

TRIBUTE

SYED MUJTABA ALI

# Making us laugh to make us weep

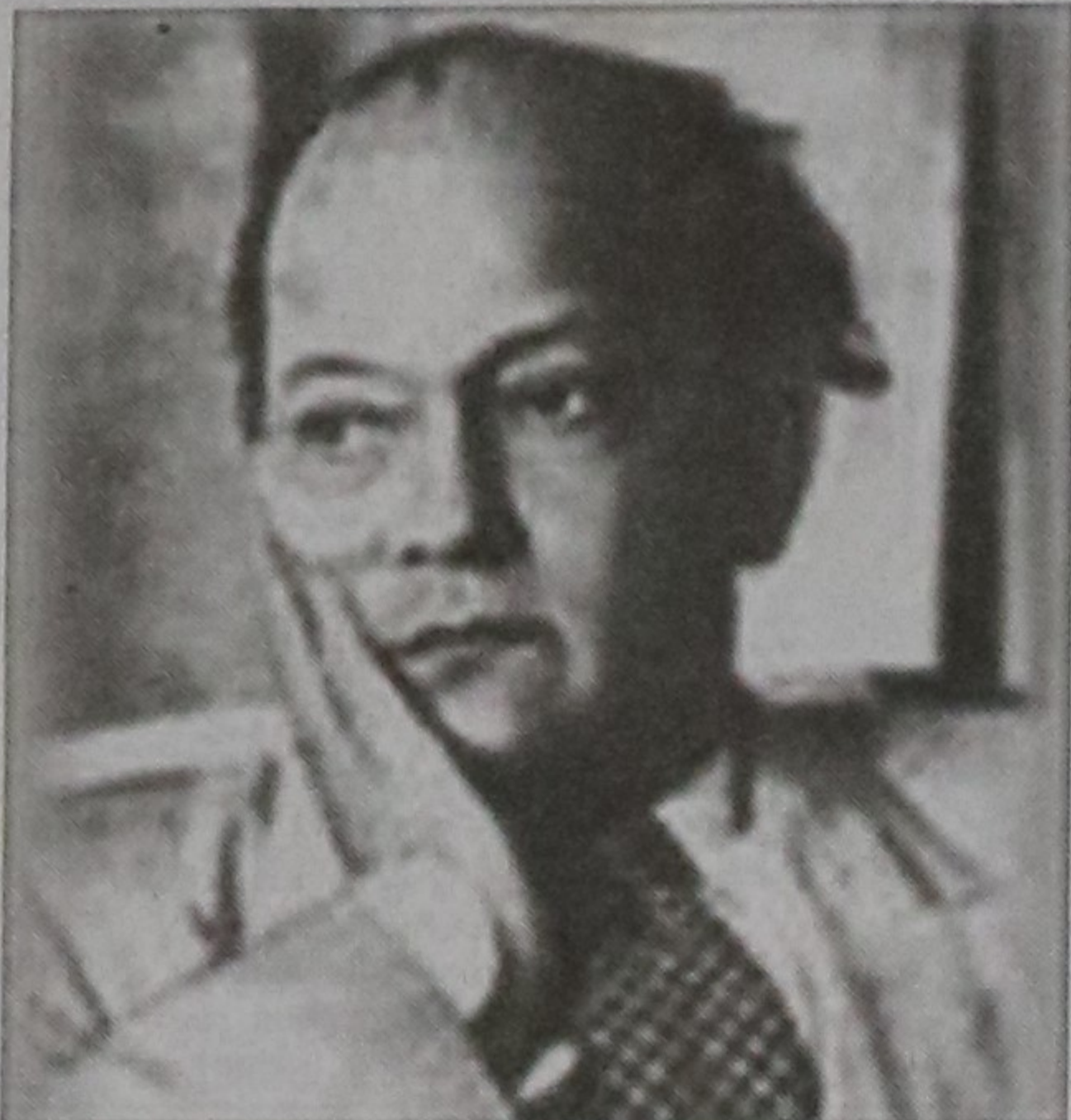
The eminent writer's 105<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary was observed on 13 September. JUNAIDUL HAQUE recalls the wit and genius in him

IN the exciting, turbulent, sad and happy days of 1971, I read *Chacha Kahini* in my village home and instantly fell in love with Syed Mujtaba Ali's books. His erudition, brilliant wit and humour, skilful satire and wonderfully lucid prose simply bowled me over. I was a sixteen-year-old tenth grader then. In the next couple of years I read almost all his books, including his latest columns in the Calcutta weekly Dosh and the Bangladeshi newspapers, like a boy possessed. I came to know a lot about him too.

