

Take back the streets

I've learnt the hard way to fight 'eve-teasing,' or more specifically sexual harassment. Now I always pull down the hood of the rickshaw (except when it rains which is the real purpose of the hood). If anyone tries to harass me, I shout back at them and let everyone know. It is not my shame. It is his.

HANA SHAMS AHMED

"PULL up the hood of your rickshaw," I heard for the hundredth time. It was a very nice day, with the wind blowing, and the sun making occasional appearances. But the hood of the rickshaw had to be put up. After all, I had to 'hide' myself from the numerous gawking eyes that always followed me throughout the journey from Mohammadpur to Elephant Road, where I went to study my A-levels.

Out of sight of my parents, I would always pull down the hood, and unfortunately pairs of eyes of all ages would look me up and down as if I was an exhibit in an art gallery. Then, depending on the vulgarity of the yelled comment, I would have to decide whether to keep the hood down, or give up and put it back up.

I liked keeping the hood of the rickshaw down. Being taller than the average, I either banged my head on the walls of the hood or had to stoop really

low if it was up -- it didn't work for me. But if one decided not to conform to the norms, we had to suffer the consequences. In this case the jeering and leering of random men.

Another place where you had to suffer the consequences of venturing out was Chadni Chowk. In the Chowk, shopping had to be done shoulder to shoulder, literally. What heaven that was for the groping gender! It came from all directions, aimed at all parts of the female anatomy. This was before the arrival of shopping malls, where there is actually some space between shoppers, making groping more difficult.

My first recollection of groping was in my early teens. My mother was trying to negotiate a particularly difficult path between a hot *jilapi* frying pan and a mud puddle. A 'nice' young man came in and addressing my mother as 'aunty' he very gallantly produced a little path, which my mother could walk through.

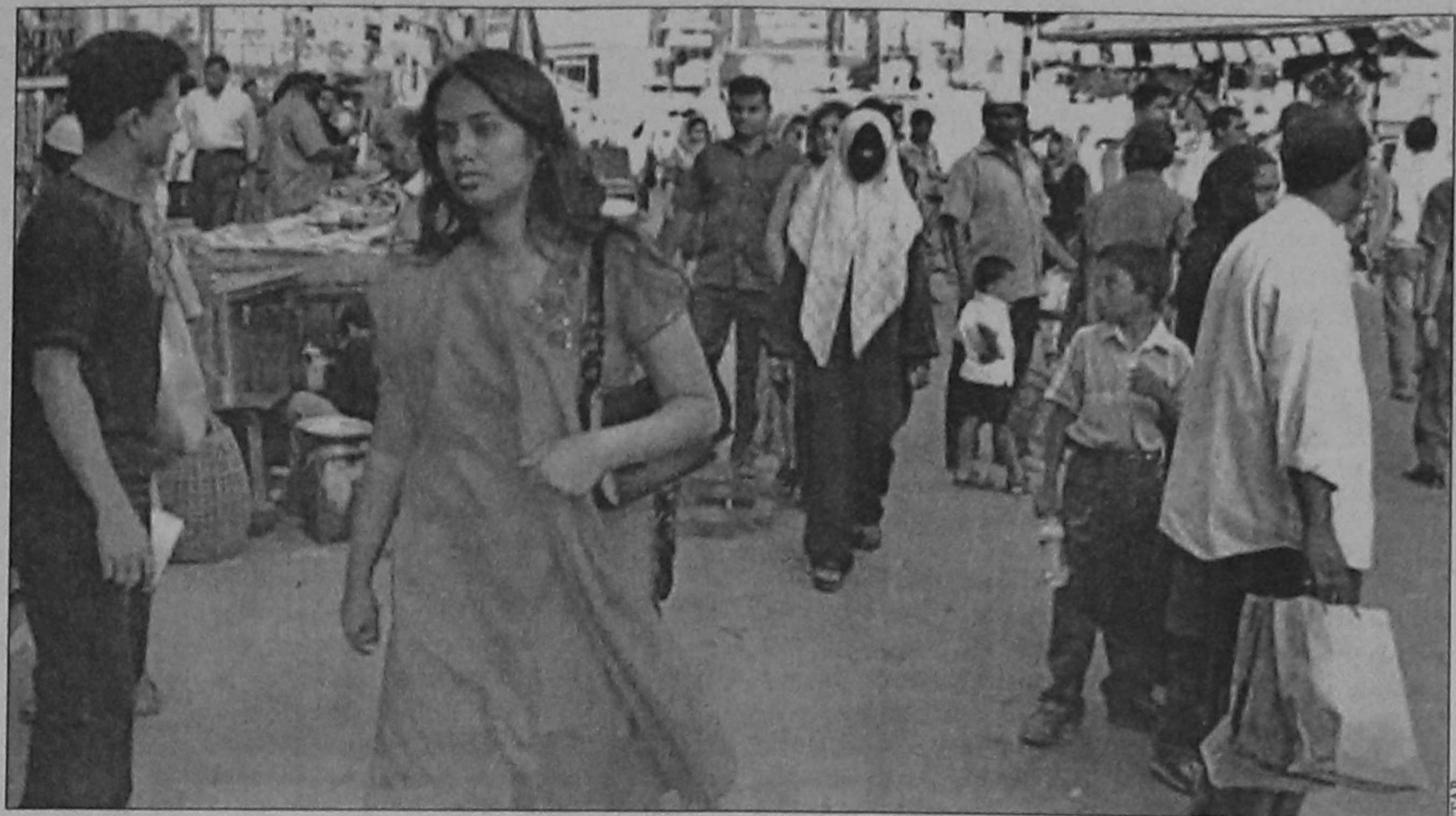
The gallantry of this young man didn't stop there. He followed us in

what initially seemed like an attempt to make sure we faced no further obstacles. Suddenly from behind me his hands protruded from his body like little tentacles and landed on different parts of my body. I was frozen in fear. He finally left, leaving me feeling violated and debased.

I never summoned up the courage to tell my mother. She could have helped me. Perhaps. But I was still reeling from the memory of the anonymous phone call from not so long ago. I was getting ready to go to a friend's house. It was a rare treat, so I put on my favourite clothes -- a denim skirt and a t-shirt. My mother took me aside and told me I would not be able to wear these clothes anymore. My 13-year-old eyes stared at her blankly. She told me an anonymous male had been calling my parents up lately and told them that if I continued to wear 'Western' clothes I would be 'stripped' on the streets as punishment.

Flushed with humiliation, I didn't know whether I was supposed to think that it was something I had brought upon myself or not. But from then on, I never told anyone when I was harassed. Not when I was whistled at on the street, and certainly not when my own cousin (15 years older than me) made his own advances in the protected walls of our home. I just wished it would stop.

A turning point in my attitude came at a concert at Dhaka's Army stadium. I



I have every right to walk the streets.

was there with my friends Jafar and Masum, enjoying listening to our favourite musicians. After the show ended, there was a rush towards the gate of hundreds of people. We had presumed two male companions would be enough for my security. We had misjudged. A hand came flying out of nowhere and groped at me. I screamed and turned around to see who it was. Everyone was a possible

offender. I gave up. Outside the stadium I waited for my transportation home, when another hand touched my leg. This time I was ready and followed the hand to the person. I grabbed the collar of his shirt and gave him an earful and a fistful.

I've learnt the hard way to fight 'eve-teasing,' or more specifically sexual harassment. Now I always pull down the hood of the rickshaw (except when it rains

which is the real purpose of the hood). If anyone tries to harass me, I shout back at them and let everyone know.

It is not my shame. It is his. If anyone stares at me, I stare back. I've discovered that there's nothing more unsettling for a man than to have a woman stare back at him. I walk, cycle and just stand on the roads that are as much mine as anyone's.

Hana Shams Ahmed is Assistant Editor, Forum.

Street defenders

There were then, as now, thousands of NGO activists working quietly in every corner of Bangladesh -- bringing incremental, meaningful and slow change to the lives of urban and rural women. That work was away from the spotlight, the media glare.

NAEEM MOHALEMEN

LOOKING at a new wave of feminist organising around the right to space and respect on the streets (Drishtipat organised *Ey Poth Amadero*), I was reminded of earlier street movements, earlier organisers. A younger Taslima Nasreen in her not-so-lost days.

Isolation from the creative ferment of Bangladesh, a life as shut-in floater in European capitals, resulted in a shrinking of Taslima's intellectual space and thinking. When she talks and writes now, her analysis is at times blunt and tone deaf. She seems disconnected from broader political movements even in her immediate surroundings (e.g., Nandigram in Kolkata).

But I remember a very different Taslima. The edgy writer who exploded onto the Dhaka scene in the late 1980s.

Long before *Lajja*, before *Amar Meyebela* or *Dikhwandito* (books the world discovered after exile), there were the weekly columns for a purely Bangladeshi audience. Even the wikipedia entry on her starts a list of achievements with her 1992 Ananda Puroshkar, i.e., with her discovery by an overseas intelligentsia (the seduction of the Indian literary circuit, which used and then disposed of her). But there is a different Taslima, from a period before fame, with a lot of earnest and effective feminist action activism.

The topics she wrote about in the late 80s may seem like Feminism 1.0 or established home truths now, but at that time she was a molotov cocktail into the complacency of Bangla *bhodorok* circles. Within the hallowed space of Bangla *kolchor*, Taslima was the first to write in 1989 about how the narrow confines and massive crowds of

even Ekushey Boi Mela were cover to groups of hungry hands.

In angry, clean, precise Bangla, she described which line, which area, which body part, which finger, where-when-how -- the mathematics of invasive groping. Through that campaign of writing she managed to inspire activists who formed human chains at *boi mela*. Angry, confrontational and necessary gender politics, all of which retreated in the face of internecine warfare of the 00s.

In 1990/91, I could feel my head crumble as I read her angry columns, week after week. That in-your-face, "disobedient girl", smash-the-patriarchy feminism was raw and direct. Eve teasing goon squads, lit cigarettes flitting into rickshaws, why women rode motorcycles side-saddle, the old uncle molesting his young ward, the sexist nonsense being taught in schools, the hypocrisy of the prostitute-frequenting middle class, Biman Airlines' discrimination against older stewardesses -- any and everything were targets of her early attacks. Wanting a room of one's own, many of us learnt about Virginia Woolf via the Bangla translations in her column (as well as Humayun Azad's *Naari*). Essential work in a xerox world before wiki and google.



My voice will not go unheard.

Of course there is much to criticise of Taslima. The way she allowed herself to be appropriated post-1992, and especially the BIPs' embrace of *Lajja*, which

she failed to distance herself from. The arrogant perch from which she surveyed the larger feminist movements on the ground. Compared to an early pioneering role, her writing and public posture now seems frozen in time. A radical whose newer writing seems stilted, cut off from meaningful challenge, isolated from debates going on inside Bangladesh (which have advanced eons since her exile).

At the time of the Taslima conflagration, wall graffiti went up with Niemoller's line "First they came for..." The last line there was "Today they come for Taslima..." Soon, those grafs were painted over with much bigger slogans in cherry red "*Taslima-r chamratule nibo amra*." Perhaps they meant clothes, not skin, back to that ultra-violent energy she wrote about. In the face of that organised fury, the genteel secularists beat a hasty retreat.

Remembering the earlier, angry Taslima, Shabnam Nadiya wrote: "I wept when I read Taslima describing a young man burning her arm with a cigarette in public. Or when I read, 'Women who emerge from the home to set foot in the street; those women -- not only me -- are all prepared to bear silently any obscene remark in the

streets. This was the first time I realised that what had happened to me on that bus and later as well, happened to others, and was not my fault." ("Woman Alone", Star Literature Eid Issue, 2008)

There were then, as now, thousands of NGO activists working quietly in every corner of Bangladesh -- bringing incremental, meaningful and slow change to the lives of urban and rural women. That work was away from the spotlight, the media glare. Some would argue that this quiet work can have more of a long-lasting impact.

But inside the alternate space of polemic and headlines, within the role of a public provocateur, there was a particular way that Taslima ignited passions. She was unique and necessary, in that Bangladesh of that time. That earlier role has evolved today not into any central feminist icon, but rather many activists, many movements. Working quietly and loudly, with negotiation and confrontation. For the rights of women on the factory floor, corporate office, university classrooms, home sweet home, and of course, the streets.

Naeem Mohalemen is a member of Drishtipat Writers' Collective.

Please come join Drishtipat-organised *Ey Poth Amadero* walk/run/bike starting at 4 pm in front of the national museum today. The walk will end at Robindro Sarobar where there will be a concert by Anusheh and Krishnokoli. The Daily Star is a media partner for the event.

Understanding the gigantic investigation

We still have pockets of excellence in our investigative outfits and it shall be in the fitness of things to allow such outfits to attain professional excellence without being tainted by any direction. Let the actual facts and circumstances of the incident be ascertained as is the job of the investigator.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

WHILE the trauma of the carnage at BDR headquarters continues to haunt and horrify, an understanding is gaining ground that this is no time for gimmickry. There is lot of work to be done efficiently and expeditiously in a polity where serious crimes having extremely far-reaching ramifications and have not been attended to in serious earnest.

Experts believe that the lack of confidence in the state's capability to properly investigate criminal offences may assume crisis proportions if we fail to book the real criminals with credible evidence.

Readers may recollect that a high-powered executive enquiry on the BDR incident is in process that has already sought three time extensions and optimists believe that the enquiry report may be available by the end of April. While that would be welcome news this writer is not sure how such an enquiry report would satisfy public queries about the culpability because to a court of law such reports

have little or no evidentiary value.

Assuming that the trial of the accused persons would be held as per existing procedural law and in the light of our Evidence Act, it would be correct to say that to the court a report under section 173 of the Criminal Procedure Code following the definition of investigation as in section 2(h) of the same code and related sections would be acceptable for ascertaining the liability or otherwise.

It would, therefore, be relevant to know what such an investigation as referred to hereinbefore would entail. For an understanding, the investigation shall consist generally of the fact and circumstances of the incident, discovery and arrest of the suspected offender, collection of evidence relating to the commission of the offence; such collection may consist of the examination of various persons including the accused and the reduction of their statements in writing, if found fit, the search of places of seizure of things considered necessary for investigation and to be produced at the trial; and formation of the opinion as to whether materials collected warrant a charge sheet under section 173.

In the light of the above stipulations, one may venture to look at the enormity of the investigative task pertaining to the BDR carnage. According to one media report, the number of accused persons, as of now stands at 1000 and so far 21 BDR personnel have given confessional statements. It is, however, not known how much of these statements are self-incriminating or otherwise.

A worrying feature of the incident is that there is no account of the stolen/looted arms and ammunition from the BDR armoury during the mutiny and the carnage. Reports have it that during the course of the mutiny the registers of the armoury were burnt.

Members of the army and the intelligence agencies have reportedly recovered 3646 pieces of firearms that were found scattered at different places at the BDR headquarters at the end of the mutiny and those have been sent to CID for ballistic and fingerprint examination. Preliminary reports indicate the use of more than 2500 such firearms by the suspects.

The task of the investigation at hand is of unusual and mind-boggling dimensions. There are nearly one hundred places of occurrences to be properly studied, more than a few thousand persons to be interrogated, hundreds of materials to be scientifically tested and opined. The sheer paper work would run into thousands of pages. All these cannot be done hurriedly without prejudicing the investigation that has to stand the test

of evidence.

It is also important not to start with a pre-conceived notion for it may lead the most zealous and smart investigators on a wrong track. A mind revolves over many theories when one starts on the investigation, but one theory can be as good as the other. However sure one may be of a thing, a close and detailed study should never be avoided.

Under the circumstances, we have to ensure that in upholding the public's right to be informed, a situation is not created where the entire process amounts to an investigation by the media. Such a scenario will seriously prejudice the rights of the victims and the interest of the prosecution because in our legal system the onus is on the prosecution to prove that the defendant/criminal is guilty beyond the least shadow of doubt. Let us remember that the anger, excitement and the euphoria will not be there at the time of trial before the court which will pronounce its verdict on the basis of cold facts and credible evidence.

In our harmfully polarised society where criminals enjoy political patronage, criminal activities are accorded respectability for so-called political compulsions and a loathsome all-pervasive distrust between different social and political groups prevail, the predicament of investigators who have the double jeopardy of being less-than-credible in the eyes of the law of the land and the members of public, can only be appreciated by a reasoned observer.

A considered view is that our investigators suffer from inadequate scientific support but even under the present circumstances they can achieve commendable success. Our investigators do not operate in a favourable environment where helpful information comes voluntarily from members of public but still like our physicians they do good clinical investigation without laboratory support by virtue of their intuition, gut reaction and the limited information network.

We have to remember that viewing criminal occurrences from a political angle only will be ruinous because that

would not only be a damper to the growth of professionalism but also in the process shatter the remaining confidence reposed in the vital organ of the State.

We still have pockets of excellence in our investigative outfits and it shall be in the fitness of things to allow such outfits to attain professional excellence without being tainted by any direction. Let the actual facts and circumstances of the incident be ascertained as is the job of the investigator and let that be placed before the court for adjudging the guilt.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a columnist of The Daily Star.



Will the truth ever come out?