

SHORT STORY

Before You Eat

ABEER HOQUE

It's the dawn, and electric lines are slowly stamping themselves against the whitening sky. The dogs have awakened, and the air fills with their cries. After a particularly high-pitched yelp, the *darwan* shouts indistinctly. The barks die down for a moment. The season is cooling. A woven basket outside the back door is filled with ivory heads of cauliflower, large curved squash, and pale green string beans, all still muddy from their journey from farm to city. The *darwan* starts sweeping the courtyard, setting the dogs off again. She wakes to the sound of the sweeping. It is both light and rough.

In the semi darkness, the blue flame of the pilot light is a familiar flicker. She rolls up her mat, sets the water to boil, and shuffles to the back door. The *azan* pierces the air in multiple conflicting streams of sound. She pulls her faded orange *anchal* over her thinning hair and bends to inspect the vegetables. Where is the spinach, she wonders? Madam will surely ask.

She decides she will make a special fish for tonight. Her specialty: ginger and lime sauce. The last time she made it, even Sir mentioned how good it was. She squats heavily, picks up the basket, and takes it inside.

After breakfast, she clears the table and wipes down the bamboo placemats. She wishes they would go back to the plastic placements they used when Apa and Bhaiya were babies. Those are much easier to clean as there are no bamboo slats for rice to get stuck between. Apa is gone now, married and living abroad, and Bhaiya is in university and rarely home. She misses their presence in the house. She knows Madam misses them too because sometimes, she will ask about things that she used to never care about. Like what she's feeding the turtles in the garden fountain. She feeds them meat secretly though Madam tells her only to give them carrots and cucumbers. They're not vegetarian, she's sure of it. The tiny flavoured pieces of beef are always gone when she looks. Though once she saw the dog eating something that looked like the beef. It was something else, she's sure.

But sometimes Madam pick fights about

inconsequential things. This morning, she scolded her for forgetting to put the box of cereal out for her friend who was visiting from America. Her friend wasn't even at the table yet, but Madam didn't care. She just wanted things done exactly as she asked.

Walking carefully down the staircase to the kitchen, she adjusts her sari and feels a small lump in the corner of the fabric. She unties the corner and finds fifty taka. It's the money that Madam's friend gave her yesterday for medicine. She hurries to the guest room on the ground floor. Knocking, she hears a muffled answer and enters. The woman is standing by the mirror. She has obviously just woken up and her hair is falling out of silky braids. Despite her weight, she's quite beautiful. The plumpness suits her, glosses her skin, proportions her large dark eyes to her face.

"Here is the money that you spent on my medicine yesterday," she says to her, holding out the folded brown note.

"I cannot take it." The woman's Bangla is heavily accented, simple, but clear.

"No, you must."

"It is nothing. Please, keep the money."

"No, no, take it."

"Next time you need the medicine, you

can use it then."

"I will always need the medicine."

"Then you know you can spend it. Now, please don't mention it anymore."

"Ok, thank you."

"You are welcome." The woman then touches her sari, "I love this colour."

"I didn't always wear colours. I used to wear white."

"Why is that?"

"I got married when I was very young. When I was twelve. He died only three months later. And I was pregnant too."

She blinks slowly as she remembers, her eyelids dark and deeply lined.

"I wore white for a long time. So long. People would say, why are you wearing white? So then I stopped."

"I'm glad. I like your clothes now."

"You are not married yourself?" she asks the woman despite her fear that she is overstepping her bounds. But she seems not to mind the question.

"No, I'm not. I haven't found a suitable man, I suppose."

"Not in America?"



artwork by amina

"Or here."

"You would marry a Bangladeshi?"

"Why not? But all the men my age are already married, or looking for much younger wives. So what am I to do?"

"How old are you?"

"Forty."

"I am also. No, I am thirty-nine. I will be in the coming winter."

"Really?" The woman cannot hide the note of surprise in her voice.

"I look older, don't I?"

"No! It's not that."

"It's because I got married so early and had a child."

"Where is your child now?"

"She died when she was still a little girl. I left my village then. I took a train to Dhaka. I left my family. I took nothing with me, only sticks of sugar cane to eat on the way."