Syed Mujtaba Ali was born in a respectable family of Sylhet. But why was he living and writing in Calcutta? In 1948, as the principal of Bogra Azizul Huq College, he wrote an article advocating Bangla as the state language of Pakistan. The parochial Pakistani rulers could not tolerate such audacity and compelled him to leave the country. How disgraceful! As a schoolboy, Ali had written a letter to Rabindranath Tagore, received an inspiring reply and was invited to study at Shantiniketan. He had the honour to be taught directly by Tagore. The Nobel Laureate taught him his own poems and those of Shelley and Keats. Later he earned a PhD in comparative religious studies from Bonn. His dissertation was on the Khojas. After leaving Bangladesh in 1948 he lived and worked in Calcutta. He was a brilliant talker in the typical Bengali adda, a raconteur. He kept his listeners spell-bound. People understood that he read a lot, was a great scholar who knew many languages but did not write. When Ali was in his mid-forties, the Dosh editor forced him to write Dosh Bideshe and it instantly made him famous. Till his death he was one of our most popular writers.

Bangla literature has perhaps not seen better travel literature written after *Deshe Bideshe*. I read the book in 1972, again like a boy possessed. After the liberation of Bangladesh, he wrote for the Bangladeshi papers and came to live in Dhaka with his wife, a senior civil servant, and his two sons. He fell ill in late 1973 or early 1974. The great admirer that I was, I went to his elder brother's residence in Dhanmandi, collected his address and went to meet him, albeit a little nervously. It was in Dhanmandi Road No. One, on the way to my Dhaka College. Mrs. Rabeya Ali was very nice to me and treated me with sweets. The writer was a connoisseur of food and I saw excellent butter packets on a table in the verandah. He was bed-ridden and couldn't come to meet me. He gave me a smiling, affectionate look from his bed and autographed the book of his that I carried with me. He even drew a flower for me. Perhaps my young and excited face touched his heart. I went to my college like a victorious warrior. Alas! A few years later a lady relative borrowed the book and lost it. She didn't realise how much sorrow she caused me.

Syed Mujtaba Ali could not appreciate modern poetry or Bangla poetry after Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam. To me this was the greatest flaw in his genius. He could not appreciate the poetry of his contemporaries --- Jibanananda Das, Sudhin Dutta, Buddhadev Bose, Amiya Chakraborty and Bishnu Dey. It has to be said, though, that they were great heroes to us, young students of literature and budding writers. So were Charles Baudelaire and T.S. Eliot and our own Shamsur Rahman. However, we never gave up liking Syed Mujtaba Ali. Maybe we read him less for a few years. But when we resumed reading him in our state of maturity, we liked him immensely



once again. His *Shabnam* was a love novel of rare quality. So were *Abishashya* and *Tuni Mem*. He wrote memorable short stories like *Padotika*, *The Colonel*, *Beche Thako Shordi Kashi* and *Roshogolla*. Often he made us laugh only to make us weep at the end. In *Padotika* he tells us that the village teacher's eight-member family lived with much less than the money spent on the Alsatian dog of the English inspector of schools. We do not forget the story for the rest of our lives. His Hitler is perhaps one of the best books ever written on the dictator. Well-researched, witty, sensitive, breath-takingly interesting. He was the best writer of belles-lettres in Bangla. His literary columns were as interesting as ever. I feel proud that as a young man I relished his writings as much and as long as I could.

