

SHORT STORY

POETRY

# A matter of thanklessness

MOHIT UL ALAM

THE toothbrush slipped from his hand. Into the large white oval-shaped basin it fell. Sher immediately picked it up. A little clot of paste dropped on his red T-shirt. Oh! He pinched the clot with his forefinger and thumb to remove it. But the naughty paste had already left a whitish stain, which meant he needed to wash the shirt. He took it off and threw it into the basket where the day's clothes for washing were being dumped. As he continued brushing his teeth, the toothbrush again struck the clenched rows of teeth and jumped off his hand once more. It fell into the basin with a rattle as it did before. He picked it up automatically, and before he could thrust it back into his mouth, as if it had a life of its own, the toothbrush leaped into the basin again from his hand, the third time. He silently recovered it but instead of reapplying it to his teeth he held it under the tap for washing. Having done that he replaced it back into the mug, which had lost its original use because of a broken handle, but was used as a holder for his shaving razor, shaving cream and some used toothbrushes. Then he gurgled and washed his face. He would now take a bath, but the thought of the toothbrush dropping from his hand so many times would not leave his mind. Nishi, who had recently, sort of, walked out of his life, had always looked for meanings behind such happenings. Mostly she would interpret anything and everything, that was apparently of no consequence to be ominous, and would take that as a divine judgment coming in disapprobation of their relationship. Sher told her when they were spending a night together in a hotel at Cox's Bazar: "You see, it's your mindset that sees everything as reflecting the inappropriateness of our relationship. Nobody knows that we are here, neither your husband nor my wife. Nobody has any reason to suspect that we are together. I'm in Chittagong on office duty, and you're in Dhaka spending a night with your friend, whose sister's marriage is coming off two days after."

Putting her lips, which were full and dabbed thick in red lipstick, Nishi said, "That is all moonshine. You talk stupid. You're still showing me dreams. I wouldn't have come if I had known that you still craved me as you did in the past."

"Yes, I still crave you, probably much more intensely than before, because there's your husband now, and I feel being challenged, and my desire grows more. But if you didn't feel the same way, then why have you come all the way to Cox's Bazar?"

Nishi, while taking off her gaudily printed chemise, paused before she completed looking herself in the mirror, and said, "I've risked everything to come and see you. Even a little mistake anywhere, a divorce will be instantly in place. See, what risk I've taken for you! But I don't want to go the old way. I just want to sit here in the balcony with you and hear the waves lapping on the shore."

Then a little pause, then she started in a torrent of words again, "