

SHORT STORY

Birds

MASHIUL ALAM
(Translated by Hasan Ferdous)

Koshkin called me on the morning of 3 December. Koshkin, that is Andrei Pavlovich Koshkin, is a young diplomat at Dhaka's Russian Embassy. I had met him in Moscow where I once lived as a university student. I have returned home some five years now. These past years I have had no contact with him, until last year when we unexpectedly met at an international conference in Dhaka. I learned that he had been reassigned here from New Delhi only the previous month. We soon renewed our old friendship and spiced it up with Vodka. These days we see each other once in a while, and speak quite often over phone. Each time he goes home, he returns with a bottle of Vodka for me. There are days when we also eat out at restaurants.

Koshkin, whom I call Andrei, is crazy about birds. In fact, not just birds; he has a deep curiosity and love for all kinds of animals. His hobby is taking pictures of birds and animals. He has an expensive camera fitted with large lenses. Koshkin has traveled to many countries to take pictures of birds and animals. On the 3rd of December morning, he told me, "My dear friend, winter birds have arrived. I want to see them, let's go."

So we went out together. Andrei himself drove from Gulshan to East Raja Bazaar to pick me up. Inside his air conditioned car, with his stereo playing music by Alla Pugacheva, it felt like early spring in Moscow. Andrei offered me potato chips and Heineken beer.

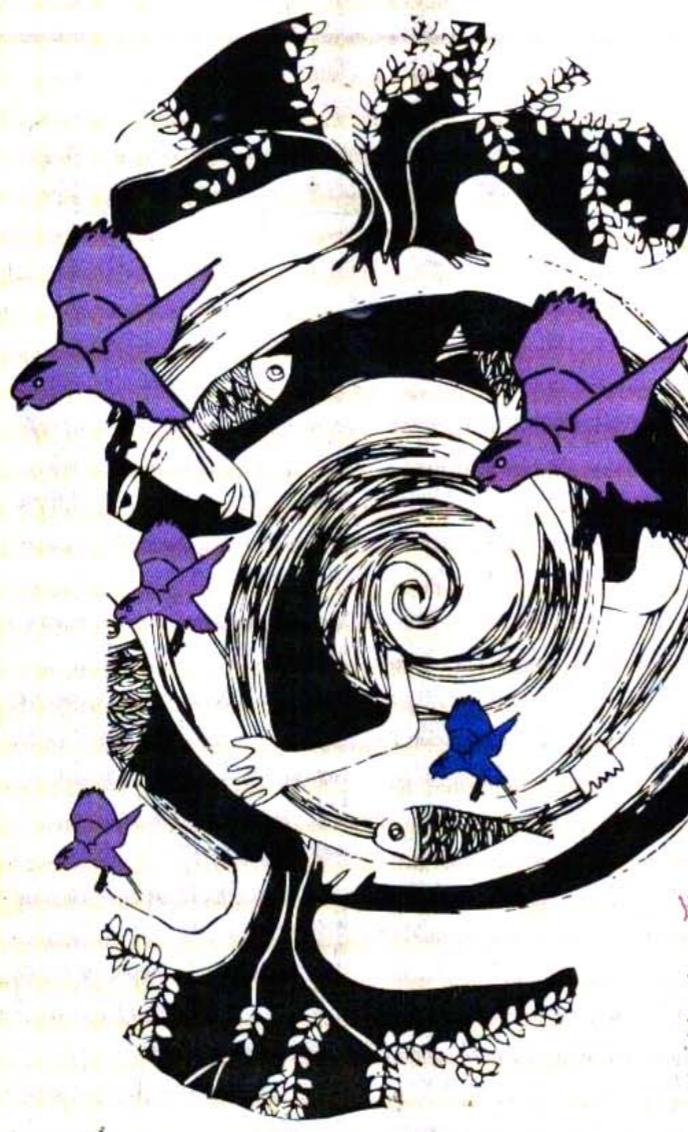
Forty minutes later we arrived in Savar and stopped next to a chor -- a sliver of sandy land rising out of a dying river -- by the road. At the end of the sandy strip stood a swamp, which was somewhere between a river and a bayou. Beyond the swamp, amidst the morning fog, there lay faint dark lines of a village. Soon the sun rose with all its glow; its crimson light spread out all over the marsh, slowly replacing a misty blanket that lay over it.