The great scholar, linguist, academician, patriot and writer was born on September 13, 1904 and breathed his last in Dhaka on February 11, 1974 (a day after my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday). He had published twenty-five immensely popular volumes of novels, stories, essays, columns and belles-lettres. He effortlessly mixed Arabic, Persian and Sylheti words in his Bangla prose. Then he dipped it in his great wit, brilliant satire and incomparable scholarship. Here was a great scholar who could hide his erudition like the bricks of the Taj Mahal. He was always exciting and interesting and never dull. He had researched extensively on religion but was secular and progressive. He was cosmopolitan as well as deeply rooted in eternal Bangladesh. I feel that all his life he stood for those ideals for which we had fought our liberation war. In fact, he was the writer closest to our heart. He was very happy to see the emergence of independent Bangladesh. He died thirty-five years back. May he live long in our hearts!

Junaïdul Haque writes fiction and essays. He is a senior airline official.

REFLECTIONS

## The insulting in Shakespeare

MD. SHAFIQUOL ISLAM goes back to the Bard in search of the withering

WILLIAM Shakespeare's plays are full of scenes in which people insult one another. He created many wonderful characters who display sharp wit through their strikingly expressed insulting remarks and pungent phrases for obvious inclusion here. This helps them seem lively on the stage and is great fun for the actors who get to voice all the insults. In life, who would not feel great if he can slip one of the memorable lines into a conversation? How nice it is to begin with Hamlet's famous remark on the weakness of women, "Frailty, thy name is woman". Menenius hurls stinging insults to the conspirators against Coriolanus, "More of your conversation would infect my brain", meaning talking to you is driving me mad. A close reading of the plays will give us lots of verbal weapons to use on our friends and enemies alike. If we do not want to see our friend so often we may say, "I do desire we may be better strangers". We mean to say our friend is so cold-hearted that even his wee is icy. But it is certain that when he makes water, his urine is congealed ice!" In *Henry VI*, Clifford pours practical insult on Richard of York thus, "Heap of wrath, foul indigested lump/As crooked in thy manners as thy shape!" Kent furiously insulted villainous Oswald in *King Lear*, "Thou whoreson zed, thou unnecessary letter!" Lysander in the spell of a potion in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* shouts at his lover Hermia, "Hang off, thou cat, thou burr!" Shakespeare's language is so subtle that we can use it while insulting somebody without being overtly harsh: "When he is best, he is little worse than a man, and when he is worst he is little better than a beast." To insult bluntly on the face, we can say, "There is not so ugly a fiend of hell/As thou shalt be." Marullus, in order to agitate the mob in *Julius Caesar*, tells the commoners of Rome that they have no more feeling than a stone, "You blocks, you stones, you worse than senseless things."

Shakespeare's fools are otherwise wiser than the sages. But when a Shakespearean character intends to insult another, he calls him a fool, "Away, you three inch fool!" or "Either thou art ignorant by age / Or thou wert born a fool." The insult becomes more biting now: "Tis fools such as you / That makes the world full of ill-favoured children". Shakespeare can infuse a series of insulting epithets into his character's mouth. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, Berowne accuses Boyet of giving the game away by divulging a secret: "Some carry-tale, some please-man, some slight zany/Some mumble-news, some trencher-knight, some Dick.../Told our intents before". In *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio harps on the main theme of family feud when he insults Benvolio, "Thy head is as full of quarrels as an egg is full of meat".

Drawing on a few from among an enormous range of insults, one is hard put to place them in an order. In the *Taming of the Shrew*, the love-hate relationship between Petruchio and Katherine is the source of a traumatic plethora of insults. In one of their heated quarrels, Katherine angrily says, "Asses are made to bear, so are you", to be equally requited by Petruchio, "Women are made to bear, and so are you". In another fiery altercation, Petruchio, just after striking her servant tells Katherine, "A whoreson beetle-headed, flap-eared knave!" Petruchio affronts a tailor: "Thou flea, nit, thou winter-cricker thou!"

Falstaff has been the occasion for a number of insults in different plays by Shakespeare. Prince Hal flays Falstaff, "Thou clay-brained guts, thou knotty-pated fool, thou

whoreson obscene greasy tallow-catch."

Falstaff, a notorious but amusing character, affronts Hostess Quickly, "There's no more faith in thee than in a stewed prune", meaning you are no more honest than a fruit, in *Henry IV*. He insulted in another occasion calls him, "Thou honeysuckle villain".

There is no end to the sea of insults in Shakespeare. One can hardly stop from quoting them one after another. Lafew impatiently shouts to Parolles in *All's Well That Ends Well*, "You are not worth another word, else I'd call you knave".

