

A martyr's tale, the story of tea and beating cancer

Syed Badrul Ahsan travels through a diversity of thought



Shaheed Buddhijibi Selina Parveen
Sharokgrantha Shomoy Prokashon

Selina Parveen remains for this country a reminder of the immense tragedy we went through in 1971 and especially in the days immediately prior to the liberation of Bangladesh. She was one of the many intellectuals picked up by the goon squads set up by the Pakistan occupation army --- Razakars, Al-Badr, Al-Shams --- in the three days preceding the surrender of 93,000 Pakistani soldiers on 16 December. Not one of those hapless Bengalis came back to tell the tale of torture, of the inhumanity that the Pakistanis and their local Bengali collaborators perpetrated on them. Some of them were never found.

Selina Parveen's corpse, mutilated and in a state of gross decay, was of course found, along with those of many others. She lay, hands and feet tied, eyes bound with cloth and body pierced by what was evidently bayonet assaults, in what has come to be known as the Rayerbazar killing fields in the capital. She and her fellow dead were not murdered there, but those who took their lives made sure that the bodies were dumped there in all the depravity that brutality can call up in men of insidious intent. These bodies were spotted and recovered on 18 December, two days after Bangladesh finally became free of Pakistan. And once the news travelled all over town that corpses littered the place, families and friends of those who had been picked up, unbeknownst to the rest of the population, made their way to the spot in expectations of finding their loved ones. The stench was overpowering. But that did not deter men like Shamsher Chowdhury (who went looking for brother Munier Chowdhury), Enayetullah Khan, Askar Ibne Sha'ikh and scores of others from scouring the area. It was Shamsher Chowdhury, as he notes in his article in this commemorative collection, who spotted the corpse of Selina Parveen among the many other corpses lying in a ditch in various postures brought about by

intense torture. The rest of the story is known. Parveen's body in Rayerbazar has since become etched in the Bengali mind as a painful reminder of the pogrom the nation was subjected to in 1971. It is a recapitulation of what the collaborators of the Pakistan army, in the shape of the Jamaat-e-Islami, perpetrated in that year of unrelenting agony. And the pity is that many of the leading figures involved in the killings went on not only to survive but also move up in free Bangladesh's political and social environment. The men behind the creation of the Razakar organization, the Al Badr and Al Shams have been part of the governmental process thanks to the many ironies of politics in this country. Young university students who allegedly played a prominent role in the abduction of intellectuals in December 1971 and disposing of them have entered such hallowed precincts as the civil service, with no one to check into their background.

And therein lies the sadness associated with the martyrdom of Selina Parveen. She was the only woman among the large body of intellectuals abducted in those few days before the emergence of Bangladesh, obviously because of the loudness with which she had linked herself to the cause of Bengali nationalism. This anthology is a series of tributes to her and a deserving one it is too. For years after her murder, even as reflections on other dead intellectuals went on apace, discussions on Parveen's life and death remained curiously limited and muted. The reason could have been the sheer paucity of information on her, save her role in initiating and keeping alive her journal *Shitalipi*. It was her baby and Parveen worked for it with a passion that only one in love with her creation can.

But there are too the other aspects of the story of Selina Parveen's life. She did not go beyond school where education is concerned. For a time she served as matron in a hospital. And then, as one naturally endowed with intellect, she drifted off into journalism. There was a quiet spirit in her. Tall and beautiful, she embodied Bengali womanhood as it has so often been depicted in the imagination and fiction. And part of that womanhood has always been a strong presence of purposeful thought in the personality. Not particularly happy in marriage, Parveen thought the world of her son.

The son has tried repaying his debt to his mother. This anthology is proof of that devotion. Some of the leading lights of the country come together to recall a woman who went to her death even as the country she waited to be born was inexorably coming to life. She missed that great moment by three days. And she has been missed by a sad, grateful nation.

Selina Parveen would be seventy-eight this 31 March.

