

SHORT STORY

RASHIDA SULTANA  
(Translated by Khademul Islam)

Fahmid saw the old man emerge from the flat beside the garage leaning on a cane and wearing a white cotton vest and a checkered lungi. A bony old man. He seemed to have trouble walking. But his voice had the roar of a tiger. As he came forward he was screaming (in English):

*"How dare you shout at my boy? Who are you? Why did you shout at him? Because he is a poor boy, do you think you can do and undo anything with him? Who have you come to see? Which floor?"*

Fahmid was taken aback. He said the fourth floor. Fuad Sahib's home. Fuad is my younger brother. Still the old man kept on screaming.

Fahmid felt insulted in front of his wife and children. He too began to shout back, (in Bengali), "You tell me, what have I said to this guard of yours? And this boy of yours who still has all of his milk teeth, didn't you see how he behaved with me?"

*"Don't shout at me,"* the old man kept on screaming. *"Why are you shouting at me, beyadob?"*

Fahmid too yelled back at him, "Why are you shouting at me? I came here on a visit and for nothing at all you're screaming and shouting with me. Your boy—here, you tell him. What did I say to you?"

The thirteen- or fourteen-year-old guard, sensing an opportunity, now stiffened his neck and said, "Huun, yes, you said I was insolent and shouted at me."

The old man joined in, "Yes, I have seen it. You were shouting at the boy. And you did it because he is poor. It is a gentleman's house. You can't do whatever you like here."

Fahmid's wife, seeing her husband subjected to such abuse, could not restrain herself any longer. She said, "You are a respectable elderly person, how can you behave like this? That boy was insolent, which is why Fahmid rebuked him. And you're now calling him all sorts of names, whatever comes to your lips?"

*"You see, your husband is an arrogant person. He has behaved badly with me. Does he know that my two sons are older than him? My elder son is DIG Police, the other one is a full professor at American University. I was deputy secretary in the Ministry of Industries."* The old man continued on in a high-pitched voice.

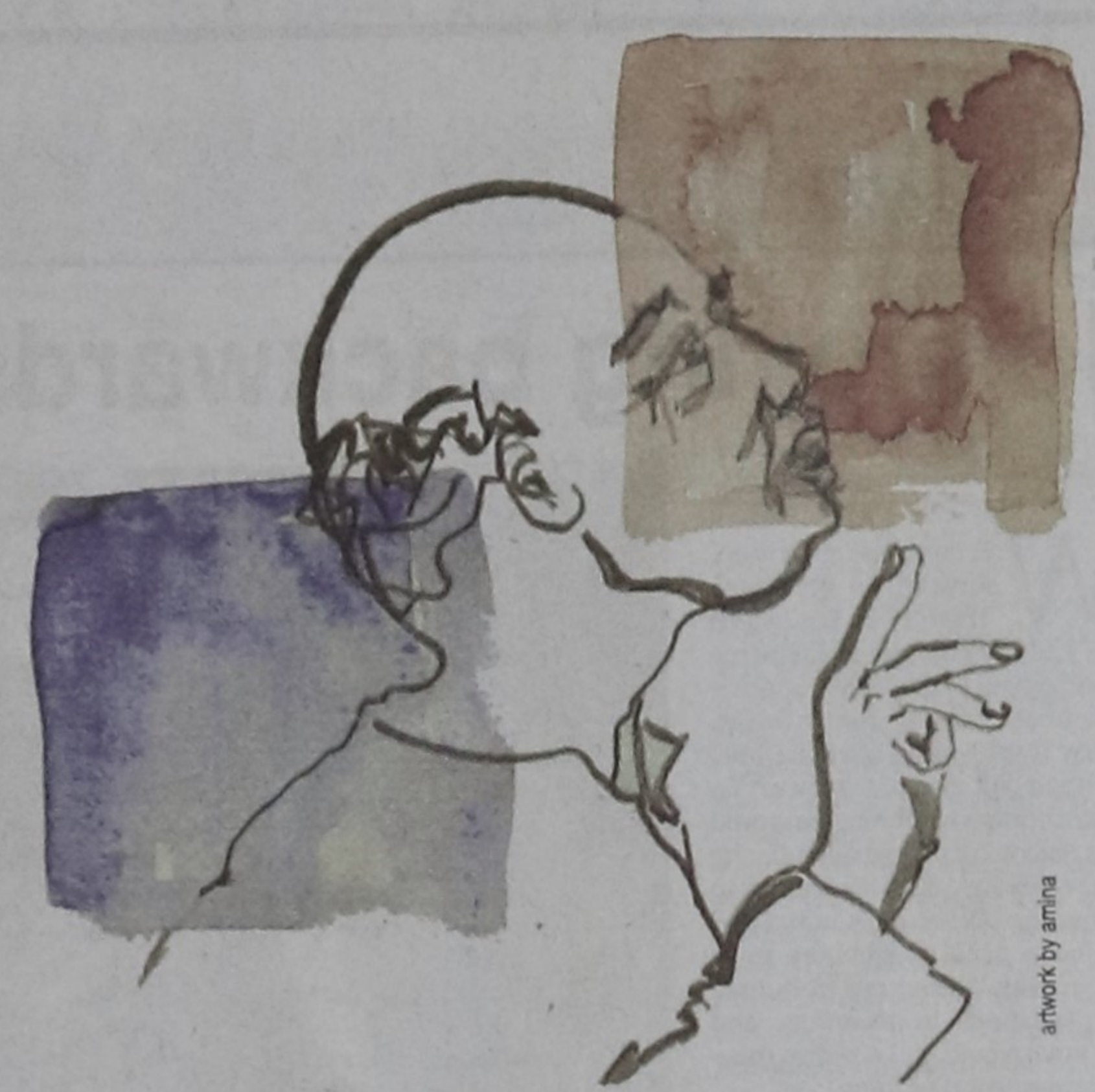
"I have no use for your high-sounding tales. Go out on the road and tell it to other people" --Fahmid said.

