

Non-Fiction

Immortal Ekushey February

SALEH AHMED
(Translated by Ahmed Ahsanuzzaman and Shuvo Ahsan; abridged for publication)

"Comrades, we shouldn't think of violating Section 144. But that doesn't mean our struggle—our life stops here." An old mango tree on the university campus. The weight of buds in bloom weighs down its spreading branches. Beneath it a sound like the stifling roar of a bomber jet begins to whirl.

"Friends, we have not come out only to retreat now."

"Yes, yes, let us raise our voices..."
"Our state language—must be Bangla!"
"Our demand—have to be met!"

"Well, Sharif, did you ever think that those words would come out of that fellow's mouth?"

Sharif is silent. A schoolboy supplies the answer. "Why don't you spit in his face!"

"And if you can't, then remember that a nation ceases to exist from tomorrow on. A language will wither away; a language, each and every syllable of which symbolizes our spirit."

"Mind you, we don't need a leader to die for."

"Yes, we can't sit around like kittens. Let's go out, everybody—"

How spirited are even the schoolgirls!

"And dear sisters, keep a cool head. Don't get carried away now. Take a look around, count them—all these tear gas shells and rifles."

"Who goes there?"

"Let's tie them in bundles and go ahead."

"Yes, yes, all of us!"

"Comrades, raise your voices..."

Puffing up a forty-inch chest, a bestial excitement at the corner of the reddish mustache, a police officer advances with his hands on his waist and stands in front of tens of students.

With upraised bayonets, many such armed men stare at us with glittering eyes, men who will never know the alphabets engraved in our hearts. They cannot read them today, they'll never be able to read them in future.

This is our first procession in tens. Students from the university, from residential halls, from medical, engineering, intermediate colleges, art institute and schools are the first to march forward. They break the law. Men make laws, the Law

does not make men, and they are men. Today is the day to bring down the house of cards that is Law.

A jeep screeches off, trailing the smell of burnt petrol. Comrades in the first band of marchers look at us with burning eyes. We wave our hands. Their eyes say, "Come forward"—our fists reply, "We are with you."

In tens, the second wave of marchers now advances. Students from the agricultural institute, veterinary school, textile institute and commerce college join the procession.

And then comes the third—with students from the teachers' training college in the lead.

A fourth...

A band of girls from schools and colleges march by, their *ornas* tied tightly around their breasts. They are like the wind—a storm wind! They break the set rhythms of the procession and seem utterly different. A roar fills the sky!

The police officers, unprepared, are taken aback, dumbfounded. There are no jeeps, no trucks available—nothing in which to take prisoners to jails. Those have vanished into thin air. By now the tar on the roads has begun to sweat. The chests of magistrates and police officers, too gleams with sweat.

More of us stream out onto the streets... Many more...

"Boom!"...
A roar. Smoke fills the air...
The small stones of mangoes are blackened.

We cover our faces with wet sari ends, handkerchiefs, vests and scarves. The smoke spreads, conspiring to strangle our voices. Muddy water from a pond in the middle of a field is fetched in buckets and empty kerosene tins. Everybody cups the water in palms. A boy, none other than a classmate of mine, is hauling one such tin on his shoulder when a tear gas shell lands in front of him. He falls down. The tin rolls on the ground, the water brought from the pond flowing away like drain water.

The men with rifles and tommy-guns move in the north-west direction, for there the students in the medical hostel have committed the criminal act of shouting out loud their demands!

We cover our eyes with the palms of our hands, start running like blind horses



towards the north-west!

Patients in the hospital, both men and women, are sitting up in their beds, covering their hoarse, coughing throats and red eyes with blankets. Those who are near the windows look out at the roads, at the marching soldiers with their raised bayonets. Those who are in the middle of the room stare at the ceiling. Their eyes feel the tear gas. Countless coils of white smoke—the terrible smell and burning eyes! Doctors and nurses, one hand pressed on eyes-noses-mouths, race down the corridors with medicine, syringes and bandages clutched in the other.