"It must have been very difficult."

"It was. I lived with a family who beat me. The neighbours would hear me crying, and tell me to flee. But I was too afraid, so I stayed."

"How long did you stay?"

"Five years. Then I came here. All these years, I've worked so hard. I've lived so long with so little." Tears come to her eyes. "I am tired."

The woman touches her hand in sympathy.

"But you can still get married," she says, wiping her eyes with her *anchal*, "I got married."

"You told me," the woman nods, "You got married a long time ago."

"No, I got married four years ago, to a very handsome man."

"Oh, married again! But you have been here many years, no?"

"More than twenty years."

"And I didn't know you had a husband."

"Yes, but I do."

The late afternoon light is leaching out through the frosted windows of the kitchen, out of the world. This house, full of its comforts and amenities, feels like a bubble from which all sound has vanished. And here she is, standing in a dirty kitchen she now has to clean, exhausted and alone.

When the phone rings just then, it is as startling as a slap. It's her husband, calling from his mobile phone shop in Mymensingh. He lives there with his first wife and his children. She is his second wife, the one he married for love.

His first wife knows of her. She's known since their love began, but she doesn't say anything. Only in the beginning, when she told him that he must not leave her, that it would malign her. So he only comes to Dhaka every few months. Mymensingh is far, half a day by bus.

Her startlement at the phone call is overcome by joy and then replaced by resentment, all in the seconds it takes to answer. He doesn't notice her mood for a few minutes, and then finally asks her what the matter is. Her husband is a happy man. She knows she's lucky for having found love and laughter so late in life. He laughs all the time, sometimes even when she's upset. This time though, he doesn't laugh.

"Are you crying?" he asks in surprise.

"It's because you're not here," she says.

"I don't know what to tell you..." he says gently.

She hears something else in his voice.

Irritation? Defensiveness? She doesn't know but it only upsets her further.

"Why is it that you can call me any time?" she asks plaintively, "A time like this, like today, when I am so busy. But I can always talk. But when I call you sometimes, it is not the right time."

"If you are too busy to talk, then just tell me. I can go," he says easily.

"That's not what I meant."

"Then what did you mean?"

"All I want is for you to come. Then I'd be at peace."

"At peace? You are not at war, are you!" He is laughing again.

"I don't know," she says petulantly although she's feeling better in spite of herself.

"Anyway, if you must know, I am coming tonight. I was going to surprise you, but since you are in such a state, I am telling you now."

She is so happy she can barely breathe. Instead she finds herself admonishing him, "You cannot laugh as loud as last time. I am sure Madam and Sir heard something."

"What? Married people can't laugh?" he says teasingly.

"Yes, but they don't know about your visits. I know they would not like such a thing."

She sometimes feels worse after she talks with him on the phone. Even though the phone brings his voice so close. There is something wrong with the sound, something electric. Something that reminds her, even if she closes her eyes, that it's not real, that he's not with her. All she wants is for her beloved to be near. It's not about the jewelry, or the sweets, or the feast, or the flowers. It's just the feeling of standing beside someone you love.

Unlike her first wedding, her second wedding ceremony had not been much of an affair. She had gone to her village to see her mother, and he had come to visit two days later. The people of her village said that they had to get married, that it was not right that they stay together and not be married. So they did. She wore a pink sari, and as much adornment as her family owned. Much to her chagrin, they had not fed anyone. He had said it would be a waste of money. Perhaps when she saves up a little more money, she can still do it.

At dusk, she bathes and dresses in one

of her best saris. It is a wide print cotton with blue and yellow patterns. She carefully applies kohl around the edges of her eyes, and combs out her hair. Though not thick anymore, her hair is still long and jet black. He will be here very late, but she wants to be ready, even though she knows she has work yet to do. The bulk of it is done. She only has to clear and clean. Then she can wait for him.

Her long conversation with the woman earlier that day echoes in her head. It has been so long since she had spoken with someone other than her husband.

"It's love," she had told her. "We have love. You know when you're hungry?" She cups her right hand in a habitual motion, "You want to eat some rice."

"Yes."