Lopa caught hold of her husband's arm and whispered urgently, "The old man is mad. Enough, you stop it! People witnessing this will only blame you for quarrelling with an old man."

Then Lopa turned to the old man, "Uncle, whatever's happened has happened. We're going upstairs. You should too."

The old woman on the ground floor who had been observing all this from behind a parting in the

Retired Bureaucrat



artwork by amina

curtain, on hearing Lopa's efforts to calm the old man down, now took courage and came forward. She took the old man by the hand and led him away, saying softly to Fahmid, "Baba, forget all these arguments."

The old man was still screaming at the top of his voice, *"I'm going to phone my sons and tell them all about this."*

Arriving at his younger brother's new home for a visit, he had honked his car horn at the gates. When nobody came to open them, he had again honked the horn again. A thirteen- or fourteen-year-old darwan type finally had appeared. He had come forward and said, "From now on whenever you visit this building don't use your car horn. We open the gates even if you don't use the horn. And if you honk once, we do hear it. You don't have to honk three or four times. We are not deaf."

Fahmid said, "What? Who do you think you're talking to in that insolent tone? Quite the tongue you have on you."

Fahmid's voice had kept on rising. And a little later there had been the explosion from the old man.

Fahmid's younger brother's wife Molly said, "Bhaiya, forget it. He's got some problems in his head. He sometimes acts like that."

Said Fahmid, "You people are the tenants. The old

man said he was going to call his sons, that he was going to inform them of all that happened."

"They know their father well. That something's wrong with his head. Didn't he speak in English? You know, if he sees guests Bangla doesn't come out of his mouth. And when I wear my white coat to the hospital, then he'll never speak in Bangla with me. As it is, he seldom speaks in Bangla. Of course, when he lashes out at the guards-servants he uses a very refined Bangla then. Didn't he tell you that he had been a high government official?" Molly asked.

"Yes, he did. Anyway, let it go. Now I'm feeling embarrassed about

the whole thing" said Fahmid.

Wearing his spectacles, Abdus Samad was cross-checking Prize Bond numbers. His wife's high-pitched conversation with the maid was making him irritable: "You hoydens, are you going to stop your yammering. Can't you see that I'm engaged in a serious task?"

His wife flew into a rage. "All my life I've seen you checking those numbers, but have you ever got anything?"

"How will you understand? These things are not for illiterate women."

After lunch munching on a paan his wife said, "What will you do with these Prize Bonds? Our two sons are fine. By God's grace they have enough money too. Why would we need more money?"

