

SHORT STORY

A bicycle at wartime*

AFOZI PARVEEN
(TRANSLATED BY ALIKA KHAN)

Rafiq covetously eyes the bicycle store in Doratana Road every so often. He really needs a bicycle: although he hadn't managed to save the money to buy one, he constantly felt its need. A small town reporter for a national daily, he has to pursue news every day -- often in remote and far-flung places. Buses are not much of an option in rural areas, and traveling is done either on foot or in rickshaws. How on earth can Rafiq foot the bill for rickshaw rides? Plus, there are certain places where even a rickshaw can't go. The only hope of getting to such places is either on a bicycle or a motorbike. Rafiq can't afford a motorbike -- he has a limited income. Besides, the situation at home isn't all that pleasant either: Baba has retired, and two of his sisters are yet to be married. Even the thought of buying a motorbike is nothing if not an idiocy. Because of all this, Rafiq thinks of buying a bicycle -- although, there is one other fantasy he has about a bicycle. He has seen the movie *Cassandra Crossing*, and has thought it would ever be so much fun if only he could sit Kaya on his bicycle for a ride and sing a love song to her like the hero in *Cassandra Crossing*! He has told Kaya about it. She had laughed to the point of rolling all over the floor. Kaya has a habit of laughing all the time. Sometimes he joins her in laughing until his eyes are all red. That is usually Kaya's cue to say, "Hey, why are you laughing so much? You know the saying -- the more you laugh the more you'll cry..."

Saying this makes her break into laughter all over again.

It was during such a spell of laughter that Rafiq has told Kaya of his plans about a bicycle. Kaya replied with widened eyes, "Well, if nothing else, the people in the locality will have something to look at."

"Not only that, gossip will spread like wildfire all through the town about Master Shaheb's daughter Kaya flitting about on Rafiq's bicycle. People will disapprove, and you won't get any more marriage proposals. Then as a last resort your parents will marry you off to an unworthy young man like myself."

"Oh, so that is your master plan?"

"Are you calling my idea to make our wedding possible a bad idea? Fine, there's no need for a bicycle, nor any need to ride on it." Rafiq started to walk away.

Letter from
BAGERHAT

RIFAT MUNIM DIP

On my way to Khulna University, I usually drop by *Cafe de Salam*, a small tea stall named after the owner Salam Bhai. It is the meeting place of virtually all the literary and cultural activists of Bagerhat. Salam Bhai is fond of such people. Despite shifting from time to time over the last few years, it has always managed to be near the Puroto Court Chhattar. Key participants forming the circle at present are Zakir Hossain, Morshedur Rahman and Asheque Ibrahim. Morshedur Rahman is a translator whose translation of Jose Saramago's *Manual of Painting and Calligraphy* was released at this year's Ekushey Boi Mela. The locals are joined on the occasions of Eid and Puja by the likes of Prashanta Mridha and Ahsan Iqbal Iqbal, both of whom are promising short story writers and have become part of us. Incorporating young ones like Nooh Ainal Islam and Zeesan, this circle keeps up the flow of literary activities through these informal gatherings.

Given the political and social unrest of pre- and post-war periods, literary activities in the '70s among students could not gather activists in one place. But since the '80s, a number of literary and dramatic circles organized themselves around the campus of P. C. College, which since its founding in 1921 has been a moving force behind such activities. The first influential literary association, *Sanglap*, was formed by the leading writers of Bagerhat, with Jahangir Ali Babu, a prominent lawyer, as president and Professor Abul Kashem as secretary. It held annual assemblies where eminent literary practitioners gathered and recited their writings, especially poems. This association exerted a lasting impact upon younger literateurs and there grew a number of student circles who published numerous folding-size magazines on different occasions like Ekushey, Independence Day and Victory Day. While providing me with as many extant copies as possible, Zakir Hossain, an activist of those days, told me about the publications that came out every year, a custom still followed on a reduced scale. One noteworthy fact is the relation of little magazines with theatre activists. All editors were not theatre activists, but it provided them with a suitable platform to get together. Bagerhat Theatre directly influenced Bagerhat's most well-known little magazine, *Chokh*. The department of Dramatics under Bagerhat Shilpakala Academy had the same effect on another circle, who brought out *Raktabanhi*.