"Well, before you eat, there is love. It comes even before your hunger."

"It's true," said the woman.

"Isn't that true?" she had asked again. "Absolutely."

In the night, her husband will call, as he always does, from outside the gate, even though the *darwan* knows him and would let him in. She will tell him to enter, and he will. She will meet him in darkness in the garden and take him inside, up the stairs to her room. Before she locks the door, she will ask him if he's hungry. If he is, she will bring him leftovers from dinner. If not, she will swing the heavy metal loop of the padlock into place and press it closed, so no one can come in and find them. She will switch off the electric light to save power, and light the candle. Only then sitting next to him, on the woven mat from her childhood home, will she feel her insides unwind.

The candle will eventually gutter, long after their breath turns from laughter to sleep. The white bougainvillea she picked from the garden at dusk will drape its leaves around the sides of the cracked drinking glass. The pilot light of the oven will remain lit, slowly disappearing into the light of the morning.

Abeer Hoque is a writer and Fulbright scholar living in Dhaka.

Book Reviews

reviewBookReview

On the Bangladesh Diaspora and Iskandar Mirza

FARHAD AHMED

Uneven Octagon, by Shahidul Alam; Dhaka: writers.ink; 2007; pp. 138; Tk. 350.



Professor Niaz Zaman's publishing concern *writers.ink* continues to roll on, publishing praiseworthy volumes of translated works of Syed Waliullah as well as providing opportunity for Bangladeshi writers in English to publish their works. Shahidul Alam's collection of eight short stories falls into the latter list. He is a newspaper columnist, short story writer and director of TV plays. He also apparently has a full-length novel in the works. South Asia Diaspora fiction, inevitably, due to the sheer volume and quality of work, has become synonymous with Diaspora fiction by Indians. Shahidul Alam's short stories, therefore, are inherently interesting for attempting to portray Bangladeshi Diaspora. Other than the first story here, which is an account of a young man's life in Dhaka during the dark days of 1971, the other seven stories deal with Bangladeshi lives in London and Boston.

"The Student and the Bird Lady" - the most resolved story in the collection - is about Faisal, a Bangladeshi who comes to study at Boston University only to be confronted by an American phenomenon, the old lady who cannot be legally thrown out of a graduate student apartment housing. In 'Sajeda' the

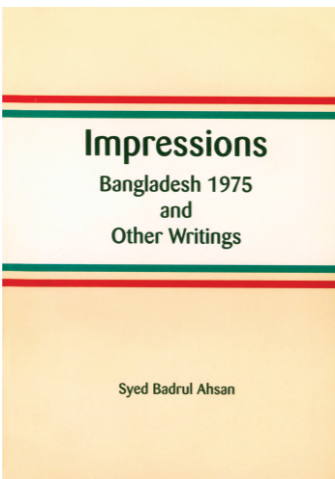
heroine of the title is a 40-year-old Bangladeshi woman who, after toiling away for a Phd and a new life in the States, finds sudden bliss with an 18-year-old American student. 'Notting Hill Nocturnal' begins 'There is this pub in Notting Hill Gate. So what?' and then takes us on a tour of immigrant life in London. And so on....

However, a standard precept about writing fiction is 'Show, don't tell' and Shahidul. Alam tends in his stories to tell us and not show enough in both action and dialogue. The latter especially is quite absent in some of the stories, making for somewhat arid stretches of prose. There is also the sudden jarring description ("his legs were rather skinny, but a narrow hip and a muscled waistline...") - what exactly is a "muscled waistline"?); or the odd sentence (Eric, the American, thinks of Sajeda as "a real multiple-angle windfall," which is a weird way for a red-blooded young American male to think about a "lusty woman" lying beside him in bed!).

Compared, however, to other practitioners of the art in Bangladesh, it has to be said that in his choice of themes, in his willingness to explore topics that are usually not 'done' in Bangladeshi English-language fiction writing, as well as his straightforward use of four-letter words wherever appropriate (and here Niaz Zaman too must be commended for her willingness to go beyond the banal conventions of genteelity), Shahidul Alam shows considerable promise.