YOU may not have tasted cocoa. And you may not quite be drawn to coffee. But tea is something else. It is there even if you do not need it. You imbibe it even when you know you can do without it. No conversation moves without a sip of tea, or with reference to tea. You meet people over a cup of tea. And if you have been paying attention to the English speaking of their customs, you may just have stumbled on the idea of high tea.

Here, in this revealing work on tea --- so revealing that you just might be tempted to think that the book is actually a long biographical tale of the growth, life and assimilation of tea in your internal system --- M. A. Zaman opens the windows and doors wide to an understanding of what tea is all about. And he should know, for he has been deeply involved with tea and the many facets of its production in Bangladesh. Consider the way he starts off. The calorific value of a six-ounce cup of tea, he tells you, is four; and that of a similar cup of coffee is eleven. An adult Briton drinks six cups of tea a day on average. In America, conditions are slightly different since it is only of late that tea has gained popularity with Americans. Where Bangladesh is concerned, tea used to be an urban priority. But that has changed. Tea is today a significant drink in its villages.

And do not forget that tea, the single commodity produced in Bangladesh under a plantation system of agriculture, happens to be a leading cash crop for the country. Think of Sylhet and you

room for other kinds of interpretation.

The beauty in Zaman's work is that he makes sure that no banality comes into his narrative. He proceeds from one stage of the story to another. History buffs, those keen about the story of tea, cannot but recall the pioneers who caused tea to plant itself in these parts. Kenny Smith left Tilbury on the Thames in an old boat of about 1500 tons in November 1893 (echoes of Melville, as in *Moby Dick*, when a damp, drizzly November makes Ishmael take to the sea?) and made his way to the east, to India in particular. Five weeks after his departure from Tilbury, Smith reached Calcutta. That was the beginning. The rest followed. And as you flip through the pages, old names, perhaps lost to time, suddenly rise upward and remind you of the glory days when tea was taking increasingly wider swathes of territory in India. There was the Chandpore Tea Estate. And then of course there was --- and is, always --- Calcutta. It was the headquarters of the tea industry, as Zaman notes, in India and from that vantage point served as the link between the districts producing tea and distant Britain.

There were other Englishmen besides Kenny Smith. Away from home, they needed all those human essentials that held up life as a normal activity. And how they were able to do that is an image you come across in descriptions of the social affairs of the early planters. It reads like fiction, or so you might suppose. It is all too real, though. All planters necessarily were members of what was known as the Surma Valley Light Horse, a cavalry brigade. There were the people needed for the nurseries given over to the production of tea. Santhals, Urias, Deshwales and Madrasies populated the area. Ninety nine per cent of the coolies were Hindu; and labourers were quickly organized into gangs of fifty or sixty men and women led by sirdars and sirdaris.

That is the history of the beginning of tea in this part of the world. And once you are through with it, move on into Zaman's own story. His role at Finlays and in the tea gardens keeping discipline, et al, are the centrepiece of the tale. Of course, within that telling of the tale comes, as it must, the political dimensions of the human struggle in Bangladesh as they shaped up in the late 1960s and were to reach fruition in 1971.

CANCER kills. And with the background it has come stepped in, it will go on killing until science points a way out of it, someday. But that is not exactly what Ian Gawler would like to agree with, let alone pass on to others. In his motivational work, *You Can Conquer Cancer*, he obviously felt it was more important for individuals afflicted with the disease to remain on top of the situation. Cancer, he argued, could be subdued.

And now in this admirable translation of Gawler's work into Bengali, Shamim Khan presents

the entire case for a psychological resistance to cancer before readers in this country. The difficulty is that not many are willing to pore through works that are strictly of a technical nature. More tellingly, sadness that broadens out into tragedy (and cancer is tragedy, whether you like it or not) is a thought that people are forever willing to brush away from their consciousness. No matter. Gawler, himself a warrior triumphant in the battle against cancer, shows in his attitude (and Khan captures it powerfully) that the ailment need not be a source of misery through pushing people to their graves. And yet, as is argued in this translation, there is more to a tackling of cancer than plain optimism. A prime principle applied to a handling of the affliction is reflection on it. Or call it meditation. Emphasis is thus placed on the soul rather than on the more commonly talked about passive therapy. Gawler referred, in his original work, to the diagno-



Cancer Bijoy Ian Gawler
Trans. Dr. Shamim Khan Mowla Brothers

sis proffered by Dr. Ensley Myers. And Myers did that through his acclaimed work, *Relief Without Drugs*.

