

SHORT STORY

The Beauty of Belonging

ABEER HOQUE

Is this what it's like to lose yourself in Dhaka, in kissing, in the dark of your skin the deep of your voice, your writhing thin slower (I whisper) faster (I fall) the winter is holding its breath as you call you're coming (say it) you're coming (say it) you're coming

in darkness, in traffic, in lamplight, I kiss you, my mind in motion, my body in bliss full abandon, there's only one thing I miss time (what's yours) time (what's mine) the winter is digging its grave as I find a way to see (tell me) to free (tell me) to stay

Any addict worth his sugar will tell you that you don't pick drugs to match your mood. I mean you could try, but it's a hopeless task. Drugs, life, magic, God, sex, whatever you want to call it, figures when it will pick you up and where it will set you down. I'm telling this pretty bit of junk to the Dhakaite girl that Dokhin has brought around to mine. This one is good looking, like all the rest. A little bit edgy but not so much it looks as if she's trying. Spiky hair, no lipstick, expressive hands. A black and white photograph. As long as she knows how to inhale, I don't care. Actually Dokhin's last paramour was sweet, though my ceiling got the best high ever with all the honey she let escape. You'd think there wasn't anyone left who didn't know how to suck a rolled-up bill. There was that girl in Cox's Bazaar who thought the Bongo way was ghetto. Aluminum foil and lighters? We just pop the whole pill, she had drawn. Americans. No romance in their bones. And where's the love if it isn't in the going? When you're gone, you're gone after all. The beauty of belonging isn't that it lasts forever, but that you think it will. Acid was the drug that taught me patience. You can't not stay in the now, on acid. It won't stop if you want it to. That's the way it is. The present moment swells, neon stains the past, swallows the future whole. Dokhin's girl, Ina? Dina? interrupts me. Or maybe she interrupted my train of thought. My blood is sped up enough that I can't remember whether I had been talking out loud or inside my head. She's actually more

than good looking. Her eyes glitter in this way that I can't take, so I avoid making eye contact. Why do some girls insist on boy mannerisms like arguing loudly? Though it means she's not shy, and I like not shy. But then she asks me what my favourite drug is. Typical business weekend parlier question. As if it has anything to do with drugs. I wish I were back in Cox. Near the sea. The summer I spent there, I filled up pad after pad with water colour smears I thought were divine at the time. Divine at the time! I didn't have a single visitor that Cox summer except for Dokhin one hazy fortnight, when we went through more pills than I can count. He went into spasms in the end and even the sea turned gunmetal in my mouth. I had warned him, but that boy never understood the power of waiting. He's like my brother that way, only better because he's not an ass-kissing self-serving prick like the blood version. When I got kicked out of my house, thanks to you know who, it was Dokhin who saved me, found me a place to crash. I had just met him at some fancy Dhaka do, and frankly, I hadn't thought much. Far too well dressed which only meant he thought far too much about it all. An Indian with impeccable manners, in Dhaka for a season of businessing. Fresh meat, thought the scene. Freshly irritating, thought I. Until I met him at the IC bar days later. I try not to go to these places as they are either overrun by expats or the Dhaka elite or sometimes, horrifyingly, both. Actually then, it's almost amusing, like watching two vapid and varied still-life scenes, each group stoic in their armours, jeans and shiny tops on one side, zealously ornamented saris on the other, glaring down each other's earnestly arrhythmic dance moves. Dokhin is pouring himself another dull gold tumbler of Black Label. He loves the stuff, though I can't understand why. It's what he drinks all the time. It was what he was drinking at the bar at the IC the night my kutti brother convinced my dad I needed tough love. I don't know why he cared about what I did. I wasn't working in garments, true, but I wasn't painting either, which he never thought was much of a hobby, let alone a profession. I was basically sleeping all day, staying up and out all night. He told our parents that throwing me out was the only thing that would teach me my ways. His ways rather. My mom, she nearly cried her



