

POETRY

WRITER'S WORLD

LET ME BE

AINON NAHAR MIZAN

If behold the sun in its burning beauty  
I am the arrogant furor of thunder  
I follow no boundaries, no authority  
I travel endless horizons and yonder  
I am the black shadow of eclipse  
Conquer, not my soul

I hold the other with a generous heart  
But wish not a condition on me  
I denounce the oasis of peaceful green  
I rejoice at the glory of self to be free  
I mock the temple of gentle serene  
Untamed I wish to be  
Conquer, not my spirit

And yet I dare to embrace silently  
The broken melody of a flute  
The tears of lost love flowing quietly  
The need to weave string of song  
To repose on good earth relentlessly  
To be a part of continuation, to belong  
Conquer, not my self

Blazing through the journey of life  
Meet I must other fellows  
Make room for the passing wanderer  
Yet to capture the mystic silence  
To feel the might of living  
I will be the lone traveler  
Conquer, not my existence

For with it, I die ....

Dr. Ainon Nahar Mizan is associated with Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, USA. At present she is Visiting Scholar, Independent University-Bangladesh

SYED NAJMUDDIN HASHIM

It was in Rangoon in March 1981 that I had an unusual experience. My shy and retiring son of sixteen, who more than justified his nickname, which means 'one lost in reverie,' suddenly broke his silence to demand that I publish my scribbles done over the previous three decades. It was exceedingly strange and not a little gratifying that what was always in the nature of a monologue was sought to be given the stamp of irrevocable finality. It was a rare pleasure to find that one so young had been delving into the meaning of things and, out of filial loyalty perhaps, ascribed some merit to ancient and yellowed manuscripts.

His younger brother, whose name stands for 'cool as dewdrops and peaceful as moonlight,' belies his name. With brutal originality he tells his indigent father, "Don't pick your kitchen legumes too soon, lest we have to pay your bills after you've gone." At twelve, he was already on the way to becoming a creative writer. As such he did not stand in need of the reassurance of a father's writings penned in the idle moments of a storm-tossed life.

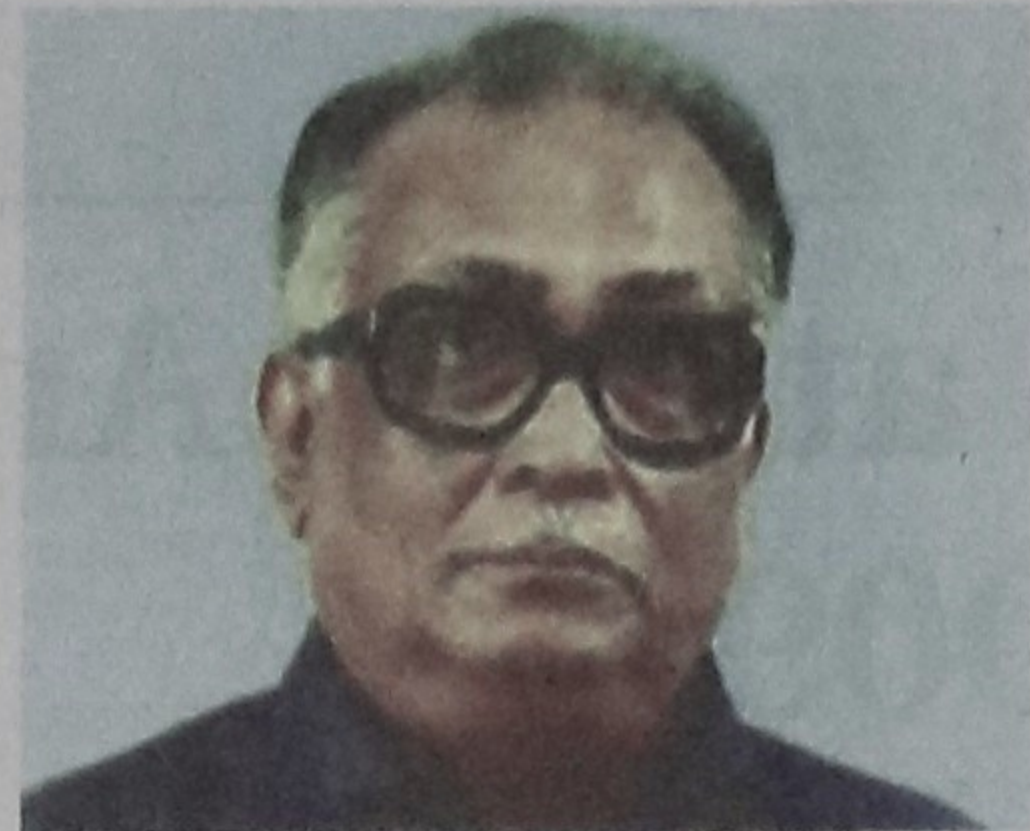
I remember that I had dedicated these pieces to 'Moana of the Seven Moons, who came but stayed not.' It was not any particular woman but a composite of many, perhaps of all women of all time. The scribbles were occasions for viewing the recurring personal crises against the backdrop of a crumbling world of broken columns, where the centre will not hold, where we are dismembered into myriad broken shadows. Wars, famines, pestilence, inequity, exploitation and civil strife, disintegrating values have all made of our world, to misquote Mallarme, 'the horror of the forest or the silent thunder diffused in the leaves.' It is the mounting but often futile anger, the sense of unbearable anger and crippling fatigue stemming from our inadequacy, the death wish of the ineffectual intellectual suddenly made aware of the futility of history that informs all my work, perhaps lends to it some ephemeral significance.