The credit for the first published collection goes to *Sanglap* when they published their results of their biennial conference in 1985, putting together a number of poets and essayists. Greetings were sent in by well-known writers such as Hasan Azizul Haque, Abu Hena Mustafa Kamal and Abu Bakar Siddique. It did not list an editor; rather it came out as conference proceedings. In this sense, it was not strictly a little magazine. The first published little magazine dates back to the latter half of the '80s, the result of the most potent literary group

"Hey, you're walking off all angry...can't you see I was only joking?" Kaya ran up to tug at Rafiq's shirt, then added, tenderly, "Please do buy a bicycle. I would love to go riding with you."

This has been going on for months, but a bicycle never materialized. However, Rafiq always makes it a point to hover around in front of the best bicycle store in town. The woman who ran the store was teacher in a local high school. Every day after school she came to sit in the store. Rain or shine, she was always there. There is no end to Rafiq's curiosity about this woman. He has heard that once Rebecca Apa was the most beautiful woman in town, there are still traces of that beauty left in her. She was also a brilliant student; she had gotten a chance to go to medical school, but instead had stayed back to complete her BA in the local college before taking up a job in the school and settling here permanently.

Did selling bicycles and teaching in a school go hand in hand? Not at all. Even then she was the owner of the bicycle store. Only she knew what joy she got from the rims, bells and spokes of cycles. Or, did she like looking at bicycles because she liked motion and speed? Who knew?

Rafiq is walking past the store with such random thoughts, a packet of peanuts in hand. He hasn't eaten anything all day; he had to go very far in search of news today. Despite a long trip - on foot and on an ox cart -- it has been in vain. The news he had chased wasn't of any value. Rafiq is upset, hunger churning in his stomach. Perhaps the peanuts will temporarily curb his hunger pangs. Who knows if there is any food left at home now? It is past evening. There will be no rice left over from lunchtime. Preparation for dinner is possibly underway. Besides, Rafiq can only go home once he has submitted his report at the newspaper's local office.

Standing in front of the shop inevitably leads to gazing at the bicycles inside, along with the woman on the chair. So many new bikes have been brought in! Rally, Runner, Humber, Prince, Ranger, Rider, Philips... *Eeesh!* If only he could buy one! Rafiq is upset, a bitter taste fast spreading in his mouth. So far he has saved up only half of the amount needed. Rafiq begins to walk away. Just then a voice calls from behind him.

"Hey there, can you hear me?"
Rebecca Apa is calling him.
"Are you calling me?"



artwork by apurba

"Yes, please come in."

Rafiq turns around and enters the shop. "I have noticed that you take time to stare at the bikes every day while passing by. Can you tell me why?"

Rafiq is surprised. Rebecca Apa had actually seen him all this time!

"Actually, apa, I really need to buy a bicycle. So I look in to see what bikes you have in here."

"Well, why don't you buy a bike? Which kind would you like?"

"No, apa, not now. I can't afford one right now. When I can, I'll come back."

Rafiq gets up and starts to walk. Talking on this subject makes him miserable. Just as he is about to go out, he's called again.

"Tell me. These days everyone is after motorbikes, so why do you want to buy a bicycle?"

"I'm the local correspondent of the daily *Jagoroni*. I need to go to remote areas in search of news, but I can't afford a motorbike. So a bicycle is my only option. And besides..."

Rafiq blushes noticeably.

Noting it, Rebecca Apa enquires, "Well, what is it?"

"No, that's another issue."

"Tell me about it."

"It's just that... I have this fantasy of

cycling all through town with Kaya."

Rebecca Apa breaks into a peal of laughter, and then at one point her laughter turns into tears. Her tears are not of joy. She is crying out of anguish.

Rafiq is taken aback. "Apa, why are you crying?"

"I'm crying because it's the same longing! The same expression on your face, the same way of blushing... only the times have changed, the couple has changed."

"Apa, I don't understand."

"Aren't you a journalist? You should know all the heart-wrenching stories of this town. You should know who I am, and why I've become this way today."

"I'm sorry, I guess I should have known. Tell me, why did you cry when I told you about my plan with Kaya?"

"Now that's quizzing like a journalist! Well, here goes then. Rakib also wanted a bicycle. He wanted to speed through town on his bike with me. Just like you, he couldn't afford one, so he had to wait a long time to buy one... I would joke and say 'You're not going to get a bicycle in this lifetime!'

"You just wait and see. I am going to take you out on my bicycle on our wedding day while people stare with open mouths."

Our wedding had also been fixed, just held back since Rakib didn't have a job. He

was applying for jobs; he even had a few tuitions. He was saving money from these tuitions to buy himself a bicycle.