"I don't like living in our sons' flat building. Didn't you see that some relative of that doctor's who rents a flat behaved badly with me, and those two, my son and his wife, gave me an earful about it. That I don't know how to properly handle the tenants, the guards and servants. If I win the Prize Bond money then I'm going to turn that tin-shed house in Bashabo into a flat building. Keep servants and guards of my own choosing. Stop having to listen to so much back talk from my son and son's wife. My whole life I've never

taken a penny in bribe. Had I done so then I'd have had quite a few flat buildings as grand as this to my name. Then I wouldn't have had to put up with this attitude from my son and his wife."

There was to be a big feast at the house of the uncle who was a member of the village council. The news had been conveyed to Abdus Samad's father. Whenever festivities were held at the Member uncle's home, the arrangements (the buying of provisions, preparation of the guest list, etc.) usually were the responsibility of Abdus Samad's father.

The overseeing of the Member uncle's lands reserved for tenant farming was also his responsibility. The feast was occasioned by the death anniversary of the Member uncle's first wife. Bringing the cow at the bazaar, hiring the cooks, all these were the responsibility of Abdus Samad's father. In the midst of greeting the guests he took out time to ensure that Abdus Samad sat in the front row. Loading meat onto his son's plate, he said, "Here, just eat only the meat. Don't take rice, just the meat. At a feast like this it's best to go after only the meat."

He heaped meat onto the plate. His son gorged on it. And all morning the next day ran repeatedly to the bamboo grove to defecate and then stumble to the ditch farther behind to wash his arse...

He sat down at the table with his wife, son and his son's wife. Ever since he was a child he had always loved to eat meat. When he pulled the beef dish near and lifted two or three pieces of meat on to his own plate, his son's wife pulled it back: "You know your stomach can't tolerate it, don't take too much of it. On top of everything you have high blood pressure too."

Silently, almost without eating, Abdus Samad rose and left the table.

His son had invited his colleagues over for dinner. Quite a few senior officers were also going to come. His wife handed him the pyjama-punjabee she had laid aside and said, "Wear these. And don't go in front of the guests if your son doesn't call you." When he heard that the guests had arrived he put on his fancy Nehru coat and went to the drawing room to sit with them. With much bravado he regaled his son's colleagues with tales of his office and career. All in English. Said that it had been during his time that the bureaucracy had experienced its golden age. Told tales about the honesty, dedication and sincerity of the officers then. That the bureaucracy nowadays was passing through very bad times. He sat in the drawing room nearly the whole time. At one time his son went into the inner rooms of the house, returned and said, "Abba, Amma wants to talk to you."

Samad Saheb rose and went inside. And didn't come back. When it was time for dinner the son's colleagues enquired, "Where is Uncle?"

He came back to sit down and eat with the guests. He ate whatever he wanted to: roast, meat rezala, ilish fish, prawns, which upset his stomach the next day. He kept running to the bathroom repeatedly.

Whenever Molly met and salaamed him on her way to or back from the hospital he would enquire with a fond air: *"How are you, young doctor?"*

If she happened to meet the old lady, the latter too would say, "My dear, you're such a busy person. Hospital, the children, looking after the household all must keep you busy. If you get the time do drop in for some tea."

One day on her day off Molly went downstairs. After the incident with Fahmid the old man's son had come by to tender his apologies. When Molly went over both the son and the son's wife were at office.

The old lady upon seeing her had said, "Come in, come in, dear" and had led her into the drawing room. She had then called out to the old man, "Look, who's come."

The old man immediately upon entering the room had exclaimed, *"How are you, Madam Lady Doctor? Why alone? Where are your children? Are they in school? I love children so much. When I was ADC general in Faridpur, on national days I used to be the chief guest at the district parade. March pasts of the school children were really gorgeous."*

"Yes, Uncle. The children are at school. How is your health?" Molly asked.

*"Not good. Severe back pain. In fact I was hospitalized for a long time. I was coming from Chittagong. Bus accident. The pelvic bone was displaced. One long year I was in hospital."*

The old lady went into the kitchen to prepare tea. The old man wanted to know, *"Who is the DG of Health now?"*

"Mozakker Ali, Uncle," Molly replied.

