

SHORT STORY

POETRY

Narcissist

ZEEENAT KHAN

I am a narcissist. That is what Glory told me while she was in the U.S. two months ago for Thanksgiving holiday. I have always known that. After hearing it aloud felt very strange. Well, I knew that her eyes are windows that could see deep into my soul. That is why I avoid seeing or talking to her. We keep in touch through emails. She writes to me more often than I do. I want our correspondence to be occasional but she pays no heed as to what I want. She kept on writing until recently. She doesn't write anymore after our last phone conversation which lasted only six minutes. That is when she said I was a narcissist. If I see her or talk to her then she says things that I do not want to face or think about myself. Her voice haunts me. With emails, I can choose what to say and avoid answering things that are deep in nature. She once told me she believes we are soulmates. This was very early on. And I laughed since I do not believe in clichés. She looked hurt. And never mentioned it again after I laughed her off. No, we are not in love. How could we be? I am in love with myself. I do not take other people's feelings into consideration anymore. I am happy to be alone. That is what I tell myself.

Glory wanted to meet me since I was in Virginia Beach (U.S.) visiting my eight year old son Robbi. He lives there now with my ex wife Padma and her new husband Mukesh who is a cardio vascular surgeon. I did not tell Glory that I was leaving Bhutan a week after she was flying west from Sikkim. That is the thing with me. I don't say much. I want people to read my mind. When I arrived in Chicago first, to see my mom, that is when I dropped her a line via email that I was in the States as well. I did not have to tell her about my short visit. I think I like to torment her and cause her great anguish. What other explanation could there be? I do not plan on it but most of the time that is how it plays out. But she is excited nonetheless, and I gather that from her usual one page long response to my one line email. I do not know why she writes me long emails. But when sometimes she writes me only a few lines which is uncharacteristic of her, I wonder if anything is wrong with her. I never let her know that, though! I do not reply to her series of emails that she dashed out since she heard about my arrival. She keeps on writing to me with a phone number where I can reach her. Then I decide not to check emails for the next week or so while I am with my son.

Every year in late November Glory goes to Durham, North Carolina, to visit her father in an assisted living facility during Thanksgiving. She stays in a nearby hotel. She spends Thanksgiving Day with her dad in the nursing

home eating a traditional pre-ordered thanksgiving meal of turkey, mashed potatoes, green bean casserole, cranberry sauce and watery gravy with cheap red wine. After the meal about fifty of them gather in the nursing home's main parlour where there is a fireplace and have apple and pecan pie with all the other elderly and their guilt ridden adult children. Drinking so much wine with one meal doesn't sit well with Glory's dad Sam and he dozes off in his chair before instant Maxwell House coffee is served in Styrofoam cups. Glory dreads these minutes between coffee and her father waking up. Meanwhile she has to make small conversations with the other adults knowing no one will remember the other as soon as they step outside the locked gates of this facility. She may see some of them next year but doesn't feel excited about the prospect. Saying goodbye to her eighty-four year old father is one of the hardest things that Glory has to do in an entire year. She goes behind her father's chair and embraces him from behind and plants soft kisses on his head with a mop of white hair that smells of Pantene pro-v shampoo and says, "Dad, you be good now, OK? Don't give the nurses a hard time. Do you hear? Take your meds with plenty of water. I will be back, before you know it."

Her dad only nods. He lost his speech after having a minor stroke about two years ago in his sleep. He still recognizes his daughter and spends hours in his room looking at all the colourful postcards that Glory sends him from Sikkim. He cannot write anymore. Glory can see tears flowing down from his hollowed eyes and she wipes his tears with the back of her hand, all the while trying to stay strong. It takes about half an hour for Glory to leave her dad. She waits till one of the nurses comes to wheel him away to his room. Then she goes out to the balcony and weeps for sometime. Day after that she goes to visit her godmother Annette in Taos, New Mexico, and spends there a week soaking in the last of autumn sun. Annette is like a substitute mother. Glory's own mother was depressed all her life and one day took her own life by taking three different kinds of sleeping pills when Glory was fifteen. Glory came home from school and found her mother dead. Her father, a travelling salesman, was out of town. She never got over the way her mother died. When she writes all the details about her past life, I simply glance through her emails and do not take a lot in. She told me a lot about her life but I haven't shared much about mine with her.