Those who are in the emergency ward, see around them, above-below-by their sides, the dancing faces of students of all ages, tormented by the gas, buzzing like drain flies, groaning, writhing.

"How long will you tolerate the atrocities committed on these near-dead hospital patients? Won't anyone of you come forward?"

"State language—Bangla..."
Many are headed here. They line up at a

long bench and hold open their eyelids. Two doctors, one a third-year student, draw up liquid paraffin in droppers and squeeze drops into opened eyelids, then move on. One quick single rub of the eyes and then it's march forward again.

Two rounds of tear gas shells fly towards the cardiac patients' ward, and land with a bang.

It urges the marchers take a few more steps forward.

Some of us manage to drive off the masked soldiers inside the hospital perimeter idling away their time or aiming their tear gas guns. We push them out onto the road on the east. Pieces of red bricks shower down like *Aashar* rain. Even helmets are blown away by this gale. We have nothing in our hands other than bricks, because we did not come to fight. We have come willingly to sacrifice our lives at the altar of our mother tongue. But that does not mean that we stand by helplessly while they tear-gas the lungs of dying patients.

The knotted police *lathis* move through the air like the humming bees. One of them lands on a boy down standing at the east end, knocking him down on the ground.

The *lathi* flies through the air again. Many more *lathis* spread their wings, swoop down simultaneously on his bruised body. Crawling towards a drain the boy tumbles down into the slime.

They keep on beating him—the way skinny scavengers kill the town's mad dogs. Running after the dogs, eyes flashing for a little baksheesh from the municipality.

Up comes the second wave.

Right eye streaming blood, someone runs like frightened sheep. Unbelievable, yet true!

The marchers fan out like the waves of the sea. For a few minutes the barbed wires of the police barricade seems to be a cobweb.

And afterwards...
A loud noise.

Branches of the *shimul* tree near the hall with flowers in full and half bloom comes down with a splintering crack. We stare at them.

A voice.
"Our state language—Bangla!"
A noise.

Holes appear in the thatch roofs of the hall and smoke from these holes wriggles upwards ceaselessly.

Another loud noise.
"Our state language—Bangla!"
Loud noises. Continuously. Here, there and everywhere.

Before my very eyes the heel of a comrade classmate is blown away. Blood streams down on the earth. We all look at him, as though we are watching a gathering of the *shimul* flowers.

A bullet enters another student, ripping into strings in a second the liver, stomach, spleen, entrails, veins.

The voice again. "'Our state language—Bangla!'"... "Our demand must be granted"...

A few students approach, wanting to cradle the martyr.

Bullets fly. It blows off half the skull of one of us. The brain tears, falling like the golden petals of a sunflower. An amazing fall!

"They're killing us; but we have done nothing to them."

"We only said that Bangla is entangled in our hearts."

"And is that enough?"

"Excuse me, has anyone of you seen my brother?... My brother...age twelve or thirteen years... dark skin...Masud-ul-Huq... a student of Betubari primary school...appeared at the scholarship exam...have you seen him?...Have a look at here..." The boy who has lost his heel is dragging his feet and talking such nonsense.

Some look at him for just for a moment.

By then all of us are lying down on the grassy compound of the student hall; we are lying on grass that we can no longer call green.

Because it is bloody and burning with blood.

"Well, aren't you Alauddin, come here to *lathicharge* us, eh?"

"Ashraf, you are here? Well, then—" A kind-hearted man in khakis—someone who uttered 'Ma' on first listening to Bangla. Something moves inside him. The *lathi* slips through his fingers.

Another student comes forward and addresses Alauddin, "Say with me—the state language..."

"Son of a bitch!" A police officer turns around and barks, ordering Alauddin to heel.

Alauddin falls down. But then gets up in a few seconds, picking up the *lathi* from the ground.

"Swine!" A man cried out amongst us...

...The numbers of the wounded and injured multiply, going much beyond the number of beds available at the emergency, surgery and midwife sections of the hospital. The people needing operation far outnumber the surgeons.

