Uttar')

Kaiser Haq is Professor of English at Dhaka University. Patrak Shamabesh will shortly reissue his 'Selected Poems of Shamsur Rahman' in an enlarged edition.

Glimpses

(Translated from Shamsur Rahman's autobiography *Kaaler Dhuloy Lekha* by Khademul Islam)

I grew up in a non-literary household. Though in our home nobody ever took any interest in either music or art, in my childhood I did have brushes with Dhakaiya culture. Many a time did I hear *qawwali* and *merashin* songs. *Merashin* songs were a type of feminine songs that at one time was very much heard in old Dhaka. In reputable households, after women had confined themselves for forty days in the birthing room, festivities were arranged, and for those festivities the *merashinis* would be called, where for a fee they would sing songs to the accompaniment of drums. They performed at weddings and marriage ceremonies too. Of course no such excuses were necessary for *qawwali* sessions. Whenever the head of household wanted such a session the *qawwali* singers would arrive at the house. They would sing the whole night in front of a jam-packed audience. There would contests between two groups of *qawwali* singers. The enthusiastic, drunken audience would throw cash at the singers. And in neighbourhood after neighbourhood, on the last day of Chaitra month, there would be the feverish flying of kites. And even though I could not fly kites, yet I loved to see the kites flying in the sky...



Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.

Correction
Last week's literature page carried a caption that said Shamsur Rahman lived from 1920-1996. It should have been 1929-2006. We regret the inadvertent error.