For the last three consecutive years from New Mexico she has flown back to Sikkim, India where she is doing her doctoral research on forestry. She is a registered PhD student at UC, Irvine. This is her fourth year in India. I

never asked her how old she is. To me age is just a number and that has no special significance. I would say she is about forty. The very first time I met Glory was when I was taking a short vacation to Sikkim to see Kanchenjunga. My friend Peter, who I call P, was with me. Glory was our guide. We were with a small group of Nepalese and western tourists and suddenly I drifted off from the group. After a head count before return they realised that I was not with the group, Glory set out to find me. Then I heard a voice from behind, "You remind me of that old Mary Chapin song." I know my mother liked Mary C Carpenter and I asked politely, "Which song? Thinking to myself this is an odd comment from a tour guide!" For a second it seemed to me that she was going to sing that song to me. She smiled and said, "Never mind. I think about odd things all the time." I gave a half smile and said, "I was taken in by this spectacular view of the third-highest peak and didn't realize that I was alone." Then she informed me that I was lucky not to have drifted off too far. I looked puzzled and she said there were not any search helicopters if one got lost in the rough terrain. There is only one helicopter service from Gangtok to Siliguri to take people to the airport. I did not know that for we came by bus from Thimphu. I told her P and I were there also for the Losar (Tibetan New Year). Then we made more small talk about Sikkim and she told me that about a third of Sikkim's land is forest. And that is why she came here to do her research for her doctoral dissertation. It was in the summer three years ago. She was working as a tour guide to earn some money and for a chance to see the land as well.

I looked at her in full length. There were only the two of us against the backdrop of this heavenly view of miles and miles of stretched mountains. I didn't think she was a kindred spirit. She reminded me of Judy in "As Time Goes By", the British comedy on PBS every Saturday evening. She has a very bright complexion with an open face and immediately one knows that she is honest and trusting with a good heart. Her auburn hair and pale green eyes make her look attractive enough. One wouldn't call her Grace Kelly but she is pleasing to the eye. Later she told me that she never married. Broken heart and all... I never inquired enough. I do not like sad love stories. Maybe it was just not meant to be.

For me things only feel differently when I go to visit my son in the States. Now I live in Bhutan's capital Thimphu and work as an international aid worker sponsored by the UN. I advise people at Bhutan's trust fund for environmental conservation. I got a Masters degree in Environmental Science from Illinois State University after I married Padma. I moved here

after my divorce was final about six years ago. While I was going through a custody battle with Padma I heard from an old acquaintance Peter, who was sort of a mentor in high school. P was all for saving the world and he was working for the Red Cross in South Asia and now is stationed in Bhutan. He had sent me a postcard with a breathtaking view of the Himalayas. He wrote me a funny message that said, "2003 business week magazine rated Bhutan as the happiest country in Asia." And I should come and see it for myself once I got my visitation rights with Robbi settled. I didn't file for joint custody because my mother said no judge would grant me that since I was leaving the marriage. And I left it at that.

I am an Argentinian from my father's side and my mother is an Italian American. Her name is Mary Ann Vigilante-Mannino, after the Italian American writer. My father left us when I was only two for a raving Brazilian beauty named Francesca Almeida. Only thing my father left behind is his watch. My mother sold it to the owner of a pawn shop. After that my mother had my last name changed to Vigilante, which is her middle name. Everyone calls me Frank. Only my mother calls me Frankie. Glory calls me Francis. I don't think I thought about my father nor did I miss having one. How can one miss someone without having any recollection? To this day I haven't even seen a photo of him. I do not want that to happen to my own son. Even though I did abandon him as my father did. During my last visit I heard him call Padma's husband dad, but I couldn't do anything about it for he has assumed the role of an absentee father.

From the time I was Robbi's age until I went off to college my mother and I lived in a small duplex outside of Chicago around where all the Italian Americans live. I felt my childhood was normal in that old house which I loved. I loved my mother's African violets over the kitchen sink that she watered first thing in the morning. Then my mother and I would eat breakfast together. On the third floor there was a tiny art studio where my mother painted. She was a commercial artist. When my grandfather lost his leg while working with a machinery assembling cars, the family fell on hard times. They all thought my mother should give up art school at the Art Institute of Chicago and get a job to help out the family. Art was my mother's passion and she simply wouldn't quit her studies. She was heavily influenced by Georgia O'Keeffe who also attended the same institute. She took an evening job waiting tables in a restaurant. All the patrons loved her efficiency.

(The concluding part of this story will appear next week)

Zeenat Khan studied English and American literature at the University of Rhode Island. She lives in the US.

Prayer for peace

TAPAN KUMAR SHIL



O Saviour, save us from the clutches of rogues,
O God, help us to fight fraud.
O Guardian, guide us to uproot cruelty;
O Leader, lead us to banish barbarity.
O Creator, aid us to salvage society,
Stand by us to face any ferocity.

