

NON-FICTION

Of journalism, of literature

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

I happen to be one of those individuals who, having found themselves in the dilemma that on a prosaic basis we call a search for a livelihood, went through university dreaming of life as a pedagogue, indeed as an academic in the hallowed corridors of a public university. It was not to be, for reasons we often choose to push away or under the rug because they are too uncomfortable to remember. And then I drifted off into journalism, but not before I had burnt a few bridges to what I had once thought would be my future, or before the immanent will, to borrow that meaningful turn of phrase from Thomas Hardy, let it be known that my future was not in my hands. It was a truth I was not aware of when I proudly lifted my head (and it was a full head of hair in those days, back in 1965) before a bowing Field Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan (all men gifted with the majesty of height must nevertheless defer to those condemned to be short and therefore more compact in form if not in substance) and told him that I would like to be President of Pakistan. He was impressed and asked my teachers to take good care of me. For the next week or so, I was Pakistan's future president. I wallowed in the limelight.

But that was fantasy, a child's daydream. My ambitions changed over the years. My parents were not overly happy when I informed them I would like to take up medical science as a future career. Neither were they happy when I had second thoughts, told them I was going to be a lawyer. My father, having missed out on the opportunities that came to other men in the 1940s and 1950s, had, unbeknownst to me, already chalked out my future. I was to be part of the Pakistan civil service, be a CSP officer and retire someday as secretary of some ministry. Maybe one day you will be foreign secretary. Why not foreign minister? I asked him. I did not appreciate the scowl coming all over his face, but there was the elegance I associated with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Someday, I thought, I would speak before the United Nations Security Council, go back home and discover, to my pleasant surprise, that I had turned into a national hero. That was not to be. But then came a damp, drizzly evening in Dhaka in the early 1970s when I unabashedly informed Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman that I would appreciate being part of his government once my education was behind me. He gave me a quizzical look. Go home and study rather than wait to see me every day, said he. We will see about that job later.

And then he died. So many dreams, so much of idealism collapsed for all of us when he was taken away from us. I who had spent my entire school life under a military ruler found, to my chagrin, that it was now my entire university life that had the shadow of yet another military ruler etched all over it. The shadow passed. My old college from where I had qualified for higher secondary took me in as a lecturer. And then there was the English medium school where I taught English, into which school one day stepped a bright young woman who, the principal told me in all her gaiety, would do the same job in the junior classes. Would I help her out at times? I did, we fell in love and decided we would marry. Nothing doing, said her family, unless your beau proves his intelligence through appearing at the Bangladesh Civil Service examinations. You can go ahead and marry, said my father, but how about doing a BCS first? I did not get to be a CSP, but that thought of a BCS took hold of my father. He smiled a lot. The bright young woman, resplendent in her beauty, met me at the end of my exams everyday. We took long rickshaw rides before parting in the descending gray of twilight. I qualified for the civil service and decided not to take the job. Everyone was devastated.

And then I drifted off to journalism. The poet Shihab Sarkar, magazine editor at the New Nation, the man who had graciously published my articles every Sunday, or almost, one day asked me if I would like to join the newspaper as assistant editor. The opening was there because one of the editorial staff was leaving to join Dhaka University. He took me to Waheedul Haque, who took me to Hasan Saeed, who took me to Motahar Hossain Siddiqui. All three of them gave me a subject on which to prepare an editorial. In fifteen minutes, in longhand, the editorial was ready. They were happy. A beaming Motahar Hossain Siddiqui, the editor, took me to see the chairman of the editorial board. It was Mainul Hossain, the barrister. He issued an appointment letter. I was officially a journalist. Since that day, I have been in the profession, with a break of three years, when the state packed me off to the United Kingdom, to man the press wing at the High Commission in London. But that is another long, intriguing, seductive story. Since 1983, in TS Eliot's words, with slight variations, I have grown old, I have worn the bottoms of my trousers rolled. There have often been times when I have felt like a pair of ragged claws scuttling across the floors of silent seas. Journalism is electrifying. It is often a lonely place to be in, if you have once been part of literature. It is a forbidding place, if politics has been replaced by authoritarian rule.