I asked Andrei, "What about the birds, where are they?" Andrei smiled. Pointing a finger in one direction, he said, "There, right there. So many of them, can't you see them?"

From a distance, the birds looked somewhat like a mass of water hyacinth or lotus floating over the water below.

Andrei smiled again, "Yes, those are birds."

Now it was my turn to be surprised. Never in my life had I seen so many birds in one place. I had no idea that so many birds could actually flock together to cover an entire body of water. We left our car near the sandy strip and walked closer to the swamp. We could hear birds chirping, as if they were whispering among themselves.



art work by sabyasachi hazzra

Some birds merrily hopped from one place to the next. On the other end of the landscape, about twenty birds flew in a colourful formation. Some of the more sporty ones flew up and down, splashing aloud into the water. Andrei, ever ready with his camera and telelens held on a tripod, began taking pictures. Rejoicing

aloud in Russian, he began clicking his camera shutter. At times he would remove his fingers from the shutter and clap, speaking to the birds in Russian, "Go, go, fly. Don't you know how far you have come? Look around and see how beautiful it is."

Andrei danced, coaxing the birds to dance along and to show their grace. As if reciting a poem, he said, "Pretty, how pretty! Look, there is a little village, and further down, there the sky is descending to kiss the earth."

Suddenly we heard the sound of a gunshot. Andrei, startled, looked around; my eyes followed him. Afar, on the left side of the swamp, stood a man jumping in delight with a gun in his hand. Andrei, carrying his tripod on his shoulders, began running towards the man. I followed him. As we drew closer, we saw an elderly man. With a shotgun in his hand, he was pointing something at the water excitedly, "There, there." On the water lay a wounded bird, still fluttering its wings. A kid, aged 12 or 13, was swimming towards the bird.

I turned to the gentleman, "It seems you are an educated man, and yet you have no respect for law. Don't you know it is illegal to kill migratory birds?"

"Who are you, boy? How dare you teach me about law? Where do you come from?" the man hollered.

"Please, don't call me a boy. I am 32 years old and a father of one child."

"Do you know who you are talking to?"

"I could not care less. The fact is you have broken the law. I am a journalist. OK, tell me, who are you? Are you a parliament member, chairman of the local union council, a retired military officer, or a former senior government official? Which one are you?"

"Look young man, you sound rude. I am perfectly aware of the law. Why says it forbids hunting a few birdies?"

"Can you break the law deliberately? You don't look to be poor; neither are you in need of hunting birds to make ends meet. You have done it wrong, do you admit?"

"You better watch your words. It seems all journalists feel we owe them an explanation for everything we do."

"Not an explanation, all I wanted was to ask you whether you knew that killing migratory birds is an offense punishable by our law."

"Look, you have been rude from the outset. I am much older than you, you can't scream at me like that. In fact, I could be as old as your father. I won't tolerate it that some guy like you could show off his journalistic credentials and insult me. No, I won't tolerate that."

"Are you trying to threaten me?"

"My people have little regard for journalists and such people."

"So, you are threatening me, aren't you?"

Meanwhile, the kid swam back to the shore with a rather large duck. It was already dead. With blood dripping down its body, the bird's head hung down and its pupils motionless. Andrei ran to the boy and hurriedly grabbed the bird. Holding it close to his chest, he moaned, "My God! How cruel!"

The hunter gentleman, startled at Andrei's howling, looked up at him with surprise. Andrei, lifting a leg of the dead duck to examine it, saw that it carried a plastic ring. On it was written, "Moscow Zoo, Duck, Series No. 3,009."

Moaning audibly, Andrei fell on the ground.

I stood face to face with the gentleman, "Now, you see, this was a bird from a zoo. You are nothing but a brute, a butcher."

The gentleman, obviously embarrassed, could not find words to respond. He held on to the barrel of his gun and glanced guiltily at Andrei.

Andrei slowly rose from the ground. Bringing the dead bird close to his heart, he turned to face the multitude of birds on the swamp. Addressing them in a somber and anguished voice, he said, "Friends, now go home. Not a moment more at this place."