Even in critical circumstances, Shakespeare is able to make stinging insults blend with humour. An instance is a dialogue between Macbeth and a murderer who introduces himself thus, "We are men, my liege", only to get insulted by the former, "Ay, in the catalogue ye go for men". On another tense occasion, Macbeth calls a servant, "Thou lily-livered boy".

Shakespeare is famous for his words. The vein of insult is equally apparent in the curses made by his characters.



'Thou knotty-pated fool...'

Macbeth, impatient with fateful and frustrating events all around him since he met the witches, curses a servant in the tone of banter for bringing bad news "The devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon! Where got'st thou that goose look?" Sometimes insult is synonymous with curse in Shakespeare. King Lear is unfortunate to have two ungrateful daughters. Being tormented by them just after he hands his kingdom over to his pelican-hearted daughters Goneril and Regan by depriving the innocent Cordelia, Lear prays to the goddess for making his daughter Goneril unfertile: "Into her womb convey sterility/Dry up in her the organs of increase/And from her derogate body never spring/A babe to honor her." In short, Shakespeare, in portraying life as it is, created unforgettable characters endowed with all human follies and traits of insult, love, hate, curse. And they enjoy their lives in full. The lines quoted here are just a gateway to get into 900,000 words penned by Shakespeare in order to acquire wisdom as well as pleasure.

Md. Shafiquol Islam is a civil servant and Shakespeare buff.

NON-FICTION

## Last train out of WTC

SHAZIA OMAR

I was part of the post undergrad elite of Manhattan, earning almost 6 digits a year, with an expensive account, a limo service, a secretary and an expensive wardrobe of designer suits. I liked the respect it earned me. In a few years I'd have a million dollars in my bank account, a penthouse on the Upper West side, a beach house in the Hamptons, Jimmy Choo shoes and Louis Vuitton purses. What more could I ask for? My Ivy League education had landed me a chance to play in the big league. All I had to do was accept this as my path.

I bent over to lace up my strappy heels and noticed that the man sitting next to me on the subway was reading the papers, an article about third world poverty. I tried to read over his shoulders and broke out into a cold sweat. He seemed calm and collected, detached perhaps, from the emotional turmoil that bites at a young woman who questions her purpose in life.

Despite the ample pay checks, I had mounting credit card bills to add to the college loans on my shoulders. I had no time to do groceries or find a husband or ponder on spirituality. I knew I was on track, an independent professional moving steadily towards the financial security of a stable corporate career. I was a South Asian father's dream come true. It was a rare opportunity for a girl from Bangladesh, but I wondered if it was the right direction for me. Did I really fit into that world of trophy wives and box office seats at baseball games? At 21, I already had wrinkles on my forehead from staring at a computer screen all day.

I noticed two passengers staring at my legs so I pulled down the edges of my pencil skirt. It was a navy skirt, a new purchase, an Armani from the World Trade Center shopping plaza where I often lingered after work before hopping onto the metro to go home 50 blocks uptown. I wished I lived closer, as I would be late for my morning meeting, though it wasn't entirely my fault.

I hadn't slept all week. I had to finish a pitch book by Friday. The night before I had completed a set of discounted cash flows, then handed the document over to Kenny, the black guy who worked in the basement, in support services' design team. He was well built and super smart, I never gave my work to anyone else. He worked on my pitches even when there were others in line before me. I nurtured his crush on me with low cut blouses and occasional emails. In an office full of alpha males, it was nice to have someone on your team. I could rely on Kenny, though I hardly knew him. At 10 am his shift would finish, and who knows where he'd go?

The train pulled into my stop, the World Trade Center. I stepped out and was fumbling in my

purse for my Lehman Brothers ID when I heard the blaring engines of a plane and then a crashing sound. The world shook for a moment. Then there was a cacophony of screams from outside; inside the station, pandemonium erupted.

Panicked people stampeded towards the two exits. Security guards blew whistles as people shoved their way past each other. I scanned the station for signs of a bomb blast as I ran with the crowd.

Outside was chaos. Fear hung over the confused frenzy. Cars honked and swerved around screaming pedestrians. Rocks and rubble fell from the sky.