At one point Rakib had saved enough money to buy the bike, and he had even received a few job interview invitations. I would laugh and say, "What's the use of taking so much trouble for a bike when you can simply accept one as a dowry? My parents won't object."

"What, to ask for a bicycle after they part with their daughter? Sorry, I'm not that much of a cheapskate."

That was when war broke out in the country. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman called for independence, masses of people flocked to fight in the Liberation War. People from Dhaka came to our town in droves -- from here they would flee to the villages. Those who have never seen a village before were forced to see them for the first time. This situation made both our families anxious. It was decided that the marriage must not be delayed. My father said, "I'll only feel better once we join the two pairs of hands in marriage. Who knows what may happen, the country is in such a distressing state."

From April onwards the situation became worse. Army packs began to scour the countryside. We had taken refuge in a village by the time the army set up camp in our town. It was decided that we would be wed in a day or two.

That night, moonlight shone through the night clouds. Rakib stood holding my hand on the edge of a pond near a relative's house as the fragrance of *hasnahena* blew in from afar... they hadn't forgotten to emit their sweet smell in the midst of the turmoil of war. The wind knew no bounds, and the guava leaves danced to their own tune. Moonlight, the defiant wind, the shivering leaves -- they all seemed to oppose the wrong, so very wrong war. Rakib said, "I'm going to town tomorrow to buy a bicycle... a Hercules cycle. When we get married the day after tomorrow, I'll take you out on it to tour the whole village."

"Are you crazy? There is no need to go to town now. The place is infested with the army."

"I must go. I have been dreaming about this for a long time. A wedding only comes along once in a lifetime."

Rakib paid no attention to my warnings and went to town. He bought his bicycle.

The next day we were married, sans the henna, sans the jewelry. My parents joined our hands after draping me in a red karolini

sari. The moment the wedding was over Rakib began to pull me towards his bicycle. I was a blushing new bride, how on earth would I get up on that? The more I refused, the more adamant he became. Finally I got up on the bike with me. Off we went, a song on his lips...

*I love you I love you
The tune, near and far
On water on land play the flute...*

I was forced to join in.

We had lost track of how far we had gone. Suddenly there was the deafening sound of bullets flying in the air. We could see an armoured truck approaching in the distance, raising clouds of dust. People began to panic and run. By the time Rakib had turned his bike around to go in the opposite direction the armoured truck was on us. From behind came the order, "Halt!" Rakib did not stop. He lowered the bicycle into a nearby paddy field and began to pedal hard. Just then a shower of bullets came flying towards us. Rakib fell off the bicycle with me. I lay trapped underneath his body.

Two soldiers came towards us and kicked us with their boots. I held my breath with all my might.

One of them said, in Urdu, "Too bad, a beautiful woman has died."

The country became independent. My parents wanted to get me re-married. My in-laws didn't have any objections. I refused. I took up teaching, then opened this store and named it 'Freedom Cycle House.'

Tears flood Rebecca Apa's eyes. Rafiq says, "I'm truly sorry, apa. I didn't want to hurt you. I've clearly dug up painful memories for you. Please forgive me." He begins to walk away.

Rebecca wants to call him back and say, "Listen, choose a bicycle you like. It'll be my wedding gift to you. Bring Kaya upon it to see me some day."

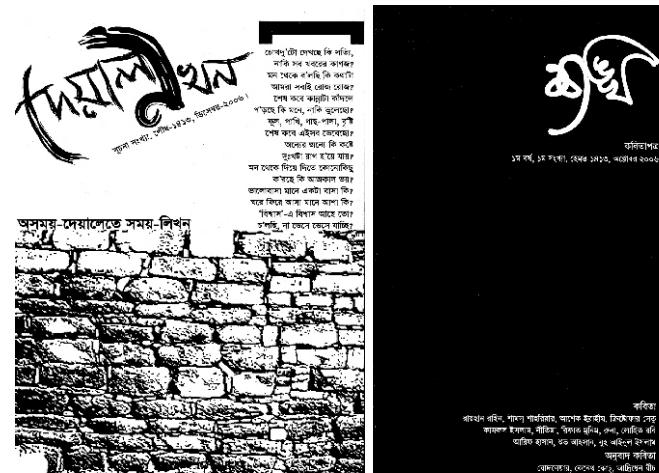
Rafiq would say, "I certainly will, apa. Why would we not be able to do what you did 32 years ago?"

Rebecca walks to the door, and steps down onto the road. But by then Rafiq has gone too far, well out of the range of her voice.

Afroza Parveen is a young Bangladeshi writer. Alipa Khan is a student of law at the London College of Legal Studies, Dhaka.