Shamim Khan holds up, in faithful measure, Gawler's stress on mental strength and psychological preparation in handling cancer or, in the extreme, coming to terms with it. Cancer need not be an agonizing, frustrating wait for the end of life, and one of the ways of making sure it is not is through bringing logic into the battle against it. Add to that the matter of food, that slight detail of what cancer patients should eat or should abjure. Take, for instance, the good that comes of eating bread prepared from wheat (atta in local parlance). And it will help immensely if vegetables are not skinned but are simply washed clean and then consumed. People who have seen their weight increase are more likely to have cancer. Gawler's simple diagnosis: eat less, eat little.

And so it goes on, this relentless sprinkling of ideas.

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Of passion and revelations of historical cruelty

Farida Shaikh is intrigued by a narrative of love and crime

THE *Reader* is German law professor and judge Bernhard Schlink's autobiographical novel dealing with the difficulties of the young generation in understanding the origin and magnitude of the Holocaust as its witnesses and memory begin to fade away.

The novel is a departure from Schlink's detective writings where the main character is *selb*, the German word for self. This work is his meditation on guilt, culpability and accountability. The *Reader* is a challenging and a moving book, with questions and moral ambiguity. Schlink's theme revolves around responsibility and the choices before an individual or a society and the burden of guilt borne by the generation of Germans that lived through the war and that which came after the Holocaust and the Nazi regime.

Schlink's literary style and first-person approach impel the reader into a deep understanding of the protagonist's psyche, his perspective and the limitations leading to an overall familiarity and intimacy. The illiteracy of the lead female character is a metaphor and conveys a sense of dramatic irony. Carol Brown Janeway's English translation of the work reads beautifully.

A film adaptation of *The Reader* by Stephen Daldry in 2008 was much acclaimed because of the performance of Kate Winslet as the main female character.

The story, in three parts, takes place in different time periods and places, each part reading as complete. It is tied together by the main character, and keeps the autobiographical form of the novel. Part I of the story is in the

city of Heidelberg, West Germany, 1958. A brief encounter between Michael Berg, 15, suffering from hepatitis, and single woman Hanna Schmitz, 36, tram ticket collector, sets rolling a torrid love affair beset by physical closeness entwined by reading aloud classical literature such as Homer's *The Odyssey* and Chekhov's *The Lady with the Dog*. The title of the book is a metaphor. In the German language the verb *vorlesen* applies only to reading aloud.

The emotional distance maintained between the two lovers is stark, and gives a levelled moving tone to this highly sexual piece of writing. For Michael it is his first sexual experience, and for Hanna it is a way to ward off her intense loneliness and mental agony, in a way a form of emotional exploitation. Some months into the relationship, suddenly, Hanna disappears. Michael goes through a guilt trip thinking it is on his account that she has left. The memory of Hanna affects all his later relationships with women, and his short unhappy marriage. The burden of guilt is introduced in this part. Physical closeness over emotional distance in a love affair is questioned. Carnal desire combined with mental exhilaration does initiate the moral ambiguity that Schlink upholds in this book.

Part II is about eight years later in Auschwitz, Poland. Michael, a law student, is observing a war crimes trial of some five middle aged SS women guards for allowing 300 Jewish women, trapped in a church, to die in a fire. The bombing incident is chronicled in a book written by one of the few survivors, who immigrated to America after the war and is a

witness at the trial. Hannah Schmitz is one of the defendants. She accepts supervising responsibility for the women guards, contrary to evidence proving otherwise. She is accused of writing the account of the fire which at first she denies, but later admits, in order to avoid submission of a sample of her handwriting.