Would you help us establish a community?
Where there is no corruption but serenity?
Could you give us a leader of great heart?
He who means to secure life?
We wait, Lord, to welcome that ruler.
Give us forbearance to be his followers.
If evil doers confess their guilt
Can you not forgive them, O Almighty?

Tapan Kumar Shil teaches English at Khilgaon Govt High School, Dhaka

Knowing the Self

RABINDRANATH TAGORE
Translation: Rubab Abdullah Shukla



This pursuit of mine to discern the self
Shall never come to a close
Through the quest
I search for Thee, O Lord.

In the long succession of Births and deaths
I shall tender myself,
O Lord, at thy feet:
The burden of my debt
Shall yet bulge.

I am coerced over and over
To land at the many harbors
Of this universe
In its fair of the hearts;
My dealings with thee
Shall only swell
Over innumerable days and nights
As I go on selling and buying
Myself for all time.

Rubab Abdullah Shukla teaches part-time at Daffodil International University.

WRITER'S WORLD

REFLECTIONS

Syed Shamsul Haq speaks to Gantha

FARIDA SHAIKH

GANTHA is a creative writers' group that meets regularly at Bengal Shilpalaya in Dhanmondi. New Year 2010 was a happy start. On 4 January, Gantha welcomed Syed Shamsul Haq, an iconic writer of Bangladesh, to a discussion session on creative writing. He spoke to a rapt audience for an hour and ten minutes, sharing his experience of over a five-decade long career in writing. His works cover 27 volumes of poetry, 16 plays (including 7 verse plays), of which the most prominent is *Payar Awaj Paouva Jaaye*, 9 novels, 57 novellas, 6 collections of short stories, 5 books of essays and impressions and 6 books of poems and adventures for the young.

In terms of Bengali literary writing in Bangladesh, Syed Shamsul Haq stands out prominently in experimental techniques and form of writing. His 1973 novel *Khelaram Khele Ja* turned out to be greatly controversial for its open delineation of human sexual behaviour.

The most important theme of Haq's work is the War of Liberation, its consequences, the despair of human existence and analyses of the human mind and society. The theme is reflected in the novels *Duratwa*, 1981; *Mahashunye Paran Master*, 1982; and *Ek Juboker Chhayapath*, 1974. He is the recipient of three highly regarded literary awards in the country.

Syed Shamsul Haq has earned the reputation of being 'the most powerful, prolific and versatile writer of Bangladesh.' He describes writing as akin to a journey. It is the most difficult of all journeys. Climbing Mount Everest is easy, if a person has that kind of money for climbing it. Much of the rope linked to the mountain route is safe for tourist climbers. The journey from one's bed to the writing table, though, is the most difficult journey. Writing is a solitary journey where a person travels alone. She or he has to make sacrifices, through foregoing the temptation of socializing and being in the company of friends.

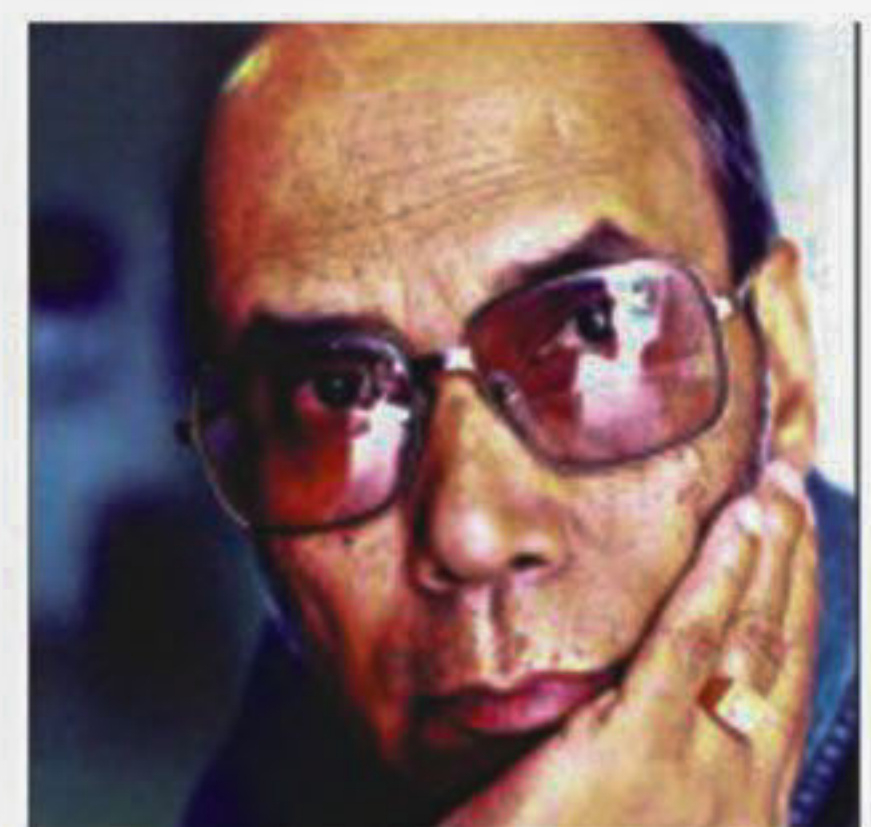
Why does he write? To this query, Haq tells you that writing is a habit. It is a sort of discipline, a regime, a kind of spell that compels a person to write. The emotions, feelings, and sensibilities that are evoked in a person's heart give rise to a strong surge of desire for expression--- and writing is the only way to overcome the storm that rises within a person.