Impressions Bangladesh 1975 and Other Writings by Syed Badrul Ahsan; Oxfordshire Wessex Press; 2006; pp. 126

Syed Badrul Ahsan has been a practicing journalist and columnist in Dhaka since the early '80s, which adds up to more than twenty years of, as he puts it in the book's preface, writing "leaders and columns for all the newspapers (he has) worked for." This book represents a compilation of



those write-ups, plus three short stories, since Badrul Ahsan also writes fiction. As befits a newspaperman and columnist, these essays, underpinned by liberal values, are evidence of Badrul Ahsan's wide range of interests. They range over topics as diverse as Dien Ben Phu, the military defeat that sounded the death knell for French colonialism in south-east Asia, to Palestine via Barghouti's classic treatise on exile and return *I Saw Ramallah* to the CIA-backed slaughter of PKI (Partai Komunista Indonesia) by the Suharto regime, to rain in London. The most readable essays, however, are the ones on Pakistan and Bangladesh politics and politicians; Badrul Ahsan, with his bent towards

the historical, is particularly good in the essays here on Iskandar Mirza and the 1958 military coup in Pakistan and Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy. There is also a knowledgeable tribute to Tajuddin Ahmed, the moving force behind Bangladesh's government-in-exile in 1971.

The short stories in the book, by being located in the village, or in village settings, represent an interesting extension of English language writing in Bangladesh, which usually tend to be very much urban tales.

If there is one criticism of Badrul's book it is that the pieces here were written for popular consumption in newspapers, and reflect those exigencies of deadlines and speed. There is thus at times too fulsome a language - as in the piece titled 'Reflections on Beautiful Women', or in describing Anwar Sadat as being "full of the milk of human kindness," with which, I am sure, quite a few of his readers, including the present reviewer, may disagree with. But such things aside, Badrul's book is undoubtedly a welcome addition to the yet-vacant field of English-language newspaper column/essay compilations.

Farhad Ahmed is a freelance editor/writer.

Tonguing Mother

B. SINGH

Baroque, plateresque and rococo are words that Indians mostly do not know

unless they have been to a lecture on Western (thus un-Indian) architecture.

All three words mean wrought and ornamental, but for Indians meanings aren't fundamental.

Indian owners of these syllables feel their breathy, aspirated sex appeal.

B. Singh is a Singaporean poet.

Talking with Neil Bissoondath

Neil Devindra Bissoondath lives in Quebec, Canada. He was born in 1955 in Arima, Trinidad and Tobago and is the nephew of author Sir V.S. Naipaul. He is a well-known writer of fiction in his own right as well as a perceptive critic of public policy. Two of his nine published novels, *Digging up the Mountains* (1987) and *The Worlds Within Her* (1999), have won awards and critical acclaim. He recently exchanged emails with The Daily Star's staff writer **Ahmede Hussain**.

Ahmede Hussain: "I feel today about Trinidad the way I feel about, say, China. It's another country in the world. I've never had a single regret about leaving, or the slightest desire to return."--You have told Celia Sankar of The Sunday Guardian once. Why do you feel so distanced about a country where you were born?

Neil Bissoondath: There are several reasons. The primary reason, I suppose, is that even growing up in Trinidad, I felt I didn't belong to the place. My family - parents, aunts, uncles - travelled a great deal to Europe, North America, and even from very young I was a voracious reader. Somehow - and this is probably something innate to my personality - I was aware from a very early age that there was a larger, more vibrant, more interesting world out there, and I was very curious about this world. So, in a way, I grew up in

Trinidad wanting to leave it - to go to that other world far from what I saw even then as the small, isolated, deeply un-intellectual place in which I was living. In addition, I was aware of being surrounded by political corruption, racism both social (our political parties were racially divided, one for the blacks, one for the Indians) and closer to home in that Indians hated blacks and blacks hated Indians, Moslems and Hindus distrusted each other - all of this in a place whose motto, promulgated at independence in 1962 when I was seven years old, was "Together We Aspire, Together We Achieve".