eyes out. I'm the only one who can usually calm her down, but this time, I didn't. At first. But there was something hysterical about the way she was going on. So I tried to get her to stop, and that's when I realised that she was genuinely afraid for me. As if leaving home was some death knell. My foolish over emotional family. I had been going straight then for a year, bound by an insane promise to Juthi, and it was driving me dumb. Of course, my paintings followed pandering suit. But none of the New Yorker turtleneck f****s had the balls to point it out. Instead it was all genius decompressing, oil-based discontent, rewired and reverberant, and other ridiculous shit I can't deign to reproduce now. Every last one of my paintings went for some outrageous price. I reneged on each sale by giving my paintings away in Prospect Park one pastoral sunset, one by one, to whoever looked the longest. I'll never paint again. But I won't tell anyone that because I know never will always come back and rub itself all over your stupid face. The truth is I went to Cox to escape Dhaka. Dhaka and its tired tinkriny. Dhaka and its faded winter, its melodramatic summer. Dhaka drowning me in Juthi's love. That's the real deal. I was running away from Juthi. Oh yeah, she said she had nothing left to give me. But I know what she meant. That she had too much to give and it was spilling over my edges, costing her karmic energy by the second. That Art of Living talk kills me even though I know it's not all crap. Or maybe it's just Juthi's friends and their overly happy voices. I can't take it for very

long. The first time I saw Juthi wearing a sari, I immediately wanted to bed her. In that post colonial, back to your Tantric roots, brown erotica, woman worshipping Western ways (no, I want you to come first), slipping into Eastern clothes (sorry, you were too much for me, premique, next time?). The problem is that you can't love and leave very often with brown girls. Even if you leave their bodies flushed and pulsing, which I do, thank you very much. I'm not one of those boys. Of course, you can't f**** and run in Dhaka, but even in the mutinous underground bars of New York, you get that rep. Whether or not you make it perfectly clear from the beginning that all you ever wanted was love, without the strings. It's the strings that f**** things up. Bind me to you, and I'll show you the surest path to flight. It's true, Dokhin tells me, but don't talk about strings now. She'll be back soon. He cocks his head towards the bathroom. Besides, we need more ice. Can you get some from your upstairs neighbour? You're the one who needs more ice, bhai, I say. I can't drink that shit, ice or no. We can't all have your high class tastes, Dokhin says, swigging the last of his whiskey. F**** off, man, I say. At least I knew what it was like to be middle class. We both laugh but we know who's older money. Dokhin's family is one of Kolkata's bastions of wealth, going back generations. My pops only made his money in the last couple of decades. And seeing how my brother uses his slimeball connections to

grease things, I don't know how long the cash will last. I believe in karma as it turns out. One bad turn for another. On my way back from the neighbours, I stop in the loo. Seems Inadina doesn't believe in locking doors. She's sitting on the toilet but waves me in. I only need to shake out the ice crumbles at the bottom of the bag into the sink but when I glance into the mirror, she's watching me. I leave the bag in the sink and turn around. As I lean down slowly, I can see her legs closing into a dark velvet upside-down V. The oldest mystery of them all. I have an urge to paint. Her. On her. A standard tired overdone O'Keefe image comes into my head. What the bleeding edgers don't understand is that we create those standard tired overdone images even when there's something pure driving us. We do it because of that purity. All the ways to jack it up, splatter it, deconstruct it, build it back, they're all just ways to get back to the original feeling, at best, foils at worst. That's why I love you means something even now. Juthi was the first Bangali girl I loved. Hell, the first brown girl. Before that was a string of white girls. Even when I came back to Dhaka, it was easy finding them. A new crop of NGO-ers every season. But Juthi with her Krishna dark skin and undulating hair got me for some reason. I couldn't stop touching her. I couldn't stop painting her. No drug ever felt as good. Drugs and Juthi together would probably blow my mind, but for reasons both logistical and perhaps lucky, I never had the shot. When Juthi found out about my habits, she got me to swear I'd never do anything when I was with her. At first, that was easy enough. But then it got harder. I saw Juthi less. She doesn't realise it but how often I see her means nothing. How little we talk means nothing. When she's around, the world shrinks and fits into my heart. When I'm gone, I shrink and disappear into the world. I'm so close to Inadina that I can squint the glitter of her eyes into pinprick stars, growing, falling, fading. A living painting. A painted life. I clap suddenly between her legs and look at my palms. F****ing mosquito. Black ink fairy imprint across the lines of my hands. I grab the bag of ice and bang out of the bathroom. Welcome, Dokhin smiles. Or is it welcome back? I have long since stopped being surprised at his knowing. I know my internal

