

SHORT STORY

POETRY

# The Exile

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

IT'S not 5 o'clock yet, and Rahman shaheb is already up, and pacing the verandah in a slow cadence, something that is not his usual practice. Of late, he's been having trouble with his sleep, especially during the early morning hours, and often found himself awake when the prayer calls for Fazr went out from the mosques in his neighborhood. These changes in his daily routine have just recently started to bother him, because he could not recall these happening before but have been recurrent in the last few months, particularly since the house became an empty nest. It's no cause for concern, he reassures himself as he slowly and firmly paces back and forth on the covered verandah that runs along the entire length of the L-shaped house.

Just after six thirty, the hawk delivers the daily newspapers, and he then proceeds to spend a little time reading, which he enjoys as he moves from the international news section to mofussil news on to the Op-ed page. Rahman shaheb has enjoyed this routine since his college days, and takes pride in his knowledge of current events and understanding of international politics. It takes him a little longer nowadays to finish browsing the newspapers, both Bengali and English, from cover to cover, but fortunately for him he can go about it without any interruption or distraction. The house is quiet and his wife is fast asleep. The house is mostly empty and quiet even during the rest of the day, unless they have visitors. For a few years, his nephew was staying with them while he was studying law at Ideal. Now, he has found a government job and is in Satkhira.

Rahman shaheb and his wife have two grown children--his son lives abroad and his daughter Anita lives with her husband, Ashek, and son, Aditya, nearby in Banani. Ani, as he calls her, was very bright and intelligent early on, and wanted to be a litigation lawyer. But, right after she finished university, she found Mr. Right and got married. The first day Rahman shaheb saw him, Ashek made a favorable impression on him. He was very sociable, and knowledgeable. Since Anita was his only daughter, he did want her to be married to someone who had some interest in Ani's world: books, music, and world affairs. She wanted to be a diplomat but once she found out about some of the hardships a Foreign Service career entailed, she started backtracking. Rahman shaheb was hoping that she'd either go abroad for higher studies or have a career. Many of her contemporaries joined private sector firms and rose very rapidly. He felt a career would be good for Ani. She was very close to his mother, her Dadi. When Ani was a child, they would spend hours talking to each other. Mother would tell her stories about her own childhood and her life as a housewife, wistfully talking about days when she missed being outside the home. She wanted to be a school teacher, but had very limited opportunities in her days. She would always tell Ani, "You will be very successful". Anita would on the other hand, talk endlessly with Dadi, telling her stories and spend hours describing her own world, sometimes real and sometimes make-believe.

After marriage, Anita occasionally mentioned her thoughts about going back to work but one thing or the other would intervene and she seemed to have put the idea of working on the back burner, for now at least, and had devoted all her energy on grooming Aditya, and on supporting her husband's career. Her family life appeared to be peaceful, and Aditya's soccer/music/debating club

schedule, and their busy social life appeared to keep Anita content, or so it appeared to Rahman shaheb and his wife over the years. It was only after Anita and Ashek celebrated their tenth wedding anniversary did Rahman shaheb get some indications that trouble might be brewing under the surface. The first hint of the darkening clouds came in the form of a black eye that he noticed when Anita came to visit them after last year's New Year's Eve celebration. Anita at first tried to brush off his inquisitive eyes, and only said that she had slipped and fallen down. The explanation only reinforced his suspicions. In light of his years' of experience in the judicial service and extensive knowledge of social norms and cultural practices, he sensed that there probably was more than met the eye. But as a father he did not want to cause Anita any discomfort by probing further, and let the matter slide.

Another day, a few months after that first incident, Anita called, and asked "Baba, how are you doing?" She sounded a little down, and the tone of her voice was very subdued. He could sense that the bubbly daughter he had known all along was not there on the other end of the phone.



"Your voice sounds a little hoarse. Do you have a cold or fever, my dear?" he asked gingerly, trying to pry open the veil that Anita had managed so far to keep wrapped around her personal relationship with Ashek.

"Oh, it's nothing, Baba. Probably the cold I have been fighting the last few days. It was such a dreary day. The rain did not let up!"

"Ani, you do not sound very convincing. Are you sure you are not hiding anything?"

"No, Baba. Why do you think I am hiding something?"

Rahman shaheb now sensed that that something was not right. He pressed on,

"Mamoni, you have to let me know. How is Ashek doing? I am your father, and you can't hide anything from me."