When you're young, you have little patience with hypocrisy and



I had less than most people. So I grew up wanting to leave and did so with joy at the age of eighteen. I arrived in Toronto with the sense that I was beginning a wonderful adventure. I left Trinidad with no regrets. I've never wanted to go back, doing so only for a couple of visits to see my parents. The last time was well over twenty years ago, when my mother died. My father himself has since died and my brother and sister and their families live in Toronto, so there's not much left in terms of emotional links. I'm not a terribly nostalgic person. I believe that the past is the past. One acknowledges it and moves on. I've been living in Canada for thirty-four years now and at this point Trinidad is what it is - a part of my past. I have no feeling for the place. I think it's a natural process of evolution. One grows roots in another place and the old roots, such as they were, wither.

AH: *Digging up the Mountains* has a loose similarity with Naipaul's some novels of later phase (*The Mimic Man*; *Guerrillas*, in the sense that it portrays (especially the title

piece) a post-colonial country in ruin. Will you share of your reading of Naipaul's work (who, we understand, is also your uncle) with us?

NB: Yes, VS Naipaul is my uncle, my mother's brother, and it was his example, more than anything else, that led me to write. In a way, he was living that adventure I dreamed of when I left Trinidad - travelling the world, writing about it in both fictional and non-fictional terms. I have enormous affection and respect for the man, for the way he persevered through years of toil and hardship, writing these beautifully-written books that offer the world with such clarity, such lucidity and intelligence. Of course, everyone writes in his own way but among the many things I learned from reading his books is the importance of honesty, of clarity of thought and expression. Novels such as *Guerrillas*, *A Bend in the River*, *A House for Mister Biswas* are like revelations. In the most subtle ways, they map the complexities of man and society. His non-fiction, much of which reads like fiction because of the sensibilities he brings to them, is equally complex. But I do find myself going back to the fiction. As he once said about another writer - Balzac or Flaubert, I'm not sure which - reading him is like eating the finest chocolates. You're fed on so many levels, all of which come together to shape or refine your view of the world.

AH: In *The Worlds Within Her* we see you ruthlessly dissect the idea of an individual's presence in history in an

increasingly hostile world. Do you in a way like to align yourself with the marginalized?

NB: As a novelist, I align myself with no one and with everyone. As a novelist, I have no constituency. A novelist's responsibility is to explore the complexities of the world as frankly and as honestly as he possibly can. You can't do that if you align yourself with a particular any group, because then you assume the role of the politician or social activist and, frankly, that makes for bad novels. Novels that read like political tracts, novels with messages, novels that want to reform society and save the world are boring novels - boring and dishonest in that they betray what I see as the primary responsibility of the novel. Novels should not try to sell or promote anything. The essay's there for that. If you've read *War and Peace*, you know that Tolstoy had a rather idiosyncratic notion of history and of man's role in historical events. At the end of the book, he presents us with a long essay on the topic. But who pays attention to that? What we remember are the characters, the human drama. *War and Peace* is saved from the didacticism of Tolstoy the Intellectual by Tolstoy the novelist. So as a novelist, I align myself with no one and with everyone. On the other hand, as a human being... but that's a whole other story.

Ahmede Hussain's novella 'Blues for Allah' has been published in Colloquy, Monash University's journal.

Second Daily Star Anthology

The Daily Star literature page, in order to promote English-language writing among Bangladeshis, will publish a second anthology, this time of non-fiction writing. Bangladeshi writers/authors/poets/translators, plus our readers, are invited to send in their contributions for consideration. Themes and contents must deal broadly with Bangladesh, or with Bangladeshi life, whether here or abroad. Submissions should be limited to 2500-3000 words, though this condition can be relaxed in the case of outstanding efforts. High-grade translations will also be considered. Translators should send in the original Bangla if they are to be considered.

Submissions should be sent electronically as Word attachments to starliterature@thedailystar.net or by snail mail to The Literary Editor, The Daily Star, 19 Karwan Bazar, Dhaka-1215. All submissions must be clearly marked 'For Anthology' (in case of electronic submission on the subject line).

Only Bangladeshis need submit.

We specially welcome submissions from outside Dhaka, as well as humorous pieces dealing with the lighter side of life.

The last date of submission is May 15, 2007.

--The Literary Editor