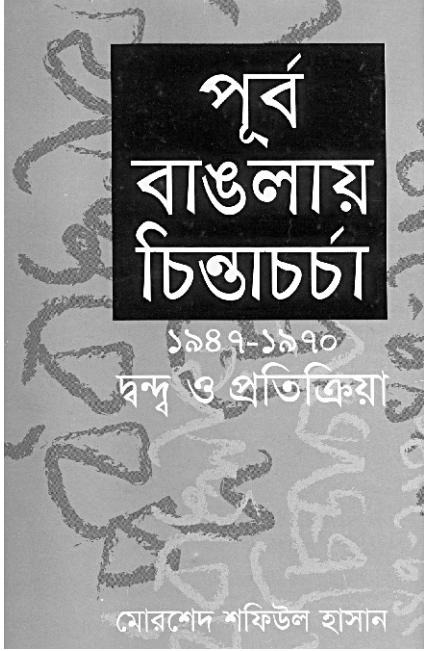
monologue's f****ed sometimes. As in I don't know when it's internal and when it's aloud. But even when I've made a ludicrous leap of imagination, Dokhin somehow follows. When Inadina enters, she goes straight to Dokhin's side and sits neatly beside him as if bidden. I don't know if it's the light but her eyes look darker, and I can barely see past her lashes. Dokhin seems oblivious. He's in the Matrix, working the strip of aluminum foil, pressing it, stretching it, running the lighter flame along it. When he's placed the little red pill on the edge of the aluminum, he hands me the lighter. For all his suave ways, Dokhin can't keep a lighter lit while he inhales so I always do the honours. The rolled-up 100 taka note is sitting on a box of cigarettes. He puts it in his mouth and waits as I hold the lighter under the silver strip. A second later, a tendril of smoke is born. As it widens and wends, Dokhin's breath calls to it. I trace the lighter under the path of the pill as it smokes and slides down the strip. The smoke is now entering me, that familiar metallic tang girding my lungs. Inadina's whole body, not just her eyes, in darkness now. Dokhin a silhouette, then a shadow, then nothing. I am alone. As I breathe, each rib contracts under my muscles, under my skin. I can see the building of my Cubist body. It slowly becomes. F****, there is nothing like it. This understanding of why we are. This joy in being. Itself a reason. It's why I still pop, inhale, shoot, chew, lick, snort, suck, absorb all of it, despite the steel pincers flexing on my brain some nights, most nights, every night. I know what I have to do. The thing that always belonged to me. The way anything belongs to you in the moment you engage. I pick up my paintbrush. A second later, a lifetime later, I feel Dokhin shaking me. His voice fades in and out like a pirated soundtrack. He's telling me something absurd. He's telling me not to die. Juthi wavers like a flame into my candlewax mind, midnight skin and midnight hair. I'm not in my room anymore. A bumper car world resolves. It grumbles and shakes around me. It pixelates. Fluorescence in my eyes. Juthi wavers out.

Abeer Hoque is a Bangladeshi-American writer currently in Dhaka on a Fulbright award.