Staring up through the haze, I thought I saw a plane. I ran across the street and turned back. I



squinted to keep the particles out of my eyes. I was still too close to see the top of the building properly, but it was a plane, that much I could tell, and there was black smoke billowing out of its burning tail.

I'm not sure now why I called him of all people. He was back in Bangladesh, a million miles away, but I guess the stress of that moment made me a little girl, so I called my father. I told him about the plane and he instructed me to get in a cab and go home immediately.

In the midst of the falling rubble and screaming commotion, there were no cabs to hail down. Shielding my eyes with my hands, I stared at the plane and wondered what was

going on. How could such an accident happen?

I tried calling my boss. I wanted to tell him about the plane crash. Our office was less than fifty feet away and our windows faced the World Trade Center. John's phone rang, but he didn't answer. I felt unsettled and wondered if I should go home. I didn't want to piss him off and get fired. There were a hungry pack of magna cum laude over-achievers waiting to get their hands on my job, but I felt queasy.

I decided to take the train out of the downtown area, go back home, despite the work on hand, and figure out my next move later. The smoke had made the air thick and it was difficult to breathe or see. I hurried back towards the station, against the flow of the hysterical masses.

Suddenly my past worries seemed insignificant. I didn't have to be a banker to give definition to my existence, I didn't have to accept the beaten path, I didn't have to make money, it didn't really matter to me much, I didn't have to find a husband just yet. I had everything going for me, my health and sanity, my friends and family, my education and opportunities, peace and freedom. Life was beautiful and finite, and I was lucky to be alive. After what seemed like a century, the door of the train finally closed. The announcement on the speaker said, "There's been an emergency, folks. This is the last train leaving the station. All services to this station will be shut until further notice. I repeat, this is the last train to leave the World Trade Center."

The train screeched out of Ground Zero, skipping all the stations in the financial district and onwards till it finally stopped in midtown. I stepped out of the subway station into the sun and surrendered to the universe. I could hear police sirens and fire trucks. People were running around in mayhem. Everything was NOT going to be OK.

I walked around the corner and found a crowd of people huddled outside a store window, watching the news on display televisions. I joined them and watched another plane fly into the second tower. I thought of the people stuck in the buildings, the dreams and ambitions I shared with them and how all those dreams shattered with the glass windows as the jets ripped open the building.

And then we saw the mighty ivory towers crumble. In unison, we screamed, tears poured down my face and someone held my hand. Despite our differences in race and religion, we shared a connection. We were all New Yorkers, in shock.

(This story was first printed in Open Magazine).

The lady collapsed on the seat next to me. She looked like she might faint. The child stayed in my arms, silently trembling. As we waited in the nearly empty train, visions began to flash before me. I wondered if anyone was in the offices above when the plane crashed. Were they okay? I wondered if Kenny was still at work, working on my pitch. Had he seen the plane?

"Why won't the train start?" yelled the lady, frantic. The other passengers eyed her with blank expressions; they had not stepped out. They sipped their Starbucks, blissfully ignorant of the plane lodged 70 floors above us.

I thought about how absurd and precious life is, how in a moment anything could happen, like a plane crashing into a building, or a bomb blast or a stampede. I whispered a prayer.

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(This story was first printed in Open Magazine).

Shazia Omar is a social psychologist. Her debut novel, *Like a Diamond in the Sky*, will soon be available in bookstores in Dhaka.

POETRY



### To See Him Again

Gabriela Mistral

Never, never again?  
Not on nights filled with quivering  
stars,  
or during dawn's maiden  
brightness  
or afternoon of sacrifice?

Or at the edge of a pale path  
that encircles the farmlands,  
or upon the rim of a trembling  
fountain,  
whitened by a shimmering moon?

Or beneath the forest's  
luxuriant, raveled tresses  
where, calling his name,  
I was overtaken by the night?  
Not in the grotto that returns  
the echo of my cry?

Oh no. To see him again-  
it would not matter where--  
in heaven's deadwater  
or inside the boiling vortex,  
under serene moons or in  
bloodless fright!

To be with him...  
every springtime and winter,  
united in one anguished knot  
around his bloody neck!

Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957),  
among Chile's pre-eminent poets,  
won the Nobel Prize for Literature  
in 1955