Writing is self-expression and self-discipline; for every man has two births. The biological being is born of the mother's womb and then there is the birth of the social being. Man is a symbolic being. The individual is a thinking creature. Thinking is an abstract process. It takes form in

language. The individual thinks in the language into which he is born.

Therefore, writing concretises man's thoughts, feelings, emotions, agony, fear, love, death and dreams. There is no substitute to writing. As a craft, writing and the pursuit of literary activities in the East are 'guru mukhi shikha.' One is at gurujee's feet in the same fashion as a cobbler mending the shoe on the foot placed before him. In the West, learning writing is mostly through workshops and course work. Generally, writing is judged as a supreme form of art. Man's desire for expression gives rise to writing. On the perverse side, writing is for purposes of exhibitionism, fame, glory and vanity.

It may be noted that in the 1990s when a Bangladeshi writer angered Islamic fundamentalists with allegedly blasphemous writing and earned the disfavour of progressive writers as well, Syed Shamsul Haq defended her. However, ironically enough,



he had subsequently to confront defamation from the writer he had defended.

In all forms of writing, there is a point of reference. It sometimes may happen that a reader is not able to understand the writer. This happens when the reader's point of reference does not correspond to that of the writer.

Syed Shamsul Haq was born in Nilphamari. In his youth, he often heard his father, a practitioner of homeopathic medicine, narrating the story of the Prophet of Islam and the date palm trees of Arabia. Haq would listen to the story in rapt attention and visualise the date palm trees in Manikganj, the location of his maternal grandfather's house. As a multiplicity of examples highlighted the points at the discussion, it was easy to grasp what the speaker said. Even so, how does the imagination in a little boy illustrate the difference in point of reference between a particular adult reader and the writer? Owing to time constraints this was not discussed any further. It was noted, though, that in all

forms of communication, wavelength and frequency are essential elements of connection between reader and writer.

Of this prolific writer's works, only a few have been translated into English. One such work is *Neel Dongshon* (The Blue Sting), which unfortunately was not to find a receptive readership. Some English translations of his works are by the writer himself. There are no regrets, for the writer is of the opinion that readership is manifold more for works in the root language than in translated versions. That much is lost in translation is the common concern, for language is more than grammar. Asian writers of the diaspora generation have been quite successful. However, there are many instances to show that faithful translations do enrich the original work, one such being Sunil Gangopadhyaya's *Shei Shomoy*, translated by Aruna Chakravarti as *Those Days*. Both the writer and the translator are recipients of the Sahitya Academy Puroshkar.

Related to translation work was the elaborate discussion on *kria-podh* in the Bangla language. The use of tenses is more varied in Bangla than in English. The writer especially referred to Tagore's *Khokababur Prottyabartan* and the poetry of Jibanananda Das. This is in sharp contrast to writing in English where usually most narratives are in the past tense. Modern Bangla writing is frequently loaded with the use of 'double kria.' Haq further clarified this point by suggesting a reading of the first four pages in the novels of Buddhadev Bose, Mahmudul Haq and Syed Waliullah. And poetry? There is a distinction between good poetry and great poetry, which is obvious in the poem *Shah Jahan*.

To be inspired to write a story based on one's reading another writer's short story, is this ethically acceptable? This happens consciously and unconsciously all the time with so many readers. A deep reading of any text leaves a mark of influence.

However, acknowledging the impact of another writer on one's own writing depends on the latter's conscience. There are no better rules for ethical justification.

In Bangladesh today there is a huge proliferation, so to say, of prose and poetry writing. A lot of this writing, nearly eighty per cent, is unreadable. Yet there is a tremendous need for writing. Syed Shamsul Haq compares all writing to a fast flowing river, and to the writer travelling on the river. Good writing causes a bend in the river.