Only those severely injured in the stomach, chest and head from bullets are allotted beds. Those who have lost hands or legs lie on mattresses laid on the cold and polished cement floor under the deep blue, shaded electric bulbs. They groan and moan. Or lie numb by the powerful dose of morphine.

We can hear the mike from here...

And listen to the sky-splitting sound—"Our state language—Bangla!"...

A midnight that is noontime. Sleep has vanished from our eyes. I stand along with thousands of comrades near the barbed wire that is the boundary of the hospital. We have put up a barricade.

Some of us have gone to guard the dead bodies. They cling to them, grasping them with their hearts. Since we cannot forget our syllables, we will never forget these dead.

The sharp-edged bayonets march towards our live eyes. Wisps of smoke from the tear gas shells drift across the sky like shadows. The occasional blank fire from rifles is like lightning in the bosom of clouds. Our victory cry makes the sleepless city tremble.

The wind gusts. It rends apart the white cloud of the tear gas. Rays of luminous light from the distant horizon slant down to spread on our eyes and faces.

Five fingers close on each other. A fist is born out of them.

Like fog rising from the sea of people in every street-road-lane-by-lane in this sleepless city innumerable hands had formed fists to rise up in the sky.

Hands without fear.

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BOOKS FROM THE EKUSHEY BOI MELA

Of lonely writers, arrogant bureaucrats and old romances

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

There are times when you miss Taslima Nasrin. The exile she has been in these last many years questions the idea that freedom of expression is a truth we live with in these times in Bangladesh. If thoughts floated free as the clouds across a summer sky, why is she moving from one country to another, all beyond the frontiers of her homeland, in search of a home? A certain sadness tugs at the heart as one moves through, in a melancholy manner, through the pieces in *Ami Bhalo Nei Tumi Bhalo Theko Priyo Desh*. A plaintive call from a Bengali wanting to be heard is how Taslima Nasrin presents her case. Exile is never easy to come to terms with. For writers, the agony involved in living away from home under compulsion tends to double in painful intensity. And that is what emerges from the thirteen essays



Taslima Nasrin has written in this very readable anthology. In pieces such as *Shikol*, *Berliner Chand*, *Ekar Jibon*, et al, the lonely writer in a lonelier woman is the theme that asserts itself repeatedly. She writes poetry in solitude, which is just as well, but the solitude here does little to inspire the soul. Taslima Nasrin has a hard time courting the Muse away from home, for reasons all of us happen to be familiar with.

You could move on from Taslima Nasrin, the vibrant force that she is, to a new voice in Bengali fiction. It is the young Rashida Sultana, born post-1971, who impresses one. In *Andhi* emerges a number of symbols, all of which then gather around a larger symbol of the young in Bangladesh going for a charming

fusion of the traditional with the modern. The eleven stories in this tempting collection reflect a fine writer at work. *Andhi* could be a mirror image of what a good number of Bengali women may have gone through, could yet plod through, in terms of love, loss of romance and the onset of a lifelong bitterness in the soul. All the factors which often undercut the life and career of a sensitive, educated Bengali woman --- a jealous and overly possessive husband, sad memories of the parental home, the arrival of unwanted guests --- are the diverse strands in the story. And then comes, in a style you are not quite familiar with, the element of the supernatural. The protagonist is awakened by calls from beyond the grave. Her dead, divorced husband, still demonstrating the old jealousies as well as old desires, speaks to her on a regular nocturnal pattern. The grave is not silent at all. How does Rashida

English; and he looks for people he can pick a fight with, for there is the superiority--so he thinks--acquired through work in the government that he can fall back on.