Andrei's words reverberated throughout the swamp, fading out slowly. Soon thereafter we could hear the birds fluttering. With their wings and feet, they began running on the water. The sound of their wings flapping could be heard all over. As they began flying up above the swamp, the sky became covered with countless chirping birds, drowning the earth with the sound of their flapping wings. They began flying towards the north. All around one could only hear the birds flying and their wings flapping.

When the last batch of birds faded from our vision, we looked at the swamp. Not a single bird was left. Only the morning sunlight shimmered on its yellow, muddy water.

The next day, newspapers reported that the migratory birds that had taken refuge in Savar had left the swamps and nearby ponds. Experts fearing that this might have been caused by a serious environmental pollution urged immediate investigation of the water, soil and other natural elements in the area.

Two weeks later on a Sunday morning, Andrei telephoned me. "My friend, I have been transferred. I am leaving you country for Poland."

"Don't people in Poland kill birds," I joked.

Andrei laughed, "You silly."

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Imagining South Asian Writing in English from Bangladesh

FAKRUL ALAM

It was during the Cold War that some Americans academics began to construct the category of "South Asia Studies". Subsequently, the influx of South Asian students in western universities boosted the demand for courses in South Asian culture as well as politics. A new generation of scholars then took over the term coined by the Cold War intellectuals working with an "Area Studies" outlook in mind adopted earlier to give it a new currency dependent on the value that would be accruing to it because of the large number of South Asians living and working in North America from the seventies onward.

The nineteen-eighties were the years of the brouhaha created by the *Satanic Verses* controversy and the belated acknowledgement in the continent of the burgeoning South Asian presence in North America. Bharati Mukherjee, one recalls, had received the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction for her *The Middleman and Other Stories*, the first South Asian-American writer to be so honored. Already in her preceding collection of short fiction, *Darkness* (1985), she had chronicled with distinction the experience of South Asian immigrants in contemporary North America. Writers like her and Anita Desai, Bapsi Sidhwa and Vikram Seth could now join earlier writers like R. K. Narayan, G. V. Desani, Raja Rao and Nirad Chaudhuri who had attracted the interest of at least a few academics in North America and England since the fifties, to form a body of literature well worth analyzing.

But for someone working in this area in the Indian subcontinent itself, the term "South Asian Writing" has to be reconceptualized so that it means more than the writers of the South Asian Diaspora now residing in the west and much more than the English language productions of writers who originate directly or indirectly from the subcontinent. After all, South Asia is home to at least twenty languages, including English, each of which has its unique and vibrant literature. And notwithstanding the outrageous claim made by Rushdie in *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-57* that "the new, and still burgeoning 'Indo-English' literature represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books" (x), few who knew any one of them really well would agree that it represented the Indian subcontinent anywhere as vividly and solidly as they did.

The term "South Asian Writing", in other words, should not be confined to the expatriate writing being produced in the west or merely literature in English produced by South Asians. It is very much a trans-South Asian phenomenon even though it has resurfaced in a new context in the North American continent and Great Britain. Its claim to fame should be in its ability to represent the subcontinent as a whole and not any one part of it not regionally as well as internationally.

As for South Asian writing in English, the term connotes all writing produced by South Asians in the language from the time of its introduction into the subcontinent as an administrative and "link" language by English colonizers at the end of the eighteenth century. Partly because of colonial

policy but partly also because many Indians saw the advantage of learning and using the language, English started gaining considerable currency in British India throughout the nineteenth century. It was thus that South Asian writing in English manifested itself embryonically in the sub-continent with the colonial encounter. This ultimately led to a literature that would have a trans-India dimension even as the counter-flow resulting from colonization began.

Seen thus, the first published South Asian writer was Sake Deen Mahomet, an Indian who had found himself transplanted to England via Ireland and who published *Travels of Deen Mahomet, a Native of Patna in Bengal, through Several Parts of India (1794)* in England. As is so often the case, prose was the first branch of the literature to flourish, and it did so in this case with Raja Rammohun Roy's essays on religious and social topics. As is also often the case, there were several false starts: poets like Michael Madhusudan Dutt and novelists like Bankim Chandra Chatterji, tried their hands in writing in English before deciding that they would do better to write in Bengali, their mother tongue. Not surprisingly, the initial output was meager and not particularly distinguished. For sure, the verse of Toru Dutt showed promise and the prose of Swami Vivekananda was inspirational but their works did not have a lasting impact. Inevitably, and initially, the earliest writers of the region to make a lasting impression internationally were those who published in the west: Rabindranath's *Gitanjali (Song Offering)* or Ananda Coomaraswamy's works on the art and craft of India and Ceylon.