And so with so much said, the dialogue drew to an enthralling close on that descending winter evening.

Farida Shaikh is a critic and member, The Reading Circle.

Of declining reading and downsized bookshops

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

YOU wonder at times about the state of reading in the world you are part of. There is the sense that it is dying, that indeed these increasing levels of sophistication coming into technology are in essence putting holes into our old habits of reading. Not many people read today, which is a pity. Worse is the knowledge that bookstores are being downsized because business is not good. And what you have in place of these truncated, eventually murdered bookstores is stores of all those things that reflect the decline of intellect in our times. Visit any bookshop in Dhaka. Chances are it will be empty or perhaps a visitor or two will be there. Those of you who might be tempted to visit the bookstores at Aziz Market in Shahbagh too cannot boast of high visitor numbers, though you have some of the best books, newly published, to be had in the shops there. The old shops in New Market are yet there, but there is something about the arrangement of the books on the shelves, together with the narrow space in the shops, that is pretty disquieting. The stores that specialise in English language works, of course brought in from abroad, today offer hardly anything that shows light at the end of the tunnel. Besides, there are the prohibitive prices to consider. Omni at Dhanmondi has seen its book section confined to an increasingly narrow space. Et Cetera started off well. It is only the past about it you recall now. Words N' Pages, in Gulshan, is yet out there. Will it stay that way? At the old airport in Tejgaon, The Bookworm remains a beacon of happiness. How much longer will the lights gleam?

Time was when reading formed part of life in Bangladesh. It was especially the middle classes that cultivated the habit of reading. Nearly every member of the family would be holding a book; and homes, beginning with the drawing room, would be a delight because of the books and journals that met the eye. In the early 1960s, back in those black and white days, men with large baskets perched on their heads would come bearing works of fiction and journals that our mothers' generation would spend a whole week waiting for. Recall if you will the frenzy with which these women pounced upon such magazines as *Begum* and then devoured them even as they cooked lunch and bathed their children. Their men never missed reading the newspaper. And, to be sure, there were the novels and sometimes the works on poetry they were always laying their hands on. Their school-going children, forbidden to neglect their studies in favour of fiction, nevertheless found time to smuggle books into bed and read them by the light of flickering candles. It happened in the towns. And it was happening in the villages. But of one



thing there was hardly any doubt: everyone wanted to read.

There are the authors you can cite with ease. Tagore and Nazrul were there, as encouragingly permanent fixtures. But there were also Manik Bandhopadhyaya, Michael Madhusudhan Dutta, Jibanananda Das, Mir Mosharrat Hossain, Tarashankar Bandhopadhyaya, Bishnu De and so many others. Buddhadev Bose drew readers by the scores. Maitreyi Devi was a gem of a writer. In the movies produced in what was then East Pakistan, it was not uncommon for the leading men in them to be portrayed as bright, intelligent students at college or university, often weighed down by a load of books in hand. The beautiful women they courted were often spotted reading in bed before breaking into hauntingly charming love songs. The culture of reading was all. It was a common sight coming across young men in the villages reading well-known works of fiction and discussing their discoveries amongst themselves. In the early 1970s, poets like Shamsur Rahman, Rafiq Azad, Abul Hasan, Shahab Sarkar, Rudra Mohammad Shahidullah, Nirmalendu Goon and Mahadev Saha were the craze. Poetry was evolving into its post-modernist mode and everyone wanted to be part of it.

That is, or was, the legacy. You are, given the desolation all around you, today tempted to ask if reading cannot be revived in this land where the Ekushey book fair is endlessly a reinvention of the national soul. Yes, there are yet the symbols of hope --- the Jatiyo Grantha Kendra, the Bangla Academy, Shahitya Prokash, Adorn Publication, Pathak Shamabesh, Papyrus, Ekushe --- for us to build on. Bishwa Shahitya Kendra, with its soul-uplifting mobile library programme, is an instance that could be replicated by others.

And then there is television with all those channels out there. They appear to be popularising everything, from politics to agriculture to music to talk shows. We have no problem with that. But the question remains: how many programmes are there on that ubiquity of television channels that cater to books, to reading? There are nations that are privy to book discussions on television, to authors talking about their works. Surely similar discussions for an hour so every week can be injected into the television schedules in Bangladesh? There are newspapers, Bengali as well as English, which come up with weekly reviews of books. It would not be a bad idea calling in reviewers and bringing them in touch with readers through the medium of television and radio.

There are rivers that nourish the land. And books nurture the soul. Need one say more?

Syed Badrul Ahsan is with The Daily Star.