*"He must be much junior to us. Bureaucracy has got completely spoiled now. Getting more and more corrupt by the day. Its golden period was in our time. I was posted in the Health Ministry also. The secretary at that time was S M Ali. He was really the son of a tiger. A tiger cub. Even the minister wouldn't bother him. He liked me very much. He used to say to me, 'You are a real officer, Mr. Samad. When you start something you are sure to finish it.' He liked me so much because I was one hundred percent sincere and honest. All my seniors used to like my Notes and Drafts very much. When I was a school student, my essay was awarded first at the divisional level. All my seniors were pleased with my writing skills."*

Molly listened attentively to the old man's talk. When she stood up after finishing her tea, the old man and the old lady both accompanied her to the door.

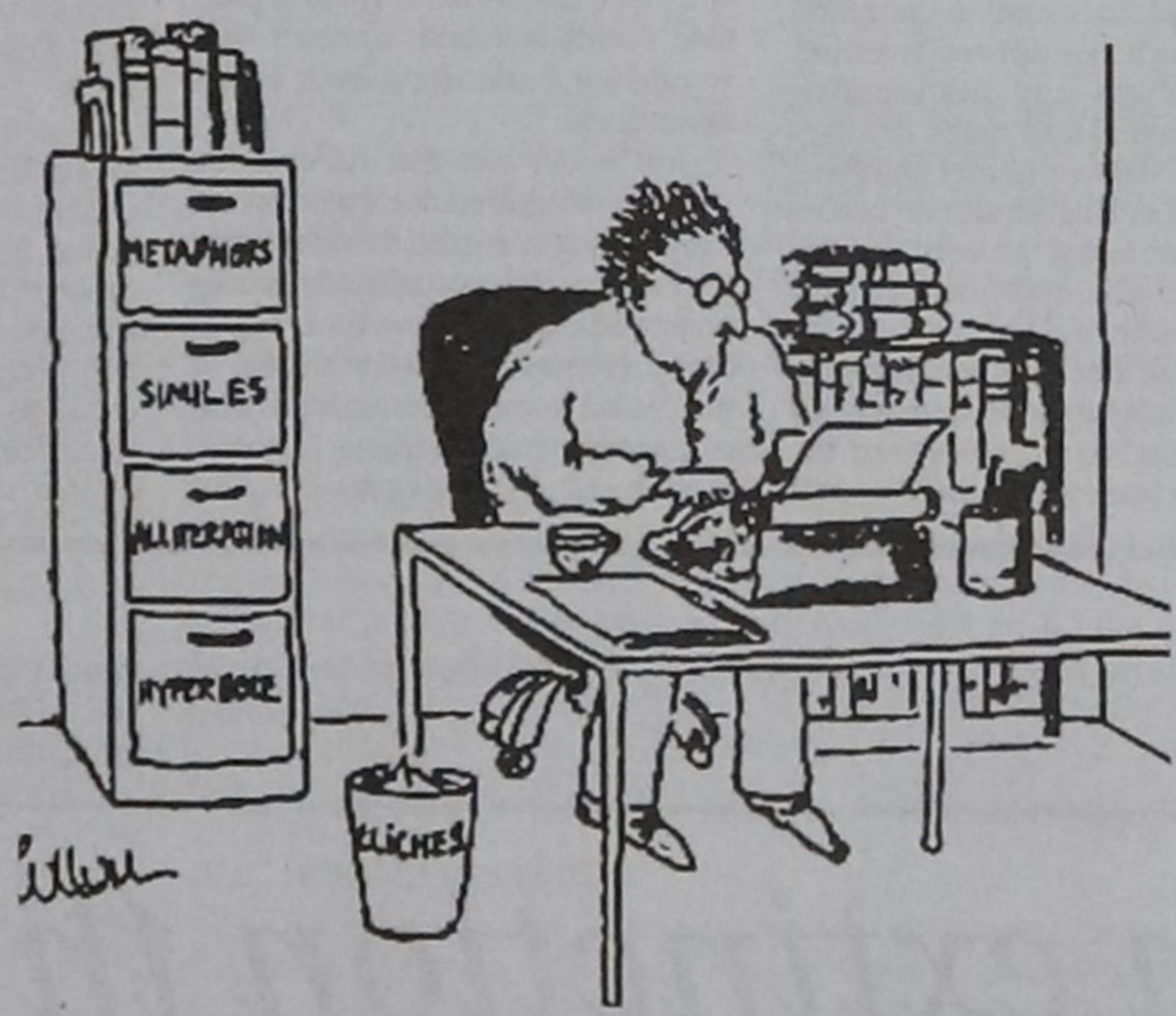
Rashida Sultana is a short story writer and poet. Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.