Reluctant Thinkers

AFSAN CHOWDHURY

Purba Banglai Chintacharcha (1947-1970) Dwanda O Protikria by Morshed S. Hasan: Dhaka: Anupam Prakashani; February 2007; pp. 1031; Tk. 700.00



History has few evidences that Bangladesh appears to be comfortable when in engagement with intellectuality. Apart from the tradition of emotion as the supreme artisan of cultures, there is apparent low demand for rigor in forming political or social ideas. It's a culture grappling to give shape to ideas formed by emotions. This phenomenon was noticed by many others before. Prof. Ahmed Sharif, the legendary academic, activist and closest to what we have had as 'an independent soul, had remarked that ours is a society where survival is so difficult that one cannot afford the luxury of thought. In this remarkable volume in question, Morshed Shahful Hasan has journeyed through the history of the thought processes of a people who are somehow reluctant thinkers. The author has completed a major academic task by describing the Bengali mind or the Bengali Muslim/ East Bengali mind after having possibly read and scrutinized nearly all the material relevant to the topic. This book should reside in every library as a reference book. Morshed S. Hasan doesn't shy away from confronting the contesting cultures that produced the framework of his research. It's not useful space management to detail the chapters here but suffice to say that he has written what is relevant to understand the socio-political landscape as viewed by essayists and reviewers between 1947 and 1971. After reading the book, one is not presented with agreeable and agreeing answers but instead with the material to embark on one's own quest as

to the centrality of this process as part of identity marking. It reveals the dilemma of constructing the ethno-religious identity of a population's shifting mind. Bangladesh/ East Pakistan mean two trends and in each case intellectuals have reflected the political views both as observers and sometimes as participants. It's presenting this task of separation that has been accomplished. Just as the book's triumph lies in the completion of this work, so does a necessity given that after Morshed, others may not attempt to discourse on the topic, which is to define the role of intellectuals in/to state making. I raise this question because they are obviously present in both 1947 and 1971, which are the book's primary borders. Some would say the argument has to do with state making rather than with the positioning of intellectuals vis-a-vis the production of the state. Of course, many such positions held by intellectuals and the *gharana* or lineage they generate have been referenced. So we have a Hali, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Allama Iqbal and later poets lined up to serve Islam's political ambitions in South Asia. And it's natural that many essays do appear which could be read as toeing this line carefully. The work of the later liberals of Bengal/ Bangladesh like Abdul Huq, who wrote about the glory of Islam and the responsibility of intellectuals to do so, is a sterling example of a new but historically failed construction. However, contesting the Pakistan state was a later phenomenon, as the book states, but all are part of this process. Yet, the contra trend was already being produced, especially in the writings of the political Left such as Md. Toaha, Oli Ahad et al and other members of the 150 Mughultully Lane, the headquarters of the new intelligentsia - although coming out openly against Pakistan was not possible. Hence, the rallying position was the implementation of the Lahore Resolution, which to them was tantamount to a much better Pakistan or a near Bangladesh. I would remark that the impossibility of Pakistan appeared to the mainstream intellectuals later and that the radicals were ahead in this as would be expected. It's only when politics caught up with them that this made sense, albeit secretly, a 'treacherous' thought becoming one of the default objectives of sub/para or full blown nationalism. Yet, it would be a simplistic argument to say that the contests within the intellectuals were a passing or weak fact of force. The Pakistan Writers Guild, an outfit birthed by Pakistani ruler Ayub Khan to entice intellectuals to their side, was rather successful and after the 1965 war with India, the radio programme "Ronagan" was bursting with Bangla intellectuals spewing Pakistani patriotism and hating India. It was then a popular time for Pakistan and hating India. But in

