

SHORT STORY

Magpies and Traffic-Jam

DILRUBA SHAHANA
(translated by Supreeta Singh)

Is there anyone who will not tremble with fear when suddenly the person hears his or her name pronounced by the announcer at a huge international airport? Usually since you are waiting as a transit passenger when the announcer's booming voice calls out your name, isn't it usual to be scared even before knowing anything about it?

I was not particularly alarmed when I heard my name. Of course there is a reason behind it. I had already made sure I had my passport and ticket. I had checked the time. No, the person who could have inquired about me, his flight had already left half an hour ago. Not only have I not seen the man (and I doubt whether I shall ever see him in my life), but I also do not have any inclination to meet him. I have only one desire now, that the unseen, unknown man returns to his country to see his mother alive.

It is not an illogical wish: It took a man twenty-two years to go back to his country because of some problems with his papers. Now, quite anxious, he is going back to see his ailing mother. And it is more undeserving that even though he was near home, he would have to wait at the airport for a twenty-hour connecting flight. It was sheer good luck that he wisely appealed to the waiting passengers at the airport. And that his sad story reached the ears of a large-hearted person like me. I thought, so what if I had to sit in this airport for twelve more hours. If that makes a man reach his sick mother even a wee bit early, then so be it.

On hearing that announcement I walked towards the counter. There was no problem at all. He got my flight number and I got his seat on the next flight. The man was not at the ticket counter, he had only left his ticket for me. The woman at the counter looked at me strangely. Her glance told me that only idiots did this kind of thing, that only fools willingly shoulder the annoying task of sitting at an airport. Perhaps, I am a moron, or else why I did I choose to take up this burden?

The voice of the announcer reverberated loudly. This is a request to this passenger of this flight number to go to the duty free shop with the ticket. Now the announcer said "La Espanola" and announced it in Spanish. Then again in "Parle Francais", requesting

Aran Aziz to go to that shop.

When before I had gone to exchange tickets, I had left my small journal in the safe custody of the couple sitting next to me. Actually, I had wanted to strengthen my temporary claim to the convenient place where I was seated. This too was an example of how man becomes selfish at certain times. I looked at them with imploring eyes, asking for their help. Who knows where these 60-70 plus-years-old were headed off to? Tallish, with beautiful but serious faces; melancholic faces that would arouse anyone's pity. The lady was wearing a black ankle-length skirt, a maroon top and her head was half-covered by an embroidered, beaded black scarf. The gentleman was wearing a regular suit. The man seemed aware of his surroundings. The lady looked detached.

The man became very eager to talk when I looked at him. Even before I could request him to keep an eye on my seat, he asked me, "Did you hear the announcement?"

"Yes, that's why I am going. Is it okay if I keep my journal here?"

"It seemed to me that they are calling my name and you are going?"

"Why would they call you?"

"Yes, yes, why would they call me, I... I... am..."

The man seemed distressed and distracted; he was unable to finish his sentence.

"What is your name?"

"Aran Aziz."

That made me stop. Was it his name that was called? Did I hear wrong?

"Which flight is yours?" I asked.

"One to Zagreb, Croatia."

"Oh, then it's not you, it's me who has been called. Let me go and see."

The gentleman immediately heaved a sigh of extreme relief and again became self-engrossed. Perhaps they were Croatian Muslims. I suspect whether, had Yugoslavia not been divided, there would have been so much bloodshed over religious identity. Remarkable that men do not carry the stamp of their religion on them, only the stamp of racial identity. That stamp identified these two as Europeans.

When I reached the place where I was called, I was astonished as well as vexed. A bouquet of flowers and a box of chocolates had been sent or kept there for an unknown

beneficiary from an unknown beneficent. I felt cross that I have to carry an extra burden.

On returning I kept the flowers and the chocolates on the table in front. The two of them glanced at me. The gentleman looked a tad bit curious, the lady was nonchalant.

I opened the box and offered the chocolates to them. The gentleman told me politely that he couldn't eat chocolates any more. The lady picked one up, but did not eat it. In a dejected tone she spoke, as if to herself, "My son would also open packets of chocolates in front of me like this."

"If you have near and dear ones, then they send things to you at the airport also, how nice," the gentleman remarked. I thought of telling them that I didn't have anyone who would send me gifts at the airport. Maybe it would make them feel less isolated. Then think, why bother. They have taken care of my seat, so I have offered chocolates, why waste words? I simply smiled at them.

When the man returned he had three paper cups of tea in a small box in his hand. The lady picked up one cup of tea and offered it to me. I took the cup and thanked her.

The lady was looking at me but there was



artwork by enigma

wedding were afoot when war broke out. He went to war, and never returned.

The war went on for a long time. Many more people went to war from this town.

Because of the military training centre in this city there were many other army families there.