Sultana Rashida brings a fresh insight into the modern Bengali short story, while what Kajal Shahnewaz does is introduce themes that are offbeat. As you go through *Gotokal Lal*, you are struck by the narrative style Shahnewaz employs in the work. In *Chander Blade* Chandpur, much of which has been swallowed up by the river, makes a sudden re-entry into the consciousness through the writer's recapitulation of what it is and how it used to be. The reflections on the water, in this instance by a river, tea at a roadside stall, the breeze blowing in warm from the river, conjure up images of a community that is no longer there. It begins with the itinerary of a tour, and the centre is reached, in a manner of speaking, with the principal character linking up once again with *Tiatisha*. It is amazing, as the writer informs the reader through the protagonist, how two names have come together to adorn the personality of one woman. In the end, the bigger amazement for the reader comes in a detection of a softness pointing to romance, perhaps the tentative rekindling of old love between a man and a woman? Whiffs of socialism, of underground politics, rise from the tales. A 'comrade', aged seventy-five, as well as his party, decide to spend the rest of their days out of sight of the state--the old East Pakistan now turned Bangladesh. Why does the party go for its new name seven years after the emergence of Bangladesh? The question throws the reader into the muddle of left politics that has traditionally been a staple in this country. Questions of this kind often threaten to push you into cantankerous exchanges on dialectics and all the rest.

One reads on, in this season of Ekushey, till dusk insinuates itself into the mellowing luminosity of the day. These books cause a different luminosity to arise in one's sensibility.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, *The Daily Star*.

RAFI HOSSAIN

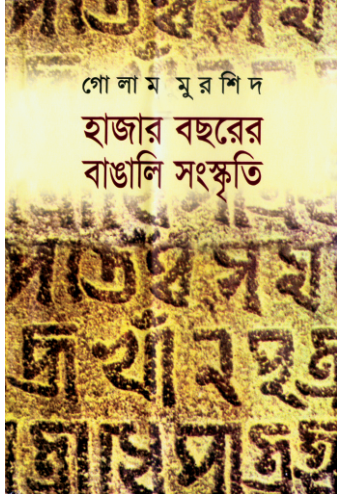
We Bengalis claim that we are intellectually and culturally rich. This claim may be questionable. Which country or nation we are comparatively richer than and in what context is also questionable. Yet it can be said that Bengalis have proven themselves to be vibrant in many cases; for example, Rabindranath Tagore, Amartya Sen and Professor Yunus all have been presented with the world's most distinguished awards. But will we Bengalis be able to continue this trend intellectually? Will coming generations be able to carry the torch forward? I guess my questions will only be answered by time.

"Biggo ponditra porite chan, poriben, kintu tahadiger nimitto... likhito hoynai. Shotteo ta mukto chinta O govir ovinibesh dabi kore." (Those intellectuals, who want to read it, are most welcome to, but it's not only for them; it's for the masses. Still, the reader needs to deeply concentrate with an open mind.) This is how Gulam Murshid's *Hajar Bochorer Bangali Shongskriti* starts off. This introductory line may startle some, but I found it interesting. I do not think I am qualified enough to comment on such a scholarly work, but I found it so thought-provoking that I could not help but write about it. I would urge the readers to regard my piece of writing as more of an ordinary reader's perception about this very important and stimulating book.

I don't know if such a thorough treatment of our cultural history has ever been done by any other writer in our country. In that respect we can term this gift to us by Golam Murshid as original and unique.

The book discusses Hindu-Muslim relationships and comprehensively demonstrates our common, hybrid heritage. In the past, when such a book was written, both Hindu and Muslim writers have taken sides, and as a result the readers of such books would become biased. This gap needed to be bridged by an impartial book, which had not been written until now. Gulam Murshid's book comes to us like the long-awaited rain that follows a drought. People of different religions in this region have lived together hand in hand for as long as we can remember; and even after all the difficulties that were intentionally created by external interference, and after many partitions that resulted in turning a single nation into many, followers of different religions still live together. Nowhere have people of a specific religion lived exclusively by themselves in a single country; it has never happened and never will. People of different creeds always lived together, and always will.

The religion-driven conflict between Hindus-



Muslims-Buddhists never arose in the mass population, and did not originate automatically in the hearts of ordinary people. Such conflicts were/are created for and by political interests. Unfortunately, the many differing kinds of books that have been written about such a history, depending upon the origins of the writer, reflected different kinds of prejudice. But we cannot simply keep thinking and writing along the same old track; we need to show coming generations the true face of history. And that is why Gulam Murshid's book is so important. We Bengali Muslims are not the same as other Islamic communities; we

have interacted with other religions in our culture and have become syncretic, more liberal and more Sufi-istic. This book represents an examination of that fact; instead of focusing only on Muslims, it attempts to acknowledge, and build upon, the contribution of Hindus and Buddhist Bengalis in the making of our culture.