Michael is stunned to see Hanna. He is all shaken up by



The Reader
Bernhard Schlink
Vintage International

emotional eruptions, feels guilty for having loved a Nazi criminal and is even more flaggasted at Hannah's admission of full responsibility for writing what she had not written. It is only a ploy to hide her dark secret: she is illiterate.

Hanna in the past refuses promotion that would give her authority to kill the women

directly. Instead she takes in the weak, sickly women and has them read to her before they are sent to the gas chambers and so makes the last days of the women bearable. She remains gripped in panic for fear of being discovered to be illiterate.

As Hanna is sentenced to life imprisonment, Michael could have saved her by disclosing her secret. Instead he makes the choice to withhold what he knows to guard his own connection with a Nazi criminal. Is this betrayal or hiding connections with a war criminal? His buried emotions corrode him continuously.

Michael is also confronted by the legal history, his own area of research. Following the argument on the prohibition of retroactive justice '... Was it sufficient for the ordinances under which the camp guards and enforcers were convicted or were already on the statute books at the time they committed their crimes? Or was it a question of how the laws were actually interpreted and enforced at the time they committed their crimes and that they were not applied to them.'

Part III is on the end of Michael's studies, beginning of his training and interest in history and sociology. The time coincides with a student's upheaval, the real reason of which is '... coming to grip with the Nazi past.' Sometimes Michael thinks 'that dealing with the Nazi past was not the reason for generational conflict that drove the students' movement but merely the form it took.' More importantly, 'how could those who had committed Nazi crimes or watched them happen or looked away while they were happening or tolerated the

criminals among them after 1945 or even accepted them --- how could they have anything to say to their children?'

Hanna survives her twenty years of imprisonment. She is now literate and writes in a childish way and has been reading about camp history and Holocaust survivors such as Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, and Tadeusz Borowski Michael.

In the meantime, Michael with fond feelings arranges for Hannah employment and a place to stay once out of prison. In 1984, after twenty years as Hannah is about to be released, she once again disappears, this time for ever. The prison warden informs Michael that Hannah has left for her an assignment to give all her money to the survivors of the church fire.

Michael is heartbroken over the loss of Hanna. He faithfully carries out her wishes. He visits the surviving Jewish woman who is then living in New York. She is the writer of the book on the last death march from Auschwitz. She hears Michael, takes the tin but refuses to take the money in it, for that would mean granting Hannah absolution. She asks him to donate the money as he sees fit; he chooses a Jewish charity for aiding literacy, in Hannah's name. Returning to Germany, Michael visits Hanna's grave for the first and last time.

The Reader is a poignant story of love as beautiful as a well orchestrated symphony. The reading of the book is like riding a horse gracious and graceful, with an interplay of bodily sensibilities in harmony with mental capabilities within the ambit of Spinozistic philosophy.

Farida Shaikh is a critic.

AT A GLANCE

Manto's Golpo Shomogro 1
Trans. Jafar Alam
Uttoron

Jafar Alam has been a conscientious observer of politics as it is related to undivided India. He has studied the life of Bahadur Shah Zafar and has recently translated the short stories of Quadrutullah Shahab. And now he brings into his repertory some of the tales that have regularly upheld Saadat Hasan Manto's literary reputation. An engrossing read.

Maa-er Ohongkar
S.M. Mizanur Rahman
Publisher: Asmat Ara Rahman

A small collection of poems, these are reflections of the writer's patriotic feelings about his country. In a way, they are what such poetry is always about. In quite another way, the poems here are a hint of Mizanur Rahman's thoughts as he dwells on the history and heritage that have shaped Bangladesh.

Contemporary Nineteen Great Poets of Asia
Ed. Yubak Anarjio
Asia Link, London, New York

You have a composite collection here of poetry from all over Asia. There are echoes of distinctive tradition in each of these poems and yet there is a continuity of thought that is evocative of the Asian spirit. The poetry is good for the soul. Indeed, you could think back on themes such as the purgation of emotions. And you will feel quite happy.