*The above story has been somewhat abridged for publication in The Daily Star.

On local little magazines



Meanwhile Bangladesh Chitra Union renewed their annual publication, *Droho*, in 1998 highlighting well-known writers such as Sardar Fazlul Karim, Hasan Azizul Haque and Serajul Islam Chowdhury. It also included Ahsan Iqbal Iqbal's short story and upcoming Asheque Ibrahim's piece on the perverseness of cable television culture and media.

Nothing came out of Bagerhat in the next six years--until Nooh Ainal Islam's tiny monthly *Bangashudha* in the April 2004. Apart from the annual issue of *Droho*, it is the only publication that came out regularly for about a year. Meanwhile, though interested in bringing out a Bangla magazine, we at Khulna University actually published an English magazine in August 2003. Its editor was Setu Halder. Gradually we became depressed realizing the amount of money and time required for this. But our junior class proved us wrong by bringing out *Arora*, with both Bangla and English writings. It was edited by Shuvo Ahsan. A student organization named 'Ba Path' founded the most durable folding magazine at Khulna University, *Vaafat*, in August 2006 publishing almost all practicing poets here. *Shankha* was published in October of 2006 as Bagerhat's first purely poetry magazine. *Deyal -likhon* followed *Shankha* in December of that year. Edited by 'Ba Path', it contained exclusively prose works. *Arora* too came out in January 2007. Most of its writers are from outside Bagerhat but it also includes writers from *Shankha* and *Deyal-likhon*.

Till the '90s literary and little magazine activists depended on letter presses, of which Kobra and Amina were the two preferred presses of the activists. Later, offset presses were utilized; *Shankha*, for example, was printed from Al-Maha press, one of the five existing offset presses in Bagerhat. *Deyal-likhon*, however, resorted to normal printers, and starting at midnight, it took them some fifteen hours to finish the job.

There is presently a literary revival of sorts in Bagerhat given the alliance of writers with like-minded students at Khulna University.

Compared to other artistic genres like theatre and music, literary activities do not depend on organizations anymore. Instead, they rely upon informal literary circles and the little magazine movement. The latter, with its claim of going against the grain, has a more difficult life than other art forms. One hopes that lines of communication established among activists of different regions continue to exist, not to obliterate their differences and distinguishing features, but to make the ground on which they stand stronger and deeper.

Rifat Munim Dip is a student of English Discipline at Khulna University.



Book Review: An Exchange

Criticism is a very popular word. But what is criticism or book review? Why is it essential? How should it be? Let us now have a look at a few possible answers. A criticism always should be something to encourage the readers, giving some inseparable detail about the book and to rectify the writer's inattentive casualties helping him go a further step ahead in the arena of creative writing. A criticism should also evaluate the writer's genius where necessary so that he can get the taste of applause coming out of the critic's mind. So, an improper criticism can simultaneously strike both the reading mind as well as the writing soul. Mr. Afzal Aziz has brutally criticized Dr. Mohit Kamal (March 17, 2007) in the first two of his four columns that can easily be compared to an outright contempt or jealousy critically made. In the third para comes a criticism of Dr. Mohit Kamal's four books. It is said that only these four books out of his 25 have got literary value. And then in the fourth para, we get some personal opinion of the critic. The critic has not stopped here. Rather he has gone to a farther step ahead of bitter criticism saying that even the lowest graded writers of the 19th century and 20th century would surely turn over in their graves from shame if they knew that these sort of books are nowadays considered popular Bangla literature. His likewise statement about the renowned writer Dr. Mohit Kamal is nothing but a showdown of personal jealousy. As a general reader we expect genuine criticism of the book 'Chandmukh'.

Time and again the same complaint has come about his writing. It is complained that he has dealt with the silly love and sexual affairs in his writings and the protagonist employed by him are all young. But why cannot we consider it a bit otherwise like he has not represented these young characters and their involvement in love and sex as a merely silly practice of these all. It has reminded us, once again, about the silly culture we live in.

The story 'Chandmukh' has also earned a lot of criticism of the critics. But we earnestly request them to have a patient look on the book to find its worth. The criticism we have so far mentioned cannot be like this while criticizing a book.

Why the readers like 'Chandmukh' can only be answered by the readers who have bought it. So our heartiest request to the critic is that they should ask the readers to know the real mystery of *Chandmukh*'s success.

Munmun Ali
Umme Salma
Final Year students English Department
Islamic University of Khulna

Azfar Aziz replies: