

SHORT STORY

MAHMUDUL HAQUE
(Translated by Shahed Mansur)

Jamshed Choudhury said to his son, "Tipu, go at a run to Tarafdar and tell him to come over. Tell him I sent you, and he is to come immediately." Tipu asked, "If he asks me why, what do I tell him?" "Tell him your head's cracked, you idiot," Jamshed snarled at him. "Tell him 'I don't know.'"

As soon as Tipu left he called out to Jhunu. "Are you going to the academy today?" Jhunu said, "Today we have our examinations." "So what? What will you do by learning how to sing? All that nonsense stops today. I'm not going to stand for it anymore. All of you are getting out of hand any..."

Mariam now came forward to intervene. "Why are you shouting at him? If he wants to go..." "He's not going."

"Why are you raising such a fuss? If something happens would you be able to stop it? Do you have the guts? What are they going to do, stay inside and wag their tails? He is going to go..."

"They're all spoilt, all this love you heap on them has turned their heads. Don't you know I'm saying it for their own good?" Mariam said, "Just because you're afraid because God knows whose corpse is lying outside, you've started this ruckus! Aren't there other people living all around us? Are they all frozen with fear like you?"

"If something happens then you'll come to your senses." "Whatever happens will happen," Mariam said. "Everybody knows we're not into anything fishy. Because of you Tipu doesn't even leave the house. And you've made the girl huddle inside the house all day."

Soon Tarafdar made his appearance. "What's the matter?"

"Have you heard?"

"You mean the corpse, is that..."

"I get up in the morning and see it, right across the window. Can you imagine?" Tarafdar sat down and drank a glass of water, then said, "Haven't been able to find out whose corpse it is? Most likely some guerrilla-lad. What do you think?"

Jamshed Choudhury said, "Somebody from the neighbourhood certainly?"

"Who knows? Nobody seems to recognize him. That's the puzzle. Who's lying there dead..."

"I think it's some neighbourhood kid the army shot during the night and left him there. The parents must be just turning their faces away out of fear they'll get caught." Tarafdar said, "That's impossible. How can they see that and sit by silently? Would you have done it?"

"Anything's possible." "Could be somebody from outside the neighbourhood, just happened to die here." Jamshed Choudhury responded, "What a thing to happen."

What if they start to make a fuss about it? And they can involve us in it if they want to. I wonder if the corpse was found somewhere else, and in the dark somebody out of enmity with me dragged it opposite my window..."

"Do you have enemies like that?"

"Could be. Who knows what lurks in somebody else's heart? I don't consider everybody to be a good person. When I first started to live here I had a lot of problems. The people around here are not good, you know that, you've suffered here too. You're still running back and forth to the courts..."

"Tarafdar replied, 'That's different. Now, what are you going to do about this?'"

"I've forbidden the children to go outside."

"What good will that do?"

"They won't get involved in something stupid."

"Some brains you have got there! The moment I saw it what I did was send the whole family to their uncle's house in Shantinagar because I thought if they stayed here the chances of getting involved in something nasty would increase..."

"What do you mean?"

"Suppose the army uses this as an excuse to make an appearance, the thana and police get involved, what happens then? If they want witness statements there's no way to say no. As it is, I'm leaving for my office soon..."

Jamshed Choudhury said, "So tell me what to do. What a trouble to land into..."

"Why don't you inform the police?"

"And land myself into further trouble..."

"Well, you have to decide what you're going to do. I have to go soon..."

"How about doing this? How about contacting the neighbourhood Razakar camp? If one gave them some money perhaps they'd remove the corpse."

"That they might, but it's better not to have contact with them. None of them are from good families, all of them are dregs from the streets. When I see them I turn my face away. Good to stay at arm's length from them."

It seemed to Jamshed Choudhury as if Tarafdar didn't want to get involved too closely in the matter. He bade goodbye to Tarafdar and stepped back into his house.

He told Jhunu, "Go for your examination. Don't waste any more time, just go..." Mariam raged at him, "All



artwork by apurna kanti das

this for nothing. Why did you kick up such a hullabulloo?"

He sent Tipu off to his uncle's house in Kamalapur. After Jhunu had left, he put his eye to a crack in the window and said, "Why not do one thing?" Mariam asked, "What?"

"How about making an anonymous telephone call to the police station?"

"Why not just go there and report it? Later on they might ask, there was a corpse beside your house so why didn't you report it to us? Then what?" Jamshed Choudhury said, "My head is jammed. You know what, why doesn't Abdul go out at an opportune moment and just drag the corpse off to one side..."

"And then if they start after him about it?"

"Well, supposing he went away after that. Why not let him go off to his village for a while?" Mariam said, "And who is going to look after the house? It's easy to say he should go off to his village, but where are we going to get someone else to do the housework?"

Jamshed Choudhury sighed, "You people are impossible! You can't go without a servant for a single day. If you lived abroad you would be carrying the full load yourselves, all this living-like-nawabs business..."

A little later two khaki-clad Razakars were spotted approaching the house. They came and inspected the corpse, turning it this way and that. Then they knocked on Jamshed Choudhury's door.

Jamshed Choudhury glared at his wife and said, "See what's happened now, just what I had feared."

Mariam said, "Instead of huddling behind a veil inside the house, go and talk to them." Jamshed Choudhury replied, "You've got the brains of a chicken. That's why they call you women. Always coming to a snap decision."

Mariam covered her head with her sari-end and opened the door. One of the Razakars asked, "Where's

the man of the house?"

"Gone to the office. Why? What do you want?"

"There's a dead body lying next to your house."

"Yes, I noticed it this morning."

"Have you informed the police station?"

"Who's going to do it? There's nobody really in the house..."

One of the Razakars was very young. He now spoke up, "It's been lying there all this time, and you haven't bothered to inform anybody about it?" Mariam replied angrily, "Well, that's your responsibility. There's things to do here, there's office and jobs. Where is the time to do these things?"

The other, older Razakar, who had been standing silently with his face averted, now said, "It's lying beside your house. This could be trouble for you..."

Mariam said, "All right, we'll see to it then. We know what happens afterwards with these things..." The Razakar was a bit taken aback by Mariam's spirited demeanour. He said meekly, "Well, this is a legal matter, so..."

"What do you know about legal matters? All you know is how to be a Razakar," Mariam now screeched. "My husband is going to call the Army from his office. There's a Razakar camp right under our noses, and yet we have a corpse lying beside our house. All they do is wander around enjoying themselves. Why can't the body be dragged to the river and dumped there?"

The young Razakar replied, "We came as soon as we got the news."

"Where were you the whole night?"

"The army and police don't have guard duties."

"If the army comes, what will you have to say for yourself? I know you people very well. The army will have you hopping all over the place..."

The young Razakar seemed to think of something and stepped forward. In a low voice he said, "Murad Bux has done this. The body was lying on the other side of the road. He hired some people and had it dragged to the back of your house."

The trouble with Murad Bux had started after they had bought this plot of land in Rayer Bazar. Ever since then Murad Bux had been after Jamshed Choudhury, but had not succeeded in doing anything. Even when the house was being built he had hired some youths who one night had knocked over a side wall.

Mariam said in a commanding voice, "We know that too..."

"So what is to be done now?"

"You find out. You are on duty, and some goons drag a corpse and dump it beside somebody else's house. We'll see what happens when the army comes around." The young Razakar now said uneasily, "We didn't know it then. It wouldn't have happened had we known..."

"There's still time," Mariam replied. "Get a few people and take the body away to Hatkhola. That should take care of the problem. If you need money I can give you some."

After some time Mariam saw that Jamshed Choudhury had turned the dressing table mirror to the side and was sitting very silently at the head of the bed. She said, "What's the matter?"

"The matter is good..."

"Good' meaning?"

"Good' meaning good..." and saying this, Jamshed Choudhury crawled forward on the bed, got down, rushed over to the door and bolted it. Mariam said, "A fine man you are!"

Jamshed Choudhury clasped Mariam in his two arms and said, "After how many days have I got the house to myself. Uh, just give it a thought!" Mariam freed herself from him and said, "You're getting more and more idiotic with each passing day, chee!"

Jamshed, pulling his wife toward the bed, remembered some lines of a song Jhunu would sing:

Mariam closed the door immediately after saying this. A little later the two Razakars returned with some youths. Again the young Razakar knocked on the door. "Auntie," he said, "give us twenty Rupees. We'll dump the corpse in the Buriganga." After giving them the twenty Rupees Mariam let her breath out in relief.

Jamshed Choudhury put his eye to the crack in the window, absorbed in watching the removal of the corpse. When it was lifted from the ground he saw that either jackals or dogs had torn at the face in such a way as to render identification impossible. This was a good development. If the body could be identified then no doubt the problem would be compounded. With his eye glued to the window crack, he grew angrier and angrier at Tarafdar: The selfish fool! If the body had been lying beside his house we would have seen how lightly he would have been gadding about! At this moment it was to the jackals, dogs and even Razakars that he felt grateful to—that Tarafdar was one man without a conscience! He felt bitter towards the whole nation, the people, everything: he had no reverence left for anybody.

After the body had been removed he left his post at the window, called for Abdul, took out some money from beneath the mattress and said, "Here, take the bag and go to the bazaar. If anybody asks, say I'm not at home, I'm at the office." After Abdul had left for the bazaar Mariam asked, "What's going on?"

"What's going on is you," said Jamshed Choudhury in a light-hearted tone, attempting a joke. "Haven't you let loose the rumour that I'm at the office. Now if I go out what'll happen if somebody sees me?"

"You're something else again!"

Jamshed Choudhury said laughingly, "Well, something good came out of it, I got a day off for nothing..."

After some time Mariam saw that Jamshed Choudhury had turned the dressing table mirror to the side and was sitting very silently at the head of the bed. She said, "What's the matter?"

"The matter is good..."

"Good' meaning?"

"Good' meaning good..." and saying this, Jamshed Choudhury crawled forward on the bed, got down, rushed over to the door and bolted it. Mariam said, "A fine man you are!"

Jamshed Choudhury clasped Mariam in his two arms and said, "After how many days have I got the house to myself. Uh, just give it a thought!" Mariam freed herself from him and said, "You're getting more and more idiotic with each passing day, chee!"

Jamshed, pulling his wife toward the bed, remembered some lines of a song Jhunu would sing:

Nowhere am I forbidden to wander lost
In my mind...

Shahed Mansur lives in Sussex, UK.

Remembering Mahmudul Haque (1941-2008)

MAHMUD RAHMAN

"One day everything becomes a story"...

Three years after Partition, a ten-year-old boy moved from Barasat near Calcutta to Dhaka, settling with his family in Azimpur. At West End High School, the teacher slapped him. "That was my *shopnobhongo*." His crime, he learned later, was that he had gone to school without a Jinnah cap. He also found the teacher hard to follow. To his ears, Dhaka rang with strange new dialects. Dialect could bewilder, though later he would learn that it could infuse richness in his own prose. In Mahmudul Haque's writing you will thrill to the voices of 24 Parganas, Bikrampur, and Dhakaia.

If Pakistan meant such abuse, he wanted no part of it. The boy set off all by himself to reverse the journey that had brought them to Dhaka. Train to Narayanganj, steamer to Goalundo, train to Barasat. In time he came back. He admired the poet who lived next door, Mohammed Mahfuzullah. But the older man told him to stay away from a teacher who was a communist. The dictate only sparked curiosity.

One day he finally met Shahid Saber, who came to class as a substitute teacher. In prison Saber had done some translating, but the writing was scattered in multiple scraps of paper. The boy put the jigsaw puzzle together. From copying the other man's writing, he learned the syntax of writing prose.

In his teens, he started to publish stories.

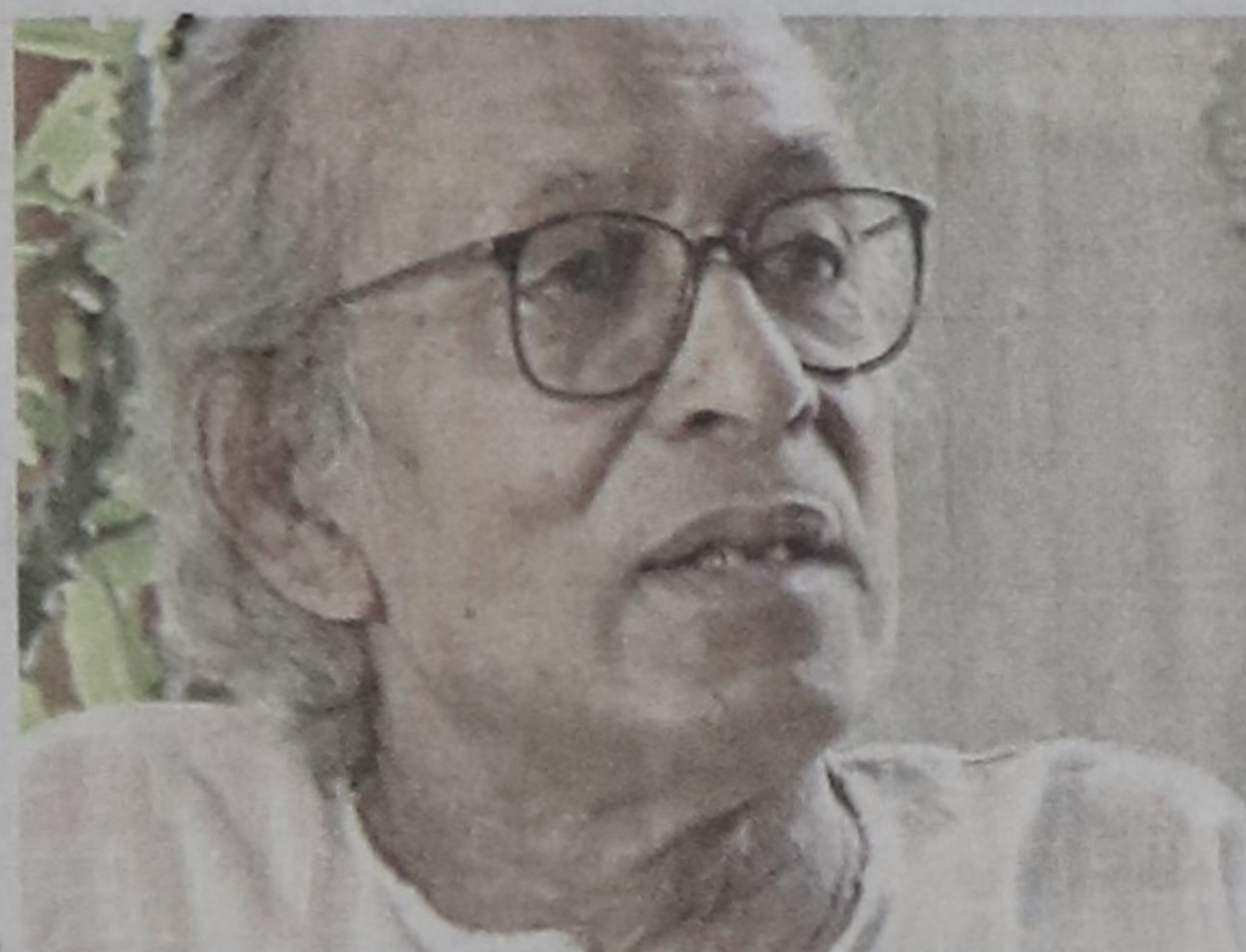
I discovered the author late, through an interview by Ahmed Mostofa Kamal published in 2006. I was fascinated by both the man and author who surfaced in this conversation. I devoured his books. Each novel carried a unique voice. The lack of sentimentality in his 1971-based *Jibon Amar Bone* touched a chord. I was intrigued that his fiction often focused on passive, alienated men.

I began to translate his writing.

I also wanted to meet the man. When I phoned, he answered in a plain voice, "Come." After I showed up, he didn't let me leave for five hours. I only knew him for a year. Now with his passing on July 21, recalling his stories, I try to make sense of the man I got to know as a friend.

In the late 1950s while a student at Jagannath College, he heard that Mizanur Rahman was starting a magazine modelled after the Calcutta *Uttoroth* that had created a stir by including a novel in each issue. His first novel *Draupadi Akashe Pakhi* came out in Mizan's magazine, serialized in three parts, and then discontinued. By this time Mahmudul Haque had become friends with Mizan, but he couldn't work up the courage to ask him why he had dropped his novel. It was not until 1973, after his first book came out, that he finally learned the reason. The new book was praised in *Bichitra* by Mohammed Mahfuzullah, and Mizan confessed that he'd stopped the earlier novel because he'd been hectoring by the very same man, "Why are you publishing him? Why are you trying to ruin him at so young an age?" Mizan had concluded that the novel wasn't good. Now he realized he'd misinterpreted.

Soon after he finished Jagannath College, he went to work, managing the new family business, Tasmen Jewellers at Baitul Mukarram.



With his sharp eye, he would become an expert on stones. He now wrote his stories on the counter, standing up.

In 1967, he moved into a room in Shamibagh with Kajol, his new wife. They were 'undercover' from their families. It was Muharram time and he asked Kajol to visit her family during the mela. He sat down to write the novel *Onur Patshala*. He had been listening to boys playing marbles on a strip of earth along the house. An article on *deja vu* in The New Yorker had buzzed his brain. These elements entered the novel focusing on a middle-class boy caught between the unhappy marriage of his parents and the exciting world on the street, with boys at play and a mesmerizing girl named Sarudashi. He wrote the novel through the night. It would be the only novel he wrote in a single day, but he wrote most of his novels in one or two weeks. The only exception was *Jibon Amar Bone* that took three months.

Mahmudul Haque belonged to a generation of writers who gathered regularly in boisterous addas. One meeting spot was Beauty Boarding in Bangla Bazaar. The heart of these sessions became the poet Shahid Qaudri. With the city's growth, the addas shifted to the Gulistan area.

He recalled one night to me. A new issue of the police magazine *Detective* had just come out, carrying a story of his alongside poems by Shahid Qadri and Al Mahmud. At the Gulistan restaurant, people discussed the poems but no one mentioned the story. Afterwards as they walked over to the cannon, he asked Shahid, "How come you didn't say anything about my story?"

Shahid replied, "Eto upoma keno?" Why so many smiles? He then held out his arms and yanked them down. He shouted, "Langta kore dey! Langta kore dey!" Strip it naked!

Later Mahmudul Haque looked at his story and agreed.

On 25 March 1971, they lived on Road No 15 in Dhanmondi. When the curfew lifted for a few hours on the 27th, he rushed out like a madman, all the way to Sadarghat. He wanted to be a witness to the carnage.

Stuck in occupied Dhaka, life became hard. The store was looted. With a loan, he sold toiletries.

1971 would appear in his writing again and again. The first major creation was *Jibon Amar*

Bone, a complex novel set entirely during that fateful March. The title was a tribute to Pasternak's poem 'Sister My Life'. When the novel first came out, some denounced it for the aloofness of its protagonist from the upsurge. Others were awed by the freshness of its language and its rejection of romanticism.

Until the mid-1970s, Mahmudul Haque set his fiction in the city. He began to crave a rural connection. With a friend as principal of Ichapura College, he embraced Bikrampur.

Whenever he could, he bolted there. His favourite time was the monsoons when the land flooded and people travelled from house to house by boat. The Bikrampur

landscape emerged as a character in the works that came next, *Kalo Borof*, *Matir Jahaj*, and *Khelaghar*.

He heard of a village where everyone was massacred by neighbours during the war. The village had a reputation as a thieves' village. This impelled the story 'Buro Obader Joma Khoroch'. Mahmudul Haque was pained that no one felt that there had been anything wrong with the affair.

I think Bikrampur signified a deeper searching. A child of Partition, squeezed out of his birthplace, he remembered Barasat with both fondness and pain. I believe he was searching for a new sense of belonging.

He stopped writing around forty. People wanted to know why, but he wouldn't answer them. Once he admitted to me, "It's not like I intentionally stopped. That's just how it turned out."

Drafted into the group 'Padabali' that organized poetry sessions, he found the hypocrisy and pettiness alienating him from the literary world. And he became disgusted by the Bangali elite that year after year could see no further than its own *bhag*. It appears his searching led him to Narsingdi, to the man he called Baba. They drank and smoked together, and he believed the man held a deeper wisdom. To understand why he stopped writing I come back to what he repeatedly asserted, that creative output was linked to the energy of youth. It was a retrospective theory, but I do think in his case, his wizardry was connected to his younger self. Then he had unbounded curiosity, he embraced spontaneity, and he wrote in a single flow. His inspiration came from some place in his being where a piece of work would gel and then gush forth. After forty, in the midst of the slower person he was becoming -- a mirror of his own creations -- he lost access to that space. It is not that he did not try to write again. In the early 1990s he produced one story for the magazine *Shoili*. He said, "Writing it was agony."

Mahmudul Haque lost his wife in December. Something snapped inside. Like many couples bound tightly to one another, he too flew away within months.

But what a life! And what gifts he left us.

Mahmud Rahman is translating Mahmudul Haque's novel *Kalo Borof*.

Was Mahmudul Haque left unread?

SUBRATA KUMAR DAS

It was 2:00 on the afternoon of 21 July when I got a phone call. It was Dr. Tapan Bagchi from Ekushey Television. He told me that Mahmudul Haque had died, mentioning that the writer was on my website. Later I made a text on the sad demise and began sending it. Since the death had occurred around 2.30 in the morning newspapers were unable to cover the news that day. I received calls asking who this Mahmudul Haque was. While mentioning *Jibon Amar Bone* was helpful to some, I kept wondering: How could people not know Mahmudul Haque, somebody who wrote novels such as *Onur Patshala*, *Nirapod Tondra*, *Jibon Amar Bone*, *Kalo Borof*, *Matir Jahaj*, *Khelaghar* and *Oshoriri*? Since his death many of his writer-friends are writing in the nation's dailies about Haque's popular presence among them. But was it really so? I do not know and never wanted to know.

I first read Mahmudul Haque's writings when I was a backbencher at Rajshahi University. His *Onur Patshala*, *Nirapod Tondra*, and *Jibon Amar Bone* drew me as I discovered something uncommon in his writings. Those days I was searching out writers who were not on the popular track, which was how I discovered Kamalkumar Mazumder, Amiya Bhushan Majumder, Ashim Roy and Shamsuddin Abul Kalam. Perhaps this was why I found a writer whose books are rarely available in book stalls and still more rarely read by the literati.

During the 1990s when I began writing on Bangla novelists, I collected all the books by Mahmudul Haque. An article was published in *Muktokontho* newspaper (in 'Khola Janala', its formidable literary page) in 1998, where credit goes to poet/editor Abu Hasan Shahriar, who first really introduced Mahmudul Haque to readers. It has to be noted that very few write-ups were published on Mahmudul Haque during his lifetime. The Daily Star published my 'Novels of Mahmudul Haque: An Overview' in February 1999. I'm telling all these because I could not personally get to talk with Mahmudul Haque, and thought that if these writings attracted his attention, perhaps he would search me out. In October 2003 I included a page on him in my website. I reviewed his last book *Oshoriri* in the May 2004 issue of the literary journal *Kali O Kolom*. But he remained unreachable!

To me the writer over these years, in the photos published in daily newspapers, turned from a tall figure with a young face to one with wrinkles. The eyes grew weaker, the spectacles thicker. His Punjabi remained the same, though. The 22

July editions of newspapers displayed a more elderly face. Sometimes my literary acquaintances would talk of their addas with Mahmudul Haque at his home, which coincidentally was in Jhikatala, where I myself have lived for about 20 years. But I never did get to visit him, never got a call from him. Now he's gone forever!