My foray into journalism has in these long years lengthened itself into experience straddling the serious and the comic, the plainly tragic and the hugely amusing. I have written much, and have done so in the fond belief that the language of journalism is surely enriched by a fair dose of the literary in it. My articles have generally been suffused with thoughts I have built on literature. Journalism was bringing me into closer, deeper touch with the world. It was affording me an opportunity to meet men whom I had studied from a distance. Those were days of dictatorship, intensified by a plethora of flunkies and hangers on, made fascinating by the underlying play of good against evil. I watched them, for they were men who were playing havoc with the land. And yet, the very next instant, it was literature that I brought into play as I studied these men. Richard III, Macbeth, Caliban, and so many others came into my field of vision as I tried interpreting their personalities. They were men of politics but literature took them a step further and explained the human nature that separated them from the human nature which defined other men.

There have been the times when the prosaic quality of journalism threatened to mar the poetry of literature I had learnt at university. The closure of a university somewhere in Bangladesh demanded an immediate, no-frills language response. And, paradoxically, with that came the meeting of a deadline for a write-up that sought to uphold the magnificence of poetry. And thus it was that I wrote of Aparna Sen's marriage (it was not her first) on the banks of the Shenandoah. The years went by. Youth, in me, gave way to advancing age. The hair grew thinner and grayer. As the ayatollah prepared to return to Tehran, my editors asked me to write on the revolution that was consuming the monarchy in Iran. I tried spotting a second storming of the Bastille in that uprising. I could not. But I did see history repeat itself in the flight of the Shah in early 1979. He was not Aeneas going to Dido. He and Farah Diba came close to emulating Mussolini and his mistress in World War II-riven Italy. Then, some years later, came the evening when I swiftly prepared an editorial on the imminent fall of Nicolae Ceausescu in Romania and rushed out for a pretty evening with a prettier woman I called Urvashi. Halfway through dinner, as I watched television, I saw Ceausescu fall and try to flee. It was a pathetic sight, demanding

a literary interpretation, a definition that would be seen in the context of poetic tragedy. I went back to my office, to write a fresh editorial on how the corrupt and the power-hungry fall from grace. It was something I had done earlier for Ferdinand Marcos. But, yes, beautiful was that moment when, at Waheedul Haque's prodding, I brought journalistic jargon and poetic imagery to explain the woman that was Indira Gandhi. It was an October day in 1984.

But that is not an easy job. Much as you may have learnt of literature, you discover, once you are in the world of the newspaper, that you need to cut back on your linguistic exuberance, that you need to cut out the fat as it were and go for the lean part of it. There are two ways of looking at this condition. In the first place, journalistic writing brings you in touch with manifest reality and compels you to observe things as they are. You cannot go beyond what you see. But, to be sure, you do have an opinion which can find place in the editorial or op-ed pages of the newspaper. That is hardly any signal for you, though, to step out of the straitjacket of reality. You cannot stray from facts; you cannot embellish your language but you cannot stretch facts. In the second, if you have been a student of literature, you will feel a trifle disappointed, your heart breaks, once you stumble on the truth that the poetic skills, the sheer rhetorical power you once thought was your passport to the wider world is no more a requirement for you in your journalistic career. What used to be poetry and frequent stabs at fiction soon dwindle into mundane editorials and banal articles.

Yes, writing for newspapers, especially on current affairs, deadens the sensibilities somewhat. It also does something else, in countries where democracy is generally a tentative affair. Having lived through a multiplicity of dictatorial regimes, media people in Bangladesh have understood the insidious nature of censorship. Martial law has always and spontaneously led to the rise of Big Brother, to use that Orwellian phrase, to the making of the pygmy in the journalist. When it is not martial law, when military rule has tried insinuating itself into its own version of democracy, there is the euphemistically put 'advice' reaching newspaper offices in the middle of the night, suggesting what news should go and what should not. Yes, it is advice, but advice that you can ignore at grave peril to yourself. Think of the consequences, to you, to your newspaper.

And yet, at the end of the day, your work as a journalist and your background as a student of literature add good substance to what you write, indeed to the way you reflect on conditions around you. Men who would be gods are images you dismantle as you go along. You expose the powerful for the philistines that they are through your ability to recall the myths and the mythologies of old, to be able to relate them to the world of contemporary men and women.