Commercialization of Bengali Literature: mercenary writers and publishers

RASHID ASKARI

Although there rage furious debates as to when precisely the golden age of Bengali literature was, one thing is sure: Contemporary Bengali literature is at its farthest point from it. We don't really know how we may symbolize this stage of our literature! With our printing media coming under the powerful influence of its electronic cousin, pieces of classic Bengali literature are surviving on the whims of electronic media and thereby fall prey to indiscriminate dissection at the hands of second- and third-rate serial soap opera makers. While it may be saving them from sinking into oblivion, it is at the cost of distortion. Increasing public interest in audio-visual media has given rise to serious misunderstandings about the consequence on our poor literature. The existence of Bibhutibhusan's *Pather Panchali* or Tagore's *Ghare Baire* owes more to the celluloid versions of Satyajit Ray than the old printed texts which are only gathering dust on the library shelves. These classic books are reportedly reaching wider audience by turning into films.

As a matter of fact, people are by and large losing interest in the act of reading itself. It appears as if reading is a wearying task. Back at home after a long day's work, readers, tired and exhausted, tend to fall back upon the electronic media for easy and effortless entertainment. The tendency towards reading merely to sit for examinations or for getting good results may be unabated, but the habit of reading for the pleasure of it is alarmingly on the wane. It is a big hurdle standing in the way of literary pursuits.



of being able to quickly dash off a manuscript's, and have long back sold their soul to Mammon and learnt to sacrifice real literary values and moral considerations on the altar of profit. Bengali 'literature' currently is in a dreadful state of exploitative commercialization.

What do these commercial authors contribute to our literature? Delicious trash! The more hack work the better! They are writing tacky novels, tawdry stories and dirty doggerels which cater to popular taste and bring the authors cheap popularity. So the authors are very careful to cater to their reader's feelings. Things that readers are fond of on no account must be overlooked. The likes and dislikes of the readers, their conventions, stereotypes and biases are carefully manufactured and nurtured by these authors. The audience's literary taste has thus been held manipulated, and held hostage by such authorial gimmicks and tricks, and the former have learnt to dance puppet-like to the tune their favorite authors. This literature is similar to the pulp literature which began to appear in the West (the 'penny romances and the dime novels') during the First World War and remained popular in the 1930s. Pulp literature was what Aldous Huxley memorably termed as "inconceivable twaddle". However popular it may prove to be in the short run, it could not survive over the long term due to the absence of true literary essence.

This is the present condition of our Bengali literature, which is in a very sorry state. This can be called commercial literature, growing amongst a circle of mercenary authors and publishers. This sort of literature is intended for profit only, without regard to quality. Although it may taste sweet, it is not worthy of being served at the same table with quality literature. It is 'disposable literature' for, to be read once and tossed away. We return to it a second time only at gunpoint.

Since this stream of literature is gaining the upper hand, the flow of true literature is waning rapidly. The soft glow of genuine art is being overshadowed by the dazzling neon lights of the fakers and imposters. Due to lack of financial support creative writing in Bengali is not being stimulated. If anybody does comes forward with a genuine work of

fiction, he will not find a publisher. If he publishes the book by himself he will not survive the cut-throat competition with the get-rich-quick writers, the publishing establishment and their high-selling junk. Which is the outwardly unimpressive books of helpless writers are failing to catch the readers' attention and are falling headlong into the ditch of monetary loss. Naturally they feel demoralized and do not want to write any more. Nor does any publisher want to take risks with these writers and their books. The publishers also show scant interest in publishing the books of new authors' books which in turn discourages the advent of fresh talent.

Small wonder that some good writers who earn their bread and butter by writing are also turning to commercial works. If the readers do not buy their books, their livelihood is threatened. They have become alive to the possible dangers of unpopularity and are trimming their sails accordingly. Therefore, they too have applied themselves to keeping their readers well supplied with what can be called 'delicious' literature. The more the demand grows, the more supply increases and the busier the market gets. On the basis of demand, the supply is primed and the price is fixed. From this vantage point, this sort of literature may also be called 'open market literature'. Literature capable of meeting the needs of market is surviving and the one failing to do it is getting extinct. Since the basic structure of the society is founded on a capitalist economy, 'open market literature' has grown as an offshoot of what we call 'open market economy' which is born of the capitalist economy. This is how, commercial literature, its unprincipled practitioners and mercenary allies grow in the dumping ground of vulgar capitalism. Nirad C. Chaudhuri put it best when he wrote that "Heedless to their own tastes the goat-authors write and continue to write what the readers want to read...writing can be said to be the profession of the goat-writers" [*Amar Devetter Sampatti*]. The primary objective of their writing is profit.