Mahmudul Haque began writing in the 1960s. He wrote his first novel *Jekhane Khonjona Pakhi* (later on renamed as *Onur Patshala*) in 1967. If we take a look at the years he published his novels, it gives us a better idea about the long period of his later silence. *Nirapod Tondra* in 1974, *Jibon Amar Bone* in 1976, *Kalo Borof* in 1977, *Matir Jahaj* in 1977, *Khelaghar* in 1978. *Oshoriri* is around 1980. Later editions of his novels continued to appear; for example, in 1988 *Khelaghar*, in 1992 *Kalo Borof*, in 1996 *Matir Jahaj* and in 2004 *Oshoriri*. He also wrote one volume of short stories *Protidin Ekti Rumal* and a book for juveniles *Chikkore Kabuk*. Mahmudul Haque took up writing when he was about twenty-five and left it when he was only forty, a span of fifteen years. Though he lived for twenty-five more years he never wrote again.

Readers may find *Onur Patshala*, the debut novel of Mahmudul Haque, mysterious. The conventional trend of writing stories in the guise of a plot does not appear in him. The novel delineates Onu's childhood as he goes through many new experiences. Readers curious about the writer's early days may try to find parallels in Onu's life. Onu, unloved and uncared for, is pushed into the company of some urchins who impact his life in a violent way by many unknown realities of life. Haque's second novel *Nirapod Tondra* tells us of Hiran. Setting out from her father's house in response to a call by her fiancé, Hiran flees from her village home but all her efforts end in vain and finally she winds up changing her male partners. Mahmudul Haque wrote a different novel in his next *Jibon Amar Bone*,

which illustrates the inner and outer world of a young man named Khoka. The timeline of the story of *Jibon Amar Bone* is set right before the liberation of Bangladesh, where the first person narrator is Poka (alias Professor Abdul Khalek) telling about the happenings of his childhood and boyhood. In *Kalo Borof*, however, a third person narrator picks up the story, talking about Khalek's present life, and thus the tale achieves a new dimension. These two stories of the same person proceed in alternating voices, with the intermingling of the past and present creating a sharp sensation in readers' minds. In *Matir Jahaj*, the protagonist Joyntal trades in women. He and his aide Monohar Ali undertake numerous ventures that end with the case of Kusum, a beauty. Mahmudul Haque draws his characters with excellence and the story ends in human love, whereas in *Khelaghar* love of divinity is also a focal element. In *Oshoriri*, our liberation war is also traced as it is in the earlier *Jibon Amar Bone* and *Khelaghar*, but Mahmudul Haque's originality lies in his very different treatment of the theme.

Mahmudul Haque's unique use of language lay in simplicity of diction. He disliked difficult language, and disliked writers who wrote in such a vein, no matter how great. But that didn't mean that Mahmudul Haque used language in a conventional way; rather, his language was weighted with more meaning, with unusual flavours. Popular story-telling never entered in his fictions, which is why he could not reach the majority of Bangla readers.

"Can we expect a more spacious novel with loftier ideas from this apparently silent author in the future?" I questioned some ten years back. After all this time one sees that expectations remained unfulfilled. But Mahmudul Haque nevertheless will be remembered in our literature history books for a long time.

Subrata Kumar Das's web site is
www.bangladeshinoveles.com

NOTICE : EID SPECIAL ISSUE

The Daily Star invites submissions to its forthcoming Eid special issue of both fiction and nonfiction pieces. High-grade translations in both categories will also be considered. Such translations should be accompanied by the original Bengali copy. The submissions ideally should not exceed 3500 words. The last date for submission is September 10. The date will not be extended. Submissions should be addressed to:

The Literary Editor
The Daily Star, 19 Karwan Bazar, Dhaka 1215
They may also be sent by email to starliterature@thedailystar.net with 'Eid Issue Submission' in the Subject line.