Thus come the pitfalls. And thus we go looking for promise in what we write. Often, as a well-known columnist in the West discovered, to his and his readers' delight, journalistic writing must come trippingly on the tongue, or tongue-in-cheek, if it is to be received in rapture. When a reader berated him for his obsession with writing on loaded, serious subjects, he decided on a rethink. The next week, he had something new on offer: his new article carried the intriguing heading: 'The sex life of a mosquito.'

The letters column of the newspaper was submerged in letters. The article turned out to be cathartic for everyone --- for the writer, for his readers, for innocent bystanders.

Excerpts from a talk delivered recently at Independent University Bangladesh (IUB). Syed Badrul Ahsan is with The Daily Star.

SHORT STORY

The proud possessor

RASHID ASKARI

It is a sweltering hot night in a sleepy remote village called Madhupur. Although a full hour has not yet passed since dusk fell, it seems quite like midnight. It is typical of a village, particularly one like Madhupur. A terribly backward village where days and nights are not determined by the clock but by the behaviour of the poultry. Nights begin with their entry into the pen and the day that follows is heralded by their cock-a-doodle-doo. The villagers get themselves into this poultry routine of life. They finish their meal at twilight and go to bed after shutting the hen-house door. The next morning they wake at cock crow. But this night is different. It is too hot to sleep. There is no breeze. The leaves on the trees are still. Men and women are outside their cottages for fresh air. Some are sleeping out on mats laid on small platforms under the trees.

One is reading aloud the punthi -Gaji Kalu Champaboti (a medieval Bengali epic poem) to a large group sitting around him. Men do not have any top to go with their loincloth which is worn so loosely around the bottom that it hardly helps. The women too are scantily clad. They are in thin cotton saris accompanied by no second piece of fabric. Jainal and his wife Saleha are no exception. The only difference is that they have not come out of their cottage. Jainal has been bedridden for a couple of months. The spade wound on his right foot is not healing at all. It is rather getting swollen day by day. He cannot still believe this! How could he have cut his own foot with his own spade? Jainal is the strongest man in the neighbourhood, a tall, dark fellow with a square jaw, broad shoulders, muscular arms and legs like logs of sal tree (vatica robusta). As a hadudu player, he has no peers in the vicinity. Occasionally he plays for hire. But he earns his living by different labouring jobs. The spade is his dearest tool. He has inherited it from his father. It is being sharpened by regular wear and tear. But Jainal can handle it as a toy spade. His most popular tool has crippled him! It was in the fraction of a second that Jainal became distraught hearing the proposal of Kasem Bhai while digging the earth. "Look, Jainal, you've been slaving away in this village for long. But you're always hard up for money. It's difficult to maintain your family quite alone. Monga is fast approaching. You may starve to death with your wife," said Kasem Bhai most sympathetically. "I know," Jainal concentrated on digging out a big lump of earth with his spade. "But you don't know how you can raise your income." Kasem Bhai seemed very caring toward Jainal's family. "How?"

Jainal raised his eyes from his spade and curiously cast them at Kasem Bhai. "Send Saleha to a garment factory in Dhaka. A friend of mine has one. I can get her a good job over there. She'll earn at least thrice as much as you earn by drudgery and hadudu." Kasem's eyes appeared tinged with sneaking lust and Jainal could read it. A rancorous lava-flow quickly ran down his spine. In the twinkling of an eye, he received a severe blow of the spade on his right foot. The blade of the spade was suffused with blood. Kasem took him to the village kabiraj as quickly as he could. The kabiraj washed the foot with pond water, filled the long gaping cut with the sap of some unknown herbs and bandaged it up with a piece of shabby old cloth. He was muttering some arcane mantras and blowing repeatedly on and around the wound. All this could not effect any cure and the injury turned into a suppurating sore. But Jainal does not try any other treatment for that. He ties a string of twisted hair piercing an oyster shell round the wound with a view to warding off evil spirits. Maybe the spirits are resisted but the wound is getting graver and killing him, almost. A thick yellowish liquid oozes from it. With such a bad sore how can he join the others for fresh air? So he is in his bed, with Saleha. He is lying on his back looking at the ramshackle roof of his old thatched cottage.