Aran Aziz's one-time student David belonged to one such family. His father, a doctor, was also an officer in the army.

A wave of grief swept the city in the wake of the death of Aran's son. David came with his father to see him. No one had said a word.

Each one had just wanted to touch the other's grief-stricken heart in silence.

David liked Aran very much. Quite a few years ago he had brought a simple slingshot, an elastic band attached to the wooden 'Y' of the English alphabet, and had taught him how to chase off magpies with it. All his friends would get together in the fields near their school and amuse themselves by shooting off magpies with it.

Since it was a hilly city, there were times when magpies flocked there in huge numbers. Each year Aran would bring that slingshot and teach them how to use it. This amiable teacher was always in a buoyant mood. He was also a good mathematics teacher, well-liked by his students. After he had retired from his job, David would sometimes come to visit him.

When today he saw Aran's face he became sad and whispered to his father, "It seems someone has stolen the smile from his face."

Then David had wanted to know: "No one has attacked our borders, so why are we fighting?"

His father had stroked his chin and replied absent-mindedly, "Yes, it is wrong, very wrong."

In the meantime David received a call to leave for war. An air of dejection hung over the impending departure. At this point, David's father committed a scandalous thing. There was only one topic of conversation in the town: What would happen to David's father. Even if he did not go to war, would he be saved? Would he be court-martialed?

It was learnt that David's father's would face court-martial. He was not allowed to come back home from his army office. There was a strong rumor in the city that David's

father would be taken to army headquarters for trial.

During this time David paid a few visits to his favorite teacher. He would quietly sit beside him, then, after some time, take his leave.

It was during one of these days that he said, "They are not letting my father to come back. Do you think my father will be sent to war by force?"

Aran did not know the answer to this. So he kept silent. Then David said, "Would you give me that Y toy for driving away birds? Yesterday a magpie bit a boy on the ear at school, and made him bleed. Some of us are going to drive off the birds."

Aran Aziz handed him a dozen catapults for chasing off the birds. David said, "We shall target the birds with marbles."

After two days David came running with news: "Tonight they are flying my father off for trial. Mother came back crying after meeting him."

That night a strange incident took place. All the traffic lights went out one after the other with a splintering sound. Then the street lights were also smashed. The traffic became chaotic. The small town became ghostly in no time at all. That night the plane did not take off. Rumors went round the city that it was the work of terrorists. All that the police could find were a few marbles. The police searched high and low for the pistol where the marbles had been fired from. They were eager to find out where noiseless pistols were to be found.

Aran became worried. Those bird-shooting catapults had been given to him by an Indian friend. Aran told him about the incident. After hearing the story, the man became almost speechless with fear.

He said, "Run, run. Your son also died in war - they will suspect that you are the agent-provocateur."

Dilruba Shahana is a young Bangladeshi writer. Supreeta Singh is currently in Dhaka from Kolkata.

Letter from AUCKLAND

Luna Rushdi

I suppose it is a bit curious that I have never really read much of New Zealand literature. Especially since it is my fifth year in the country and I consider myself to be an aspiring writer - (well, the aspiration is all there but the writing is yet to land). I was barely aware of this abnormality of mine until one fine day (partly cloudy actually, like most Auckland days) *The Daily Star* literary editor suggested I write a piece on New Zealand literature.

I admit to knowing a few names of New Zealand poets and writers. But names are just empty sounds unless paired with a person or a personality. These names that float in the Kiwi air with which I am familiar are not associated with any particular image or a feeling. I mean, let's take the name Shibrum Chakrobarty for example; it makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside, bursting with life and laughter. Jibanananda Das resonates a feeling of dusk, melancholy and nostalgia and Kazi Nazrul Islam brings about passion. The first New Zealand book I purchased is a collection of short stories, poetry and memoirs on cats. It is titled 'The Cat's Whiskers [New Zealand Writers on Cats]', and edited by Peter Wells. I later found out that Wells is a prominent New Zealand writer with a number of awards under his belt.

In the introduction Wells writes "The cat has long had a privileged relationship with writers. Perhaps it is the cat's solitary nature or its ability to radiate a kind of silence and peacefulness that makes it a particular favourite of writers." I immediately thought of those rare winter afternoons when I sit baffled in front of my laptop attempting at a masterpiece or two and my cat sprawled across my feet like a warm cushion, snoozing. Obviously Peter Wells's observation pleased me immensely as it so logically authenticated my claims to being an author. Thus satisfied that it is a wonderful book I commenced reading.

And surprise! Contrary to my initial impression that this is going to be a cute and cuddly collection on cats, Wells says that, "My aim with this book has been to mine a rich seam in New Zealand writing that has seen the cat as friend, companion, muse." Wells has collected samples of writing by a wide range of New Zealand authors and poets of varied genres and time. It is amazing how without even knowing it, like a thirsty horse led to the water by divine powers, here I stand.