Bangladesh it lasted for six months only till Sk. Mujib declared his 6-points and began to construct the final phase of Bengali nationalism in its full militant garb. The same intellectuals soon stood against 'Pakistan' and the imposition of ideology from Islamabad. It was a time when the intellectuals closed ranks, barring the very Left who were confused. Marxism was also an emotional content here and was never served by the intellectual labour it demands. What brought most together was the ban on Tagore and that turned into a cultural struggle, which had begun in 1948 and incorporated the wider political struggle in the final years of Pakistan using popular literary symbols. So it was the literary imagination that seems to have triumphed in the intellectuals' participation in societal pursuits. It also shows that our intellectuality is closer to emotions of Tagore and his pantheon, including the hazy world of vagueness and reality within which the intellectual has to prosper. Or perish. Given that argument, how should one look at the use of first person in writing such a book? A lesser book may well have escaped such scrutiny but in a book dealing with intellectual history, how does one necessarily separate the dancer from the dance? Morshed is immersed, embedded even in his topic and it's sometimes difficult to say which is subjective opinion and which is objective analysis, where is the dividing line between observer and critic. I am taking this liberty to make this remark because much of what will be written later will be modeled on this absolutely ground-breaking book. And that's why one must ask if he looks at intellectuality as a distinct concern on its own, or as a description of a larger process of social change. It does seem his verdict is that of 'reactivity' and most scholars have responded to challenges rather than start intellectual fires on their own. That issue is a significant one and lies within the book because eastern societies are not questioning ones. The dominant metaphor for them is a library rather than a debating hall. Such a book, should one ever care to muddy one's boots in the long academic chapters, will be rewarded with illumination. The author has captured the gamut of East Bengali thinking in a single prize-winning tome. One can't meet this book with praise but can only say that the author has shown that Bengalis are capable of thought even if it's an occasional labour.

Afsan Chowdhury writes for a variety of South Asian newspapers and magazines. His latest book was a 4-volume study of the Liberation War.



worry, we will soon shoot one together." We sat for a while in the lobby as my father explained the scheduled program for the coming day. Tahawar confided that most people here mispronounced his name and called him 'Talwar Sahib' instead. He laughed and said that he actually took it as a compliment since it rhymed perfectly with Hazrat Ali's legendary sword - Zulfiqar! He presented us with an autographed copy of his book, *Man-eaters of Sunderbans*. Sadly, after decades of safekeeping it has now been lost. On the appointed day, Tahawar showed up at the venue immaculately attired in an English tweed jacket, a silk cravat and still sporting a beret. He looked very much like an army officer of the colonial vintage. He spoke impressively in English to a captive audience of diplomats and transient visitors. There were also Bengali and Pakistani participants. The exotic and picturesque slide-show on the Sundarbans went down very well with the audience the flora, fauna, rivers, creeks and, of course, the dead tigers! Tahawar demonstrated the full-throated call of the tiger, the distress call of the cheetal (spotted deer) and the guttural noise of a prey in the vice-grip of the tiger. As a grand finale he made the repeated plaintive calls of a deer in the throes of death. Amplified by loudspeakers it sent a chill down my spine. In the end many eager hands went up and Tahawar was only too pleased to oblige. The day Tahawar Ali Khan left Dhaka news filtered in of the humiliating defeat of the Arab forces at the hands of the Israelis. Initial jubilation had given way to collective gloom. Father and I went up to Tahawar's hotel room. He greeted us with a faint smile and a limp handshake. He was only half packed and looked crestfallen. "Khan Sahab," he told my father with a grimace, "these bloody Arabs are no fighters, just big mouths!" There was silence. My father quoted to him the famous Suhrawardy one-liner on Arabs, that "zero plus zero always equals to zero." During small talk over tea and biscuits I looked at a stack of Sundarban pictures, including of dead man-eaters. Tahawar read my mind. With a flourish he selected some photographs, autographed them, and said "These are for you, son." I was simply too elated and thanked him profusely. "Please come back and see us again," I said. "I surely will," he replied. We would never meet again. Those coveted photographs are still with me forty years on.

Waqar A. Khan
Bangladesh Forum for Heritage Studies.