The narration of a civilization's history is not easy, and it becomes even more difficult when that history is fabricated to serve different interests. The desire to accurately map our cultural history with pen and paper is highly difficult, given the research needs and intellectual requirements necessary to properly tackle the subject of our culture. Our civilization's culture, rich in terms of anthropology, religion, rituals, etc, is a daunting subject. This complexity is one of the reasons why scholars have not thought about writing a book about Bengali heritage and culture that is readable and transparently explanatory. For a very long time, eastern Bengal has remained confused and agitated about the origins of its national and cultural identity.

Gulam Murshid is fearless in terms of true and justified research, because in his book "*Hajar Bochorer Bangali Shongskriti*," he has tried to clearly map out and portray the various lines that went into the making of the cultural history of Bengal. He has discovered the genesis of the civilization through defining true Bengalis by what lies in our hearts, thoughts and minds. This book has attempted to portray the people of this region as Bengalis, and not as people who belong to specific religions or castes.

Amongst the books I have read recently, this is quite a collector's item, and should prove to be worthy reading for readers of all ages.

Rafi Hossain oversees *Daily Star's* Insight magazine and Readers' Club.

Ekushey

MOHAMMAD RAFIQ
(translated by Syed Manzurul Islam)

Great and noble Twentyfirst, the blood-hued
Twentyfirst February.

Barefoot processions and streams of people
on Dhaka's streets;
As if a flashflood has swept all these youths here.
Girls with flowing hair and white saris

the young men
in their fine shirts, sleeves rolled up.
A black badge pinned to the left shoulder,
faces sweating
from a ritual fire.

From a flower-bedecked dais the poet shouts
his fiery words,
the revolutionary rhythm of words, phrases
and songs
which, like un-reined horses of the sun, tear
through the air
filling the sky with echoes of drumming hooves
a thousand hands raised in hope to make possible
the impossible.
The sun's galleon drops its oars in the eastern sky.

Barely two miles from Dhaka to the south lies
Bailapur;
and Jamir: predictably unclad bare feet
and empty-stomached--
couldn't even afford a few leftover morsels
from last night's meal--
puts yoke on a pair of skeletal oxen.
Vacant, nothing to do now. Nothing to do
yesterday, or tomorrow.
Yet expecting the barren red soil, a gift from
forefathers,
would at last speak
lashed by the angry iron of the plough.
And Rahimuddin opens the shutters of his shop
and sweeps the dirt out.
Last night the mice ate into his store of pulses.

The executioner has no special dress, no family tree,
no name, place or postal address. A bloated
smile plays on his lips
displaying in its ebb and flow
a varied conflict of countless waves.
Geographic landmarks are etched on the history
of the land and time.
Birth on the gift of a moment, death of a
particular day,
The neck waits under a raised blade, as language
finds similes under a guillotine,
and courage and the integrity of words; and
an honest trade in return.
But in your effort to dig out a grave
and hide Jamir's remains in it, you have
forgotten the Twenty-First.

But tell me: has the day forgotten you?

Mohammad Rafiq is a leading Bengali poet. Syed Manzurul Islam teaches English at Dhaka University.

THE DAILY STAR SHORT STORY CONTEST

The Daily Star literature page invites short stories from all its readers, from here and abroad. The winning entry will be published and awarded a prize of Taka 5000. The story must not exceed 2000-2500 words and should be printed/typed. Multiple entries by the same person are not permitted. While the story can be written in any genre they must be set in Bangladesh and have Bangladeshi characters. Ideally, the submission should also be interesting at the level of language. The last date for entries is APRIL 15, 2007.

All entries must be sent to The Literary Editor, The Daily Star, 19 Kanwan Bazar, Dhaka - 1215. Email entries should be sent to starliterature@thedailystar.net.