Tales of a Few Kitties

I adored Margaret Mahy's story about the cat that ate a poet-mouse and became a poet himself against his will. The little verses the cat catches himself pondering over during various catly activities are hilarious. For example, as the cat lies in his bed and wonders what has come over him, he says:

Lying in the catnip bed,
The flowering cherry over my head,
Am I really the cat that I seem?
Or only a cat in another cat's dream?

Or the time when he wants to hiss at the neighbour's dog but a poem comes out instead:

Colonel Dog fires his cannon
And puts his white soldiers on parade.
He guards the house from cats,
burglars,
And any threat of peacefulness.

Well, that will definitely teach anyone attempting to eat a poet!

A poem I found charmingly witty, a nightmare to any cat lover, is Bernard Brown's 'Sufficient Pussy':

All cats can go to hell
And save me worry.
The only one I ever loved
Was one in Auckland
In a curry.

C.K Stead's poem Cat/ullus touched me. The first line, "Zac's Dead" is absolute, like death itself, no space for ambiguity. Someone once said "Dead is a good word for dead, because it's so dead."

Zac of the goldfish eyes and nice-smelling fur who when I had a problem with a poem slept on it, who lived to put his paw-print on a valued citation, who in his dying days jumped to swipe at a passing moth and missed.

together. She writes 'On April 5th our one daffodil came into flower and our cat, Charlie Chaplin, had a kitten.' Not only have I given a boy's name to a girl cat just as Kathryn Mansfield did, I also chose the famous Mr Bill Clinton for her name! Great minds, wouldn't you say? Just like her cat, my Mr Clinton sits and read with me too!

But jokes aside, a lot of the stories, poems and memoirs in the book use the cat's presence as a representative of complex human emotions and relationship with each other and the surroundings. Peter Wells writes about momentary appearance of the cat in some stories: "It is the nature of a cat to coil into a room, then slither out like a shadow, leaving behind a changed atmosphere."

As dusk arrives on my deck after a hot and humid day and I sit, leaning against the wall with the book in hand, a family of ducks under the plum tree in the garden flap their wings and sit back dreamily. Crickets buzz. Long white clouds hang from the sky conforming to the Maori name for New Zealand *Aotearoa* (Land of long white clouds). My dear Mr Clinton treads home. She jumps up on the deck and sits next to me kneading my knee with her paws. She smells like flowers, dust and sunlight. I stroke her face and carefully untangle the bit of cobweb she carried home with her. What adventures did you have today I ask, which little corner of the world did you discover. I concentrate on the book. Peter Bland writes "There's a touch of Zen in these feline appearances. A sense that they know more than they're letting on, that they somehow slink effortlessly between parallel universes; so that their mythical nine lives are more a matter of inhabiting different realities than simply staying alive." I deeply inhale and the faint fragrance of the wild roses in my backyard fills my senses.

Perhaps I am a cat in a human body. Why else do the days gone by seem so far away, dreamlike and yet so real, almost touchable, as if I am living them still in some parallel world. As I smile down at my cat, she smiles surreptitiously. A few sparrows fly away from a branch of the *gleditsia* tree. The *puhutukawa* branches sway. I say possibilities, dear Mr Clinton, possibilities.

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BOOKS FROM THE EKUSHEY BOI MELA
On Humayun Ahmed and Mohammed Zafar Iqbal

AZFAR AZIZ

Prologue

When my editor asked me to review two bestsellers, preferably novels, at this year's Ekushey Book Fair, I was at a loss, for I am by no means a devoted reader of contemporary Bangladeshi fiction. In fact, after Akhtaruzzaman Ilyas, I have read only a few novels of Bangladeshi writers published in the recent years and that, too, by chance or at some person's request.

Anyway, a command is a command and I marched to the Boi Mela and asked around about the best-selling titles. The unanimous answer was that the books by Humayun Ahmed were at the very top, followed by those of his younger brother Mohammed Zafar Iqbal and next were those of Anisul Haque. So, I bought a copy of Humayun's *Kichhu Shoishob* and one of Zafar's, *Jalmanob*. Reading them was as entertaining as watching a well-made Hollywood film. Here, I also must add that while I found Humayun a fully commercial and professional producer of literary entertainment, Zafar appeared less so, as someone who strives to achieve some sort of aesthetic quality in his work.

The rest of my impressions about the books are the following: I remember the time more than 30 years ago when after reading Humayun's *Shangkhaneeel Karagar* and *Nandito Narakey* we thought they heralded a new genius in Bangla literature. But, over the years, that impression became more and more corroded by the acid of disillusionment and at one point we realised that the promising writer has turned into merely a technically accomplished and successful storyteller.

At this year's book fair, he surfaced with 12 books, which is quite a feat for any novelist in the world. There is nothing wrong with writing a great many books only if the books are distinct in content and colour. I have sampled quite a few novels of Humayun, most of which seemed just variations of a single theme, not unlike a series of cartoon films or television sitcom where a fixed set of characters play out some new acts to make a new episode.

It does not, of course, mean that he does not possess any skills or talents or merits. In fact, quite the opposite; otherwise he would not have become the most-read and one-of-a-kind of professional fiction writers of the country. His language is lucid and very readable. He never

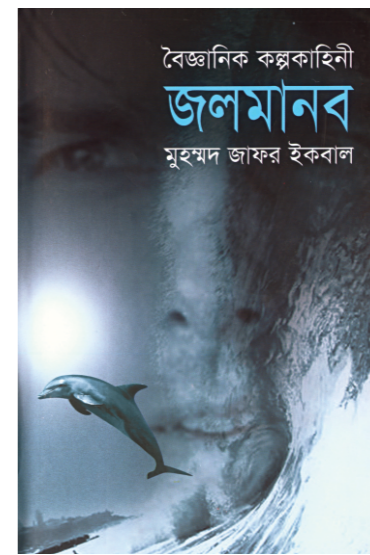


delves into any complex issue of any sort, which is ideal for the purpose of entertainment, although not for any involvement of the intellect. He is a grandmaster of the storytellers, who lets the tale run along the tracks for a while, and then makes a sudden twist in the narrative that thrills or charms or invokes some other emotion in the reader and thus retains his or her attention in the story. Humayun Ahmed never judges his characters but simply accepts everyone as he or she is - another example of his excellent technique.

For example, *Kichhu Shoishob*, in which he reminisces about his early childhood in Sylhet, can be compared with a photographic landscape, with some figures producing mirth, some sympathy, some nostalgia and so on, and that is all. It does not give rise to any question or goes deep into any event, psyche, trend, idea-nothing. Everything is superficial and there is nothing to bother or worry the reader about. It recounts events from a childhood, makes for pleasant reading, and after finishing it one can go to sleep with a satisfied yawn, like after having any other refreshing recreation.

In a nutshell, this book, like most of his other works, provides excellent entertainment value for the average reader. And entertainment obviously is in great demand in our society, and also across the world, which is why Humayun Ahmed has been a best-selling writer for quite a long time now. He knows exactly what sort of stories the masses like to have served up to them.

Jalmanob is a science fiction. There is no debate about the fact that Muhammad Zafar Iqbal is the author who contributed the most in



carving out a prestigious niche for this genre of literature. With this one he has added yet another brick to the temple of Bangladeshi science fiction.

Five books by Zafar have hit this year's February book fair. The number is less than half of what his brother has produced but Zafar's excellence lies not in quantity but the quality and the variety of his books, and in that his imagination and intellect are free of monotony and captivity of fixations, always treading on new ground in every new work.

Jalmanob, or Water-Man, takes the reader to an imaginary future, where most of the land on Earth has become submerged in water as the sea level rose drastically due to severe greenhouse effects and other abuses of nature. The people who lived on higher grounds survived the calamity and the rest perished, with a few colonies managing to continue living on artificial islands or floats. The people living on land continue to progress in technology and have reached a stage where they no longer need to work; computers and robots do that for them. They need not think; a super computer does that for them. Their society in fact has come under the total control of that super computer. They do not know what to do with their time and so pass it in a trance produced by intoxicating substances, immersed in virtual reality, or hunting one or

two water-men whom they have come to treat and hate as an alien species. And when they lose interest in everything, driven by black depression, they commit suicide, particularly the young people.

The Jalmanobs, on the other hand, are technologically poorer but closer to nature, more alive. They have learned to communicate with dolphins, who have become their friends. The most important difference between the two branches of this post-deluge humanity is that the people living in water love one another and cherish all life forms while their counterparts on land are full of hatred, cynicism, lethargy, and lack of purpose.

The book actually presents two hypothetical projected futures of humanity—one alienated from nature and dependent on machines and the other within the fold of nature and at peace with it. Of course, events happen in the book like in any other fiction, which ends in one of the policymakers on land realising their pitiful situation and trying to reverse the destructive trend; his daughter falls in love with a young water-man and finally deserts her people to go and live with her lover and his people, whom she has come to realise are far superior than her own ghostlike, perverted folks.

Iqbal's language is smooth, free of cliché and jargon. The book is as much a science fiction as a depiction of what will happen if humanity continues to travel away from its earthly roots, becomes a slave of machines and systems of its own creation, and carries on the rat race for material gratification and seeking psychic high from drugs, delusions and fantasy.

The catch line: *Jalmanob* is a science fiction and also a warning for those who will heed the message about the dangers inherent in destroying Nature.

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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 10, 2007.

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