Although each jotting, made in the agonising darkness of the long and unending nights, is strictly personal in origin, the dimensions of our anguish are never strictly or entirely personal. My life and the life of my entire generation is tinged and overshadowed by the tragedy of our time. A sense of participation in contemporary history is a prerequisite to comprehension of work shrouded in such seeming obscurity. You would have to know the murky inter-war years of international conspiracy and paralysis of will exemplified in appeasement, culminating in the Munich Pact, the cruelty and savagery of the dress rehearsal of the Spanish Civil War with Picasso's *Guernica* as the

tragic and everlasting symbol and the impassioned cry, 'No pasaran' (They Shall Not Pass) as the death-rattle of an embattled and betrayed Republic, the lynchings of the Deep South, the Biblical Diaspora culminating in the attempted 'Final Solution' of the Nazi death camps, to fully understand why personal love never stood a chance in the diabolical unfolding of the events of our time, when tinpot gods in the chancelleries of the world killed and crippled us for their profit, if not for their sport.

Twenty-five years later, *The Pomegranate Tree*, penned in 1977 in Dhaka, the capital city of a new nation, has the same sense of futility of individual endeavour facing the daunting facts of history, the same sense of fellow feeling for those engaged in an unequal battle, for the innocent victims of organised genocide and incarceration in distant prison camps. A few years hence, who will remember the background of this piece? Who will recall a state nurtured by its international patrons into a veritable prison-house of nations, its paranoid and humourless succession of rulers? Who will take the trouble of finding out how a fledgling democracy was strangled in infancy, how untold atrocities were perpetrated against rebellious subject peoples, how the much vaunted sword-arm of a so-called martial race was blunted and broken by a ragtag band of freedom lovers? Will history have the integrity to record how such a regime was cynically supported and sustained by Grand Masters of the international power game and their servitor ideologues?

A scribbler of my captive generation in a captive land could not, therefore, sing of his lonely passion from an ivory tower. His individual alienation was overwhelmed by a quarter century of neo-colonialist humiliation of his people. The sense of outrage inevitably echoed in my words, as in the work of others. Witness my *Ramadan* and *Eid-ul-Fitr*. They were written on two successive days in 1970, against the backdrop of a tragedy of colossal and classical proportions, when a tidal wave left some half a million dead, a world catastrophe reported faithfully by the international press and media but ignored and denied by our overlords. A bereaved people sustained and nurtured by charitable men and women of goodwill all around the world finally shed its illusions under Nature's merciless assaults and man's studied apathy. The ground had been prepared for the War of Independence that was to start in a matter of months. Significantly enough, these two pieces were published, under a pseudonym, of course, in a journal edited by the poet-author-film-maker-freedom fighter Zahir Raihan. He, along with the elder brother, author and journalist Shahidullah Kaiser, was butchered in cold blood along with



SYED NAJMUDDIN HASHIM

scores of other intellectuals, under a plan to behead the emergent Bengali nation, which could no longer be held in thrall.