Saleha is fanning him with one hand and pressing

his head with the other. The flickering flame of a kerosene lamp is falling across her full figure, giving a blurred view of it in the light and shade. Totally topless, Saleha is clad in only a thin petticoat. Jainal can feel her sexuality in every curve and swell. In two years he has fully familiarised himself with the entire geography of her body. Her pudding face, ample bosom, fleshy arms, large posterior with a slender waist, shapely legs all are mind-blowing. His eyes course along her naked body from the toe upward. They come to an abrupt halt at the crucial juncture where the plump thighs have most evenly dissolved in the shadowy groin. The lustful eyes are stuck in the tiny triangle covered with soft and silky grass. Jainal cannot think any longer. He leaps up like a person possessed. With a sudden pull he lays Saleha straight on to the bed and clasps her to his broad hairy chest. Saleha is a placid river. She is bursting with youth. She is the lone thing that gives him the elixir of life. How can he miss her even for a temporary interval? How does Kasem Bhai dare give him such a proposal?

Saleha is his only possession. How can he let her live on someone else's charity while he knows full well what lies beneath this dissipated help? Kasem Bhai is a rake, a terrible womaniser. But Saleha is not to be hunted by anybody. She is Jainal's own. His property. His possession. All her charms and beauty are not for public consumption. It is Jainal and only Jainal who possesses the right to consume her to the lees. To his heart's content. Jainal throws a tantrum. But immediately it is dampened by the nagging worry of the worsening wound. A mixture of rancour, frustration and fear turns him delicious. He hugs Saleha close to his chest and murmurs, "Saleha, my shona bo, you are my wife by religion. I love you. I would rather die

than lose my right to you. You are made for me, only for me." He takes her by the shoulders and starts shaking violently. "Tell me. Promise me. You are mine. Now and always. You're never ever anybody else's. Promise me, you'll not, never go to Dhaka with the bastard."

Saleha is used to this disposition of her husband. She does not want to hurt him at that moment. She nods her consent. But she knows she has to break her promise if she wants to save her husband. She has to accept Kasem's proposal to cure the killer sore and to face the monga even if she suspects that he is just a meal ticket for her. But then again, she is not forgetful of the promise she has made to her husband. Saleha is in the

doldrums. Her small world is swimming before her eyes. But she plans to play it cool. A sharp stink of rotten flesh spreads in the room. The sore is gravely rotting. Saleha knows it is being too late. She is apprehensive about its consequences. Jainal needs to be immediately taken to the district hospital. It calls for a huge amount of money. But they are in grinding poverty. They have failed to keep up with the bank loan installment. The motor cycle-riding officer is likely to come soon. This time he may not allow any more her time petition. Maybe he will proceed much further. The last time round, Saleha had begged him to defer her installment to a later date. "Hmml!" The officer had looked grave. But then he cast a furtive glance at her and smiled his approval. On the pretext of taking Saleha's thumb mark, he pressed her hand softly and reassured her about paying the next installment. She could take her time with it. Saleha does not mind. She has to cure her crippled husband. She does not want him to come to a sticky end. She has to be the crutch for him. She would play a beulah, the Bengali mythical woman who sailed her own yacht to an unknown destination with her dead husband with a view to bringing him back to life. She must save her dying husband. In exchange for anything. She does not know what that is. She only knows she has to turn every stone. Saleha becomes resolute. She stretches her hands towards Jainal to draw him closer. Jainal feels reassured with her promise. He buries his head in her bosom and clings to her like a child.

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CELEBRATIONS

Herta Mueller and the Nobel



SHAHAN HUQ

Herta Mueller

HERTA Mueller's triumph has surprised a lot of people. But that ought not to be the case, for there have been situations when others not very well known in the world of literature have come by the Nobel Prize for Literature. And not just literature. A whole lot of controversy has raged around some of the awards given out in the peace category. So it is not merely literature that has come in for controversy.