"Ok, ok, Baba, not on the phone. I will stop by when I get the car." For some reason, Rahman shaheb forgot to ask if Aditya was ok. Somehow, he could feel that something more than her family's health or her husband's career was on her mind.

Anita did come to visit the next day. She had put on nice make up, which she avoids doing when she visits her parents, and brought a present for him, a book of verses by her favourite poet, Nirmolendu. Only when his

wife excused herself for the Asar prayers, did he manage to find the opportunity to finally catch up with Anita.

"What's up with you, Ani? Why did you sound so depressed yesterday?"

"Oh, I said it's nothing. I had a tiring day, and the weather was so dispiriting. That must have come through. See, today the sun is up and I am already feeling fine."

Something from yesterday had convinced Rahman shaheb that Anita was not being entirely candid with him. She was trying to keep a part of her life or an incident that was bothering her yesterday shielded from him. In his years as a judge, he knew that cross-examination could turn up vital clues in the most unlikely places. Plus, thirty years in the judiciary had given him a very inquisitive mind, always probing further to unearth truths and lies, expose any cracks behind walls, or just search for the real story. He was aware that Anita was never very forthcoming about her own worries or problems, even when she was a child. She always would try to keep personal issues away from her parents lest they cause worries for them, particularly her mother. Often she'd confide something in him, and,

then add,

"Please do not tell Ammal!" A mother is one who needs protection, appeared to be her mantra. "The umbilical cord is never broken," as Anita had said in one of her many flashes of homespun wisdom.

"Are you going to tell me what happened?" Rahman shaheb finally said in a firm voice in a desperate attempt to pry open the hard wall that he suspected Anita of putting up.

Anita finally relented. "Oh Baba, it's nothing. As you know, Ashek sometimes has a temper tantrum and acts up a little."

Even before she had finished her sentence Rahman shaheb knew that his worst fears were coming true. How much he had secretly hoped that Ani would be married to a man who would not only be loving and caring only in good times, but also in the worst. The vow of "for better or for worse" was like an oath, a firm commitment of which he never hesitated to remind all. From all the domestic dispute cases he had adjudicated, one face of human beings that frequently baffled him was when men resorted to intimidate their women by words and threats or worst, physically. Kobiguru's Streeer Potro had left a lasting impression on him. "Love turned sour" is how

some men would euphemistically dismiss it, but he believed in the saying "Abuse, by any other language, smells just as bad".

Trying to tread very gently, he asked, "So what does he do? Can you be a little more specific, please?" He now was being a solicitous father trying to comfort a hurt child.

"Well, as you know, he's very loving and takes good care of his family. But you know he sometimes has a lot on his mind and loses control."

"What do you mean loses control?" he said, still trying not to sound alarmed.

"Well, you know, yelling and all that", Anita attempted to soften the impact of her disclosure on their conversation.

"No, I don't know about all that. Yelling is just that. It means talking loudly... unless, one uses language to threaten or swear. Does he do that?"

"Oh Baba, let it go."

Rahman shaheb was now worried that his wife might be finished with her prayers and overhear their conversation. She would take all this very hard. He remembered that when Anita was only seven days old, she developed neonatal jaundice. The doctors were not very optimistic about her chances of survival. That was the first time Rahman shaheb saw the real face of motherhood. His wife spent four days next to the bed where Anita was placed under the fluorescent light. Since that time, he had always tried to shield his wife from any bad news about the children. Once when Apu, their son, was in college and living in a hostel, he came down with meningitis. He arranged for Apu to be treated in a very expensive hospital, all without any word to his wife. His brothers' wives and his own sister took care of him.

"Ok, I'd like to know more, whenever you are ready to share!" he firmly said. But, there was also a part of him that did not want to know more. What if Ashek was going beyond yelling at her, as he now suspected? He could not imagine an otherwise gentle and educated person like Ashek resorting to physical abuse on his wife. What is it with men? What's it in their genes that turns them into such monsters? Is it a display of power? But what was it like when there was a matriarchal society?

"You always know that the door to this house is always open for you. This is your house, and we will always be happy to welcome you back. Do you know what I mean?"

"I know, Baba. I know. You worry for no reason. It is not what you think."

A few days later Aditya left for the residential school in India where he had been admitted. Both Anita and Ashek were very emotional as Aditya was preparing to leave. Rahman shaheb saw them more often than usual as the ten-year old was going through the unending rounds of parties as relatives and long-time family friends were dropping in. He tried to read the minds of his daughter and son-in-law for any hint of what might be going on in their house, or to decipher from verbal clues for what might happen after Aditya's departure for India. It appeared that all was quiet for now.