It is surely no accident that the real beginning of South Asian literature in the Indian subcontinent itself coincided with the struggle for independence. Key works here were Gandhi's *Indian Home Rule* (1919, dictated into English by Gandhi himself); Tagore's *Nationalism* (1917) and essays he wrote like "The Spirit of Freedom" collected in his *Creative Unity* (1922); Nehru's *Autobiography* (1936 but retitled significantly for the American edition of 1941 as *Toward Freedom: The Autobiography of Jawaharlal Nehru*) and *The Discovery of India* (1945). In such works the colonizer's language was being used effectively by this time not only to write back but to propel a discourse that would lead to freedom. It is also no mere coincidence that the ferment of nationalism registered in English would also lead to the emergence in this period of the writers who would truly consolidate South Asian writing as a literary tradition within the region but who would also attract a small but loyal following in the wider world: R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand and Ahmed Ali would pioneer the South Asian novel in English, showing in the process nationally and internationally how the English language could be used to depict the reality of life in the sub-continent effortlessly and in a stream that could run parallel to the vernacular literatures. It is germane too to note that these writers were at that time writing about an India that they saw holistically and not one about to be truncated.

When freedom did arrive in 1947, however, the partitioning of India had two consequences for writing in English in the region that would delay its consolidation in

the region. One was that with the splitting of India it became difficult for the next little while to even conceive of South Asian writing in English as a category; how could one not talk about Indian writing in English or Pakistani writing in English for the next three decades or so from this point onward? The second thing that would happen from now on is that state policy about English would differ considerably from country to country, affecting the course of the literature produced in English in them.

It is pertinent here to note here that the countries of South Asia would adopt quite different policies regarding the English language. These policies inevitably impacted on the development of the literature written in English in each country. India, to take the most important example, originally planned to have English as an official language for only fifteen years. At the end of the period, however, its use in offices was extended indefinitely by parliament which made it an "associate official language" of Hindi. It has ever since grown gradually in importance, also because it has been perceived as a "link" language, the language of higher education and now of "globalization". For all these reasons Indian Writing in English has developed slowly but surely since independence (but spectacularly since Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981)).

Pakistan, on the other hand, had never stopped using English in higher administration. But because it simultaneously pursued a policy of asserting Urdu as the state language, only students educated in a handful of elite schools would get to a position where they could use it creatively. Here, too, the writing would get a fillip with the process that is now identified as "globalization".

In Sri Lanka, as well, the increasing emphasis on Sinhalese after it was made the state language in 1956 meant that there would be a considerable time lapse before Sinhalese writing in English could surface solidly; for a long time expatriates tended to be in the forefront in producing almost all the quality work in the language. As for Bangladesh, because the country's independence is closely linked to linguistic nationalism, English almost disappeared from higher education; for a while not even elite schools were allowed to use English as the medium of instruction. Consequently, and as was the case in Pakistan and Sri Lanka, and in contrast to what was happening in India, there would be only dispersed and tentative attempts to write in English in these three countries. Therefore, nothing that could be confidently categorized as South Asian writing in English could be conceptualized for a long, long time.

What, then, led to the reappearance of the category in the eighties and its consolidation? It now seems possible to talk of South Asian writing in English after the nineteen-eighties at least partly because more and more writers from all across the sub-continent had begun to use the language spontaneously and inventively from this time onwards. Owing to greater international mobility, many of the newer generation of writers were now crisscrossing the globe or had been educated primarily in English. Moreover, there were enough of them in the subcontinent as well as the west to ensure continuous interest in this kind of writing. It must also be said that the international flow of capital, including that asso-

ciated with major multinational publishing companies such as Penguin as Oxford had a lot to do with the spread of South Asian literature in English.