And do not forget that there have been people in literature, or in its vicinity, who have either raised controversy themselves or have had controversy swirling around them when it came to the Nobel. In 1958, Boris Pasternak was awarded the prize and everyone went around feeling a good job had been done and the right individual had got the prize. He had, after all, given a fresh new dimension to literature with Doctor Zhivago. But then the Soviet state stepped

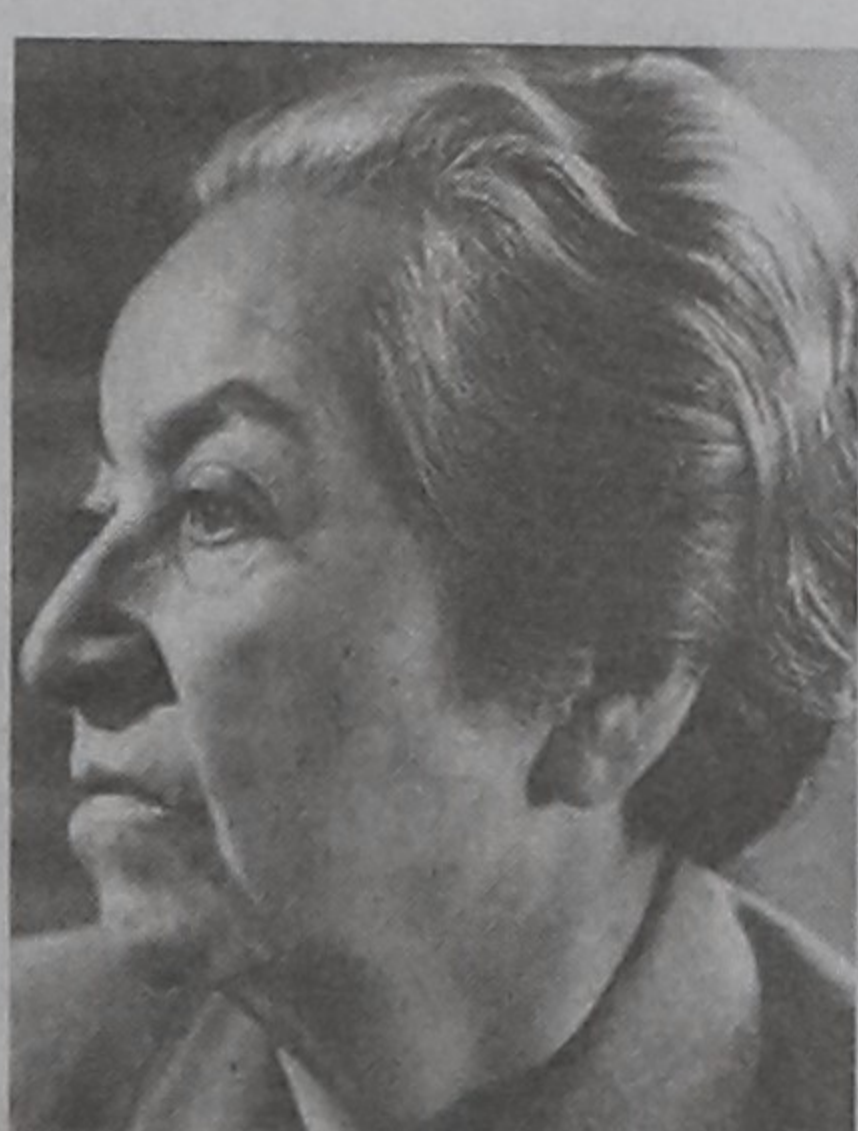
in. Nikita Khrushchev and the Communist regime were irate, for they thought it had all been a western conspiracy to undermine and embarrass the country and communism. Pasternak was unable to accept the prize.

But what do you make of France's Jean-Paul Sartre who, when he received news that the Nobel Literature Prize for 1964 had been given to him, decided he would not accept



Nadine Gordimer

it? He issued a terse statement letting everyone know that he was not taking the prize. One almost wishes Henry Kissinger had done that when he was awarded, with Le Duc Tho, the Peace Nobel in 1973. Tho declined the prize, for peace was yet to come to Vietnam. The war was to go on for two years more after Kissinger went to Oslo. Be that as it may, the Nobel for literature this year seems to have finally gone to one who has deserved it. Herta Mueller knows what experience and political suffocation is all about. She was, after all, once a citizen of



Gabriela Mistral

Romania. And this was at a time when Nicolae Ceausescu ran the show. In 1987, unable to withstand persecution and the threat of it any longer, she left for Germany with her husband.