Bangladeshe Shongshodio Gonotontro
Rajinoti O Governance 1991-2007
AlMasud Hasanuzzaman
The University Press Limited

Democratic politics has not had much of a level playing field in Bangladesh. It was expected, though, that with the return of popularly elected government in 1991 conditions would improve vastly and citizens' aspirations would be fulfilled. That hope has been belied. This work takes a hard look at the realities as they came, till January 2007.

Keeping the body and mind going

A book has a therapeutic effect on Muhammad Abdul Hai

VOLTAIRE, a French author and philosopher of the eighteenth century, once said, "Physicians pour drugs of which they know little, to cure diseases of which they know less, into humans of which they know nothing."

If he were alive today, he would definitely make some amends to what he had said, for research has made so much progress in medical science that a disease that was considered incurable a few years ago now awaits only a single tablet to disappear.

Andrew Weil, an intrepid investigator into how healing occurs, had his degrees in biology and medicine from Harvard University. His curiosity arose tremendously by an interesting yet apparently insulting snipe at Voltaire. He made it his life-long mission to find out how a malady occurs in a human body and how healing takes place.

He made a thorough analysis of his own physical discomforts when it occurred and made a meticulous record of the questions his physicians asked and the prescription that followed. As a physician, he sometimes, couldn't agree with the doctors, and in such situations he used to discuss the alternative ways regarding healing of the illness. In different hospitals and clinics, he had elaborate discussions with patients to apprehend the mysterious ways of healing a disease.

The book makes an elaborate discussion of homeopathic treatment that formally started in 1810, the year of the publication of Samuel Christian Hahnemann's most important work, *Organon of Medicine*. Hahnemann was a German physician who lived from 1755 to 1843, which was roughly the Age of Heroic Medicine. It is called so because physicians used to resort to reckless vigour in their healing methods. The favourite heroic treatment was bleeding. It was popularly believed that cure for a disease lay in the purging of a patient's body impurities and toxins, and bleeding, vomiting and sweating were caused by administering various medicines. This so called heroic treatment, in most of the cases, resulted in further complications of the ailment, and quite a few deaths were also reported.

Andrew Weil in *Health and Healing* has given a brief description of how George Washington, who was supposed to get the best medical care America could afford, fell victim to the heroic treatment. The president died of dehydration that was caused due to the removal of the so-called bad blood. Perhaps he would have died in any case, but the treatment was certainly not the appropriate one.

The book contains elaborate discussions of the nature of illness and how it is healed. The author describes an illness or disease as being a breakdown of equilibrium in the human body, and healing is a natural process which is accelerated by the application of medicine. Even then, he observes that administering the same dose of medicine to two

different patients for similar symptoms and discomfort may not yield similar responses. Hence he admits that medical scientists may understand many things related to human beings and yet many things remain mysterious to them. Healing is, therefore, a mixture of spiritual and psychological willingness of patients.

One will certainly find the brief argument of the author interesting, by which he tries to establish that blood is the key bearer of healing energy. He cites the condition of a diabetes patient. Diabetes, he says, obliterates tiny arteries throughout the body, causing destruction of organs by cutting off the blood flow to them. The slightest injury may develop into an ulcer that refuses to heal and offers a perfect breeding ground for bacteria. Even with full medical support, an ulcer of this kind may turn into gangrene that will necessitate an amputation of the limbs.

The book enlightens health-conscious people on how to breathe and work consciously because,



Health and Healing
Andrew Weil, M.D.
Houghton Mifflin Company, New York

according to the author, simple, safe and effective breathing while working promotes good health of mind and body. Proper and effective breathing means full, deep expansion of the lungs with expiration at least as long as inspiration. The breathing also needs to be slow and quiet. There is also a brief reference of faith which is said to have a magical power to accelerate healing.

Dr. Weil presents a full-length discussion of alternative healing practices, including holistic medicine, homeopathy, osteopathy, chiropractic and Chinese medicine, outlining how they differ from each other. It is an ideal handbook for people who want to understand the strengths and weaknesses of conventional and alternative medicine. It is a practical guide to exploring how the body stays healthy.

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