A few days later, one afternoon there was a knock on their door. The servants had taken a break, and Rahman shaheb was reading the newspaper. After the second knock, he got up and walked down to open the door. There was Anita standing at the door. He did not drop an eyelid, and without any show of emotion said,

"Come in, my child. Let me take your bag in and I'll open the door to your room which as you will see your mother preserved the way you left it. Stay with us as long as you wish."

Dr. Abdullah Shibli works and lives in Boston, USA.

## Two poems from Muneera Parbeen

### Call me out

Look they are coming again!  
the ones that looted and cheated  
leaving you to a life of death.

Look they are rising again!  
the ones that made skies turn black  
the ones that turned red to blood.

Look the cowards are coming again  
the ones who weren't man enough to fight  
but chose to touch the woman and the child.

Look the bastards have got together again!  
the ones that dared lie to God  
base and filth and what not.

Who let them out again?  
Who are these nameless men?  
They just show up now and then!

But don't they know who we are?  
30 years on we are stained and blooded,  
but now we make the rules, and the game is ours.

Women are not to be scorned  
they grow you in their wombs  
Can you forget where you come from?

This time we know how to fight  
and we dare hold up our lights!  
Who will you turn to this time?

The God you cheated?  
Or the Lords you booted?  
They won't save you in time.

Are you now man enough to show your face?  
come call me out then, and let's rest your case,

Try looking me in the eye.  
You will burn, you will fall in ashes,  
with the blink of my eyes and lashes.

Because you haven't faced a woman yet.  
Come call me out, for you I wait.

### An Elegy

You are lying there in cold  
somewhere we still don't know,  
we have unfinished business,  
you and I, daddy.

Thirty-eight years have gone by  
and we all live on, a life  
borrowed from you, but you  
know we all live in shame.

Feels like an entire nation  
doesn't care, not really  
for if we all did, we could  
bring your killers to law.

And yet we have our pride in you  
quoting you every now and then,  
trying to show we care,  
when essentially we don't.

We hold symposiums on  
you and your work, we give  
out rich prizes, we even build  
a road or two in your name.

We try to show we care  
about your work, what you  
gave us, but not what we  
took from you. Your life.

But if you want to know the truth  
daddy, some of us never sleep,  
we miss you, in a life  
with a void, deep.

Muneera Parbeen is with The Daily Star

LITERARY NOTES

SOLILOQUY

# An evening with Emily Dickinson

FARIDA SHAIKH

LAUNCHED Into Eternity by Masud Mahmood (and published by Niaz Zaman at writers.ink) is a study of Emily Dickinson's poems and letters. In a sense, the launch of the work at the American Centre on 13 December was an anniversary celebration of this remarkable American poet. Her birthday fell on 10 December. Born a hundred and thirty nine years ago, Dickinson passed into immortality after a life span of fifty six years. Only seven of her poems were published during her lifetime. She had asked her sister to burn her poems. Her sister ended up publishing the poems after the poet's death.

The poet focused on her feelings. For her, to experience the sunrise and sunset was a most fortunate augury. She once noted that 'people say a word dies when it is written by pen, but for me that word's life is just about to begin.' For Emily Dickinson, life and death were one continuum and not things apart. She said, '...because I could not stop for death, he kindly stopped for me. The carriage held just ourselves and immortality.' The poet saw love mingled with life, for '...I argue... that love is life. And life hath immortality.' And further that 'love is anterior to life, posterior to death, initial of creation, and the exponent of breath.'

The book launch was a near perfect event in terms of ambiance, erudite audience and timing. The welcoming remarks by Ms Lauren Lovelace, the elegant director of the American Centre, set off the sparkling occasion. The warmth of her words, her exposition of the purposes of the centre, made a deep impression on those present. Dr. Niaz Zaman, who has long taught English literature at Dhaka University, spoke eloquently of her student, the writer Masud Mahmood. She had been his

supervisor. He laboured for eight long years to complete his dissertation on Emily Dickinson. His find was stupendous: her letters and one thousand seven hundred and seventy five poems against a backdrop of the teachings of the Calvinist branch of orthodox Christianity. Mahmood has done well in shaping all the research material into a friendly volume for regular readers.

Professor Rebecca Haq, Chairperson, Department of English, Dhaka University, spoke elaborately on Dickinson as well as the writer's critical talent. As she herself is a specialist in American literature, her in-depth delivery highlighted the digression of perspectives on the central theme of the poet.