Mueller's life has all the tragic beauty of a literary existence about it. Her father served in Hitler's Waffen SS, the crack combat troops of the Nazi organization. Her mother spent five years in a Soviet work camp. A member of Romania's German-speaking minority, Mueller was born in the village of Nitzdykorf on 17 August 1953. At university she was vocal in defence of freedom of speech, a rather difficult act under the Ceausescu dictatorship. Once she had graduated, she became a translator at a factory. That soon caused her distress, when she refused an offer by the secret police to serve as an informant. She lost her job. That was when she veered into fiction writing. Her stories came out in a collection she called *Niederungen*, which in its English rendering came to be known as *Nadirs*.

When *Niederungen* appeared in Romania, much of it was censored by the regime. But a smuggled copy of the work, sent by Mueller, appeared in full in Germany and received rapturous applause. Mueller moved to Germany in 1987 and has been living in Berlin with her husband since.

Herta Mueller is only the twelfth woman to have received the Nobel Prize for Literature. Among those who got it before her are Pearl S. Buck in 1938, Gabriela Mistral in 1945, Nadine Gordimer in 1991, Toni Morrison in 1993, Elfriede Jelinek in



Doris Lessing

2004 and Doris Lessing in 2007.

Among Mueller's notable works, in English translation, are *The Passport* (1989), *The Land of Green Plums* (1996), *Travelling on One Leg* (1998) and *The Appointment* (2001).

Shahan Huq is a literary critic whose focus is on western literature. He lives in Narayanganj.

LITERARY NEWS

Writing across cultures

Writers teaching in some of the world's top Creative Writing programs will talk about how they mentor students and important aspects of craft at 'Writing Across Cultures' in Hong Kong, 9-11 March 2010.

'Writing Across Cultures' is a two-day event for students and teachers of creative writing in Asia, organised by The University of Adelaide based Asia-Pacific Writing Partnership and The English Department of The City University of Hong Kong, in conjunction with the Man Hong Kong International Literary Festival.

Instead of academic papers, 'provocateurs' will talk for four or five minutes about aspects of craft and teaching writing then open the discussion to the audience. A roundtable on the first day will focus on teaching creative writing in the academy. The next day will focus on teaching creative writing in English in Asia.

'Not many countries in the region offer creative writing at university level,' said the Asia-Pacific Writing Partnership's founding director, Jane Camens. 'I know of a number of excellent emerging writers who have left Asia to study creative writing abroad, generally in the United States or UK. Few know about the excellent programs on Asia's doorstep in Australia.'

'Writing Across Cultures' will feature representatives from top writing programs in Australia, the United States, Britain and the region. They include: Robin Hemley from the Iowa Writers Workshop, University of Iowa, Andrew Cowan, Director of the MA in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia, Brian Castro, Chair of the Creative Writing Program at the University of Adelaide (home of the Asia-Pacific Writing Partnership), Marilyn Chin, who teaches Creative Writing in the Master of Fine Arts program at San Diego State University, Catherine Cole, Chair of Creative Writing at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University (RMIT), Kim Cheng Boey, who teaches Creative Writing at the University of Newcastle, Jose Dalisay, Director of the Institute of Creative Writing at the University of the Philippines, Dai Fan, Chair of English at Sun Yat-Sen University, Guangzhou (China), who teaches creative non fiction in China.

The Asia-Pacific Writing Partnership's first event was held in India in October 2008. It strives to hold events throughout the region in conjunction with local universities and writers organisations and bring to those events its international network of writing talent. The Partnership is based within the Creative Writing Program of the University of Adelaide under the auspices of distinguished Australian writer Professor Brian Castro. Its founding director Jane Camens also founded the Hong Kong International Literary Festival with writers Nury Vittachi and Shirley Geok-lin Lim. For the full program and registration details see <http://apwriters.org/wac>.