Bengali literature today is very badly damaged by these "goat-authors". To fulfill the limitless demands of the open market, these writers are tirelessly producing tons of trashy literature and general readers are being made to swallow this with much lip-smacking relish. This is literary exploitation, very crafty and cunning. The tools of this exploitation are the commercial authors and their unscrupulous publishers, both shaping and reacting to popular tastes. The prospect of an ensuing plague is looming large.

How can we combat this literary plague? This calls for a large-scale revolution in our literature. It should be time for an awakening, for an awareness which may lead to an upsurge among the writers, the readers, and the lovers of art and literature for a radical change. The consciousness emanating from this rude awakening will help develop creative writers and sensibility and artistic bent for the readers. This may also help separate the sheep from the goats and rid true literature of the false one. We ought to give a pitiless farewell to this fake literature and a warm welcome to the true one. Although it is easier said than done, it is not impossible.

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Kali O Kolom Srabon 1415--July 2008

KHOKON IMAM

This issue of *Kali O Kolom* continues to demonstrate the literary journal's inherent vitality and variety. A most interesting piece is the essay titled *PurboBongo Progoti Lekhak O Shilpi Shangha* penned by Mohammed Nazrul Islam. It takes the reader on an emphatic tour of radical politics and cultural activities that formed the locus of oppositional politics in the then East Pakistan against the West Pakistani regimes during the 1940s and '50s. The cast of characters is vivid, ranging from Dharendra Nath Dutta (the man who first raised the issue of language and linguistic rights in the Pakistan parliament) to Khan Shamsur Rahman (an ex-CSP bureaucrat who wore a red tie to a leftist meeting in Swadarghat near the Baptist Mission Church in Old Dhaka) to Hasan Hafizur Rahman (the poet-activist who brought out the famous Ekushey collection of poems, and was later posted to the Bangladesh mission in Moscow), with the settings ranging from Kolkata to Chittagong to Dhaka, and the language both spirited and nostalgic, evoking a period of our history about which we remain sadly under-informed today. The art section is specially strong in this issue, with, among other pieces, Borhanuddin Khan Jahangir and Mansur Ali writing on the veteran artist Shafiuddin Ahmed, poet Robiul Hosain explicating on artist and cartoonist Sisir Bhattacharya's much-discussed recent art show, and coverage of the exhibition of the works of new artists at the Shilpakala Academy (18 May to 6 June) by Zahid Mustafa. An article on Simone de Beauvoir however is ordinary and descriptive, as is the somewhat strained writing on fictionalized history by Sagar Chowdhury, a subject given traction by the overhyped 'Hitler diaries'. There is an interview of Amitav Ghosh which does not reveal anything new to readers of his English books, though that may not hold true of readers of Bengali prose. There are three short stories ('Reporter' by Shaymol Mojumdar and 'Thaيدا' by Dilara Hashim are notable) while for the first time there's also been published a micro-fiction, i.e., a very short, short story. Two articles on a couple of Bangladeshi writers make for particularly good reading: the lead piece by Sarkar Abdul Mannan on the recently deceased Shahidul Zahir, and a discussion on Hasan Azizul Haq's collection of short stories *Bidhobadaye Kotha O Onannanyo Golpo*, which apparently was written some time back and has only recently been published. There is a very good review by Shamsuzzaman Khan of Papri Rahman's striking novel on Jamdani weavers *Boyan*, where the reviewer expertly discusses the Dhaka regional dialect in which the novel has been written (pointing out the very unfamiliar words that readers would not know, for example, the word '*tolok*' which means tobacco leaf when it is too strong—in fact, anything too overtly spicy, temperamental or powerful is referred to as '*tolok*'). The cover art is 'Phul' by Rashid Chowdhury (1932-1986).

Khokon Imam works in a Dhaka NGO.

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. 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 as Word attachment to starliterature@thedailystar.net with 'Eid Issue Submission' in the Subject line.