*Ramadan* and *Eid-ul-Fitr* are companion pieces of *The White Shirt* of Shamsur Rahman, the doyen of Bengali poets. All three poems clearly foretell the end of the myth, purveyed by patent violators of the Islamic code of a life of human dignity and justice to hold the Bengali nation in bondage for a quarter of a century. They anticipate Maulana Bhashani's ironic farewell greeting to the ruling class: 'Assalamu Alakum.' Together with Sikandar Abu Jafar's *Quit Bengal*, they are a paean to my enslaved people, battered but unbowed, who within a year waded through a sea of blood to proclaim to a largely apathetic and hostile world that they had finally decided to take control of their own destiny, which for long had been usurped by alien hands. Sikander's ultimatum sums up the situation: 'Remove your black shadow from my skies and fields.'

The tendency to relate the personal to the universal dilemma is, however, not always shared by my compeers, who favour a more direct and unambiguous utterance. In much of my work also it runs like a red thread. I can only explain it in terms of John Maynard Keynes' perceptive comment: 'Emotions of the moment had left behind a permanent furrow.' Looking back, I find that in '50, '51 and '52 some current national or international occurrences evoked direct and bald comment. (One such comment) was a rather long piece called *A Strange Tale*, of November 1951, commemorating the triumph of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, which traverses the tangled history of the subcontinent, drawing hope 'because a Chinese peddler knocked at my door,' a rather futile hope as it turned out during later years of infantile cultural disorder and our experience of an unrecognised liberation movement and the Chilean people's experience of eager recognition for a

counter revolution. It is ironic that the poem carries visible traces of the Chilean Pablo Neruda's 'Let the rail-splitters awake.' Then there was *The Plot*, which was the immediate reaction to the dramatic disclosure of the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case involving the cream of the officer corps of the Pakistan army and the doyen of Urdu poetry, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and which seemed to me to carry fateful echoes of the Reichstag fire which burnt down both the German parliament house and in effect sealed the fate of the Weimar Republic. The parallelism of the rise of Hitler and a succession of petty overweening dictators in our domestic scene did not, at the time, appear to me to be either forced or fortuitous. Then there was *Will McGee*, mourning the judicial murder of a young American black on patently trumped-up charges of rape. This was not one of my best efforts, although it was a favourite reading of my friend Ibne Insha, now dead, whose Urdu poems on China, including *A Night in Shanghai*, were presented to Chairman Mao.

Between 1959 and 1964, I seem to have been returning home, culturally speaking, because in (my) works of this period are discernible influences of Rabindranath Tagore, from whom no Bengali can ever escape since he has been our shield and our spear in every movement of asserting our identity, of the poets Sudhin Dutta and Jibananda Das, of John Donne, TS Eliot and of the Old Testament. A distinct influence is exerted during this period by the tropical jungles of Bengal and the forests of the foothills of the Himalayas where I spent many happy days of my adolescence. And a recurring theme is the sea and the flowing rivers which have gone to the making of the Bengali psyche.

Between *Only a Few Years* and *The Pomegranate Tree*, a span of some twenty-five years, the human condition in our part of the world has hardly changed, except for the worse and except for our signal achievement of political freedom. Hence our response to it has also not undergone any sea change. We still suffer from disaffection with our inadequacy, anger at human perfidy, nostalgic yearning for our lost innocence and desperate urge to join the forces of social change, with no real confidence in their efficacy, strength or ultimate success. A very poor material for a versifier, I agree. Yet to attempt anything more would be less than honest.

The article is a slightly edited version of the Author's Note the writer penned years before it came to be part of his collection of poetry, *Hopefully the Pomegranate*, published by writers.in

Syed Najmuddin Hashim, poet, scholar, civil servant and diplomat, was born in 1925 and died in 1999.

FICTION

REFLECTIONS

# Non-cooperation . . .

MANIK BONDOPADDHAYA -- TRANSLATION: HAROONUZZAMAN

Born on May 5, 1908 in Bikrampur, Dacca, Manik Bondopaddhaya spent his childhood in different areas of Bengal and Bihar with his father who had a transferable government job. With the publication of his short story 'Otoshi Mami' in Bichitra, a literary magazine, in 1928, he created a wave in the literary world. He was then a student of Presidency College, Calcutta. He wrote 'Dibarattrir Kabhya', a novel, at the age of 21. Even in a poverty-stricken life, writing was his living. His first novel 'Jononi' was published in 1935. Among his works, 'Padma Nodir Majhi', and 'Putul Nacher Itikotha' are outstanding. He died in 1956.

The following short story is a translation of Bondopaddhaya's 'Oshohojogi'.

HARSHANATH, the father of Romen, is a rich wholesale merchant of Dhaneshganj.

With the hope of getting his son transformed into a gentle and mild-tempered boy, a year ago Harshanath had sent Romen to Surjopodo, Harshanath's cousin's husband. Barely could Harshanath cope with Romen as he became so very dangerously naughty. Even he had had to go to court, twice or thrice, for his son. Finally, when one day Romen beat up the son of Mr. Basu, a magistrate, causing mutual bloodshed, Harshanath could understand that it was beyond his capacity to control this boy and that he would spell disaster for him. In times of war, he was minting money in so many ways. If the magistrate *Sahib*, an appellation affixed to the names of gentlemen, became angry, would there be any way out for him?

With pricey gifts, he went straight to the house of the magistrate: there were gifts worth about two hundred rupees only for the boy who had been beaten up. Falling at the feet of Mrs. Basu, he prayed for Romen's deliverance. Already he had thought about the measures he would take against his son. Therefore, without an iota of doubt, he informed her that being scared Romen had fled. Also, said he, that on Romen's return, he would give him some serious lashing, tying him to a bamboo pole.

That very day he left for Calcutta with Romen to put him in Surjopodo's care. Romen's mother, however, registered a feeble protest. "I heard he is involved in *Swadeshi* (nationalist) movement. Hope he does not change the mind of my son."

Harshanath bristled with ridicule: "*Swadeshi*! Pooh! Wouldn't the land in jail if he did *Swadeshi*? Those are tactics for earning money. Perhaps he belongs to some party or association for collecting tolls. Can teaching be a living for anyone?"

Surjopodo's house was in the city suburbs. Harshanath could not stay more than one night at Surjopodo's house. He had a lot of work at Dhaneshganj. How could he stay away from it for a long time?

Informing Surjopodo about everything, he requested him: "Brother, you must make him a man. You must correct him."

Laughing, Surjopodo said: "Of course, I will. I'll make your son a man."

Surjopodo, however, made it a condition that under no circumstances would Romen be taken back to Dhaneshganj within a year and that money should not be sent to Romen directly.

Agreeing to the condition, Harshanath returned to Dhaneshganj. When he wanted to give fifty rupees as sustenance allowance for Romen, Surjopodo took twenty-five rupees only and said: "I am a poor teacher, and I can't afford your son's expenses. But he won't need more than twenty-five rupees for his expenses."

Harshanath sent fifty rupees again the next

month. When twenty five rupees came back, happily he told Romen's mother: "Oh no! This man is really good. I think he will be able to correct him."

After a year, Romen came back home during the *Puja* vacation. Observing a marked change in Romen's personality, for the first few days Harshanath felt extremely glad. In looks, in manners and even in conversation, he seemed to have become gentler, calmer and more composed. He had his unkempt long hair trimmed and combed; his clothing was cheap but neat and clean. His face had a smiling look, his words were sweet and his manners sophisticated.

Earlier, with the appearance of a ruffian, he would wander round the area the whole day; he would either remain engaged in pugilistic encounters or in games. He had been such a restless boy a year back! He would continue doing his mischief, one after another, without respite. He would never heed anyone. But now? His naughtiness, wantonness and effrontery had vanished.

He still wandered around the whole day; this was his only reproachable act. But Harshanath felt relieved when he did not get any information about Romen's misdeeds and found no sign of mischief on Romen's body or clothes after he had returned home. Harshanath thought that perhaps Romen kept himself thoroughly engaged in idle gossip with his old friends since his return here after a long time. What else it could be?

When seven days had gone by, though, he became a little suspicious. Returning from the godown to have his meal at home, Harshanath saw that around three hundred emaciated and famine-stricken men and women, young and old, seated in the nearby open space under the banyan tree, were eating rice. Romen and thirty boys of his age were serving them food.

Harshanath gaped, unbelieving. Going inside the house, he sent someone to call his son.

"What's this?"

Romen was bubbling with enthusiasm. "We are giving them a treat, *baba*. Do you know how much we had to think before giving them a treat? They have been without food for so many days, and now if they eat aplenty, they will die. Do they understand that? Everyone is shouting, 'Give them more and more.' It's difficult to manage."

"Where did you get the rice and lentils from?"

"Mother has given them."

In fear, Romen's mother said: "He has been asking for it. Let them do it. They are all praying for us. It will do us good."

"Let me see what good it does for us."

The store of the house was almost like a godown. First, Harshanath collected the key of the store, and after they were through with their meal, he chased them away.

Romen's face became gloomy. He said: "*Baba*, I have told them to eat here daily for seven days. They will return to their villages."



MANIK BONDOPADDHAYA

"Shut up, you rascal. Free meals for seven days! This is a plot to pauperize me!"

Days went by. Everyday, the cries of the helpless and the hungry people from across the village kept getting louder and louder. Romen did not laugh any more. He sat to eat, but he got up without eating; milk remained in the milk pot where it used to be; ants ate the delicious sweetmeats.

Angrily, Harshanath said: "What a problem! Why? What happened?"

"All will starve to death. Won't you do anything for them, *baba*?"

"Didn't I contribute twenty maunds of rice to relieve?"

"Only twenty maunds! You have thousands of maunds of rice in your godown. Everyone is condemning me, *baba*. Everybody hates me because I am your son."

"Shut up, you scoundrel!"

Romen's whereabouts remained a mystery for the next two days. His mother kept worrying and walling. Even though he was frightened, Harshanath was very glum. He seemed to be losing his temper in anger, fear and worry. He thought he would flog Romen to death after his return, but when Romen did return, Harshanath did not dare to scold him, observing the boy's glance.

"Where did you go without letting us know?"

"To seven villages with Onathbabu."

With Onathbabu! With Harshanath's greatest enemy! With that man for whom Harshanath had to sell around a thousand maunds of rice at a fixed price instead of hoarding it in his godown! That man!

In a soft and an appealing tone, Romen said: "*Baba*, you just can't imagine the situation. Do one thing, *baba*. Sell the rice, keeping one rupee profit over your purchase price. You won't lose, but think how many people will survive!"

"There won't be any loss, you say that! If I sell at rupee fourteen instead of forty, don't you think I'll lose? What sort of calculations have you learnt?" Harshanath tried to trash Romen's words.

In reply, Romen said: "Then I am going to give all your rice away, *baba*. I am telling you beforehand. I won't let you murder people."

"I'll give you a slap. Don't talk big."

"I mean it. You will see."

Who cares about the light words of a young boy? Harshanath has so many people in the wholesale market! Also, the godown is locked. Even if Romen wants, how will he be able to distribute the rice? This is not going to happen even if he comes with his fifty friends and Onathbabu.

Harshanath did not worry about it at all. But he was shocked at Romen's eccentricity.

What a great mistake it was for him to send Romen to Surjopodo! It would have been better had he become a devil or a hooligan. He would have become all right automatically with the passage of time.

After some days Harshanath left the village in connection with some business. While leaving, he told the people at the wholesale market that they should control Romen if he wanted to create any disturbances there and inform the police straightaway so that they could catch Onath red-handed if he tried to create any uproar. Before his departure, he visited the police station to inform its officials how Onath had been trying to change his son's mind.

The next day pandemonium was let loose around the wholesale market. Nitaichoron, the head employee of Harshanath's wholesale market, sent his subordinate to open the shop. Taking advantage of Harshanath's absence, a relaxed Nitaichoron came late to the market and, on arrival, he found about five hundred people crowding around the wholesale shop.

He found himself rooted to the spot upon entering the market. All of them were sitting on the oily and dusty floor where a thousand cans of oil had remained stacked till the other day. A little farther stood Romen with his father's two-barrel gun in his hand. The wholesale market was filled with boys of Romen's age.

"Nitai uncle, come on in. Could you give me the key of the godown?"

"Key? Where can I get the key from? The key is with your father."

"Then sit out there. The door has to be broken."

One of Romen's friends held Nitai by the hand and seated him, with a thud, on the heap of oil.

Romen said: "I made someone lame with this gun. Do you remember? Nobody should even try to outsmart and hoodwink me. Then I will shoot. From dawn to dusk, Romen stood there keeping vigil. About one hundred and fifty boys brought out rice from inside the godown to distribute among the thousands of famished people who had thronged the venue from far and wide. Earlier, to get his message across, Romen had drums beaten in the villages. Although some policemen arrived at the venue, they did not try to enter the spot of occurrence. Rather they extended some help in controlling the crowd and the disturbance. In the morning Romen went to the police station to inform the policemen that his father would distribute rice among the starving people that day. He also posted some big notices outside the wholesale market to this effect.

The rice stock got exhausted around the evening.

Getting the news, Harshanath returned the next day. Glum, he sat before his son. He felt like crying.

Haroonuzzaman, a novelist and translator, teaches English at Independent University Bangladesh.

# She does not call

TAREQ KHAN

THE little girl I first saw in 1962 died last week. She was too young to die; and I was too cruel not to receive her calls, those desperate yearnings for conversation that came from her. She was not extraordinary in that accepted sense of the meaning. And her education stopped at a point where it should not have. But she remained, all her brief life, a vibrant girl who kept telling me that she had grown into womanhood. Easy was our banter and light were the battles we waged on the telephone. She called every day --- and she kept calling because I was not willing to talk. She did not, would not give up. When finally I did pick up the call, meaning to reprimand her for calling so many times, it was her plaintive voice that acted as a mellowing agent for me. A sense of her loneliness calmed me a little and I laughed with her. She was happy.

And yet there is in me a grave sense of guilt as I tell myself she will not call again. Somewhere in a village, perhaps in the shade of a bamboo grove, she lies, newly dead in a new shroud. She used to ask me to see her. I promised her I would and then broke the promise every time. She said she would cook whatever I wanted to eat. When I coolly informed her I was busy, that maybe she could call later, she would brusquely tell me off. I understood her anger. You never want to talk to me, she would say. Call in the evening or at night, I told her. She did. Sometimes we talked, for it was uncomfortable for me to conceive of disappointing her, of breaking her heart. Then again, there were all the moments she would keep calling and I simply would not pick it up. A week ago, after days had gone by and she did not call, I felt uncomfortable. Perhaps she was angry? Maybe she had decided that she would not call again. She had done that once and did not call for a whole month. This time, I waited for her to call. She was so innocent, so naive at times, that I needed her to feel I was her friend. She did not call. And then one day last week, once twilight had descended, word came that she had passed on.

Life could have been different for her, for me. When we were children (and I was some years older), some people who knew her family and mine spoke of our future together. She would marry me, they said in audible tones. My mother and hers were the best of friends. And somehow they were destined to reinforce their ties through the marriage of their children. Or so they thought. But then things began to change. There is such a thing as immanent will. Education had to do with it. I moved on to school, to college and finally to university. She stopped midway through school, by slow degrees grew into a vivacious young woman. She lived in a world of dreams, in an imaginary garden she and I inhabited. Often, on my way back from an exhausting spell of tutoring children in their homes, I would drop by at her place. Her eyes sparkled in happiness. The moon shone on her face. The cup of tea she made me was pure manna. I thanked her. And she slipped, ever so passionately, into my arms.

That was ages ago. When she came to see me barely a couple of weeks before the end, it was the sun that planted itself on her enervated features. She wore dark glasses. You will not come to see me, said she. I will be dead and then you will know the enormity of loneliness. I laughed loudly and told her she would live long enough to be part of my thirtieth death anniversary observances.

I do not laugh any more. She does not call any more.

Tareq Khan occasionally writes fiction.