Consequently, recent South Asian writing in English has a lot in common regardless of whether the writers are from India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan or Bangladesh. Also, themes, settings, communities and characters have proved to be distinctly "South Asian". One cluster of themes they depict has to do with colonial encounters, the advent of nationalism, the consequences of partition and nation-building in the nascent decolonized state. To put it somewhat differently, the traumas associated with political upheavals and violence and the depiction of pitfalls encountered when one set of oppressive rulers are replaced with another set of repressive albeit local ones became an easily identifiable theme of the English language literature of the region. Another cluster of themes has to do with endemic poverty and the persistence of religious, class and caste prejudice as well as patriarchal injustice. Still another has to deal with the plight of underprivileged, marginalized or steadily disappearing communities. The alienated consciousness of the writer using English and cut off from mainstream life in the region or existing in an ironic embrace of it also became more and more visible in this body of writing. On the other hand, the alienation induced by immigration and the trauma of the uprooted and the diasporic are themes treated quite often in expatriate South Asian writing from the seventies onwards, although at least a few writers also celebrated immigration and assimilation in the new world. Concepts such as "hybridity" and "mimicry" seem to be particularly suitable for the creations of these expatriate South Asian writers who also often wrote about the trauma of coming back "home".

Politically, too, developments in the region meant that it would now be possible to think of "South Asia" as a category that could have a future. Let us remember here that it was in December 1985 that a summit was held in Dhaka which led to the formation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Although in the two decades that have passed since then, there has been little progress in making this organization viable, and although some might be tempted to discuss it and its offshoots such as the creation of a South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) in 2001 non-starters, it has to be acknowledged that enough people in the region felt that the time for such political, economic and cultural linkages had come by the nineteen-eighties. Tentative attempts were thus made to have conferences on South Asian writing in the capitals of the region and books such as *Post Independence Voices in South Asian Writings* (2001) - edited by two scholars located in the subcontinent - Malashri Lal and Alamgir Hashmi and one based in Canada (Victor J. Ramraj) - were now being published ever so often.

Nevertheless, is it really possible to talk of South Asian writing in English as a body of works that can be considered as a whole or is it a construct of critics working in a niche of English departments in North America and Europe? Is there anything of lasting importance in the term for someone working in the region itself as well as in the western academy, especially if he or she is from a

Dasgupta, a professor of comparative literature at Jadavpur University, regrets "the erasure of our identity as 'South Asians' that has been effected primarily by the hegemonic claims of national identity" (xxi). He suggests that national identity has been gained at the expense of "commonalities" and that such identity was consolidated after partition at the cost of a millennia old "shared history". According to Dasgupta, what is truer about the region is that:

It is this very shared history of colonialism-imperialism and its repercussions--social, economic and political--along with that of its response, this shared historical location as the object of the search for new markets, as well as, of course, shared traditions and practices that regularly defy the dictat of national boundaries, that perhaps best define South Asia" (xxi-xxii).

What Dasgupta does in his compilation is to showcase the shared history through a juxtaposition of texts from Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal as well as India. That his selections from English language texts produced in these countries are seamlessly woven into his anthology and interspersed with selections from texts produced in vernacular literatures confirm to me what is crucial in my evolving notion of South Asian writing in English: I see it now as an intrinsic part of the plural cultures of the region. Dasgupta's *Reader* also shows that like the literatures produced in the vernacular languages South Asian writers in English have been and are articulating deeply felt views about boundaries, colonialism, communalism, class, caste, freedom, nationalism, partition and race and religion through their works. His work is a timely reminder of the "commonalities" this body of writing shares with vernacular literatures even as it underscores the forces of division that have been insidiously splitting the consciousness of the people of these countries.

Certainly, for those of us working and writing in English from the periphery of the South Asian subcontinent there is an even more urgent need to insist on the viability of the category of South Asian literature. There can be no doubt that ultimately South Asian writing in English can only survive as a category because of its ability to represent all South Asians, whether in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal or in the many countries of the world where people from the region have dispersed. That it will be South Asian writing in English--including the best work from the vernacular languages translated effectively into this indispensable "link" language--that can most effectively perform this function can hardly be doubted. It should be the burden of those working in South Asian writing in English to adopt a comparatist, a regional and, in the end, an internationalist perspective, utilizing the spread of the language in the sub-continent and in the diaspora of our people to study original texts in English produced in the language as well as quality texts adeptly translated from our vernacular literatures.

In his thoughtful and timely introduction to *A South Asian Nationalism Reader*, S.