On a Shikari and an Ode on an Ode

daily Star literature page, July 28th), of *Man-eaters of Sunderbans*, (1961), i, Tahawar Ali Khan, along with an expatriate in New York. To Dhaka from Lahore in 1967, at the time he came to the Sundarbans to shoot a tiger. The National Book Trust (NBP) was planning on publishing a book on the Sundarbans as one of the main organizers of the book. The book was to be a talk/slide-show presentation on the Sundarbans as a hunter. One morning, as the war between India and Pakistan was at its height, Tahawar came to Shahbager Hotel to meet him. I saw a rather stocky man of medium build, with a friendly face, wearing a hotel lobby. My perception then of Tahawar was that of a friendly man. As Tahawar walked up to us, I saw a man with a friendly face, eyes and a huge, disarming smile. He greeted me with a friendly smile. Mr. Khan, "he greeted my father as a good lesson, isn't it? In Tel Aviv!" My father merely smiled. He looked at me on the head and grinned, "Shot a tiger, didn't you?" He quipped, "Don't you worry, we will soon shoot one together." We sat for a while in the lobby as my father explained the scheduled program for the coming day. Tahawar confided that most people here mispronounced his name and called him 'Talwar Sahib' instead. He laughed and said that he actually took it as a compliment since it rhymed perfectly with Hazrat Ali's legendary sword - Zulfiqar! He presented us with an autographed copy of his book, *Man-eaters of Sunderbans*. Sadly, after decades of safekeeping it has now been lost. On the appointed day, Tahawar showed up at the venue immaculately attired in an English tweed jacket, a silk cravat and still sporting a beret. He looked very much like an army officer of the colonial vintage. He spoke impressively in English to a captive audience of diplomats and transient visitors. There were also Bengali and Pakistani participants. The exotic and picturesque slide-show on the Sundarbans went down very well with the audience the flora, fauna, rivers, creeks and, of course, the dead tigers! Tahawar demonstrated the full-throated call of the tiger, the distress call of the cheetal (spotted deer) and the guttural noise of a prey in the vice-grip of the tiger. As a grand finale he made the repeated plaintive calls of a deer in the throes of death. Amplified by loudspeakers it sent a chill down my spine. In the end many eager hands went up and Tahawar was only too pleased to oblige. The day Tahawar Ali Khan left Dhaka news filtered in of the humiliating defeat of the Arab forces at the hands of the Israelis. Initial jubilation had given way to collective gloom. Father and I went up to Tahawar's hotel room. He greeted us with a faint smile and a limp handshake. He was only half packed and looked crestfallen. "Khan Sahab," he told my father with a grimace, "these bloody Arabs are no fighters, just big mouths!" There was silence. My father quoted to him the famous Suhrawardy one-liner on Arabs, that "zero plus zero always equals to zero." During small talk over tea and biscuits I looked at a stack of Sundarban pictures, including of dead man-eaters. Tahawar read my mind. With a flourish he selected some photographs, autographed them, and said "These are for you, son." I was simply too elated and thanked him profusely. "Please come back and see us again," I said. "I surely will," he replied. We would never meet again. Those coveted photographs are still with me forty years on.

The following erupted from my heart after reading the poem *Ode on the Lungi* by Kaiser Haq published in September 1 issue of *The Daily Star* literature page.

An Ode on K Haq

On a small canvas
You've drawn the strings that bind the globe
With your magic words and ideas
Be it on the Lungi or whatever!

Wit, humour and the gathering of facts
Let one keep on naming...
Everything is there
Like a cluster of baby hair!

It was on a nice morning that shone like
A blazing diamond
When you entered the teachers' room here
At Premier University in Chittagong
You just finished lecturing the lucky students
But I was luckier!
For it was the first time I saw a freedom fighter &
A poet of your stature!

What grand ode you've produced sir!
You've made us proud; made us feel tall
With your immaculate work of intellectual fire
We play on the historical lyre!

I welcome all the literary spokesmen to my procession
With a garland of poems written by our bard
Dear Neruda, your ode to the socks is surpassed here
In terms of a sheer spontaneity of thoughts!

Dear K Haq, your ode on the lungi will awake
People of understanding from their slumber
To stand erect and sing a song for it
And thus you'll be there in everybody's hearts.
Cheers!

Rafiqul Islam Rime
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