A recitation by Zarin Alam, assistant professor at Dhaka University, sounded particularly apt. The poem? *Because I Could Not Stop...* And then it was for another respected academic, Dr. Shawkat Hussain, to enlighten the audience. He poured humour into the session by addressing the writer. 'You are still alive...' meaning to say that the writer had survived, having dealt with the theme of death in Dickinson for eight long years. The audience broke into laughter.

Masud Mahmood remarked that appreciation of Dickinson necessarily must encompass her Calvinistic background, the mystery of the hereafter and an understanding of the temporal in light of the eternal. While other Christian thinkers located sacred times in the presence of God, the poet achieved this subjectively in a lyrical state of mind. Death and the doctrine of resurrection were central to



her writing.

The closing, rather nostalgic remarks were by Parveen, a former student of the writer and now with the American Centre. Masud Mahmood, she noted, had been an enthusiastic and gutsy teacher. He had begun teaching American literature at Chittagong University through surmounting enormous difficulties.

Programme schedule aside, the writer's omission was in not announcing the name of his artist wife Nasima Akter Masud, the individual behind the cover design of the book

The exciting evening ended over tea and tête-à-tête.

Farida Shaikh writes on various themes and is a member of The Reading Circle.

# Profane chronicle of sacrosanct days

MD SHAHIDUL ALAM CHOWDHURY

EMPTY vessel, under the sun... wipe the dust from my face another morning black Sunday coming down again ... it is coming down again ...

Empty vessel empty veins empty bottles wish for rain that pain again wash the blood off my face the pulse from my brain and I feel that pain again ... and I feel that pain again ...

Yet it comes back ... with sudden rain ... with eclipsed sun ... with blotched sky lessening the burn ... with whispers in the late autumn winds ... in a life wasted on foes and friends ... and it guts us ... without empathy ... without remorse ...

And we wake up ... in an orphaned nation full of survived abortion with morbid vision and blurred argumentation to demented augmentation of misinterpreted evolution haunted by frenzied depression daunted by relentless alienation awaiting with anticipation for much yearned redemption yet calculated violation in clockwork regulation ensures informational encapsulation spins off speculation misplaces justification seizes alteration erases revolution seals-off purgation ...

Harbingers of damnation orchestrate symphony of destruction ...

And we swing ... oh yes we

swing to the tune of division without the slightest indecision in pointless intoxication like mae-nads in motion ...

... boys toy around the doll's house in Dionysian mirth ... girls play tug of war over the myth of creation: accident of birth ... the birth of a nation ... our hopes of progression fail to reach desired destination internequine feud fuels rampant assassination ...

Circle in the sand goes round and round ... everlasting hate is what we have found ...

Yet it comes back ... with sudden rain ... with eclipsed sun ... with blotched sky lessening the burn ... with whispers in the late autumn winds ... in a life wasted on foes and friends ... and it guts us ... without empathy ... without remorse ...

And we wake up ... in forgetful hangover we drag ourselves out of bed, clog up the brain ... mementos of loss heavier gets the head ...

Maybe I always knew ... my fragile dreams would be broken for you ...

Yet ... without procrastination us LaMBs of acculturation from decentered generation product of pseudo-pacifist unification and dominating globalization coat ourselves in corporate lamination for being placed in subaltern designation with ludicrous remuneration ... and we perform miracles for THEM without indignation ...

The ethereal transmission of fm revolution mass-acquisition of means of communication estranges us in devastating proportion ... I-pods and cell-phones and food joints and pool-zones and sleeping pills and soothing drugs and playful mating with *Kafkaesque* bugs and parental control against life led in full throttle as well as freedom of flight and misadventures at night ... everything fails to initiate relation or ignite passion ... nothing sways our heart ... we hang out together only to end up loathing each other ... love takes a one-night-stand ... sinks momentarily in oblivious quicksand ... with plugged ears and unplugged minds we cover our panopticon with venetian blinds ... beyond our tunnel vision reality fades like shadows into night ... the catcher in the rye fails to trace the runaway kite ...

Yet it comes back ... with sudden rain ... with eclipsed sun ... with blotched sky lessening the burn ... with whispers in the late autumn winds ... in a life wasted on foes and friends ... and it guts us ... without empathy ... without remorse ...

The decapitated, castrated, will to live crawls back ... Lust for life never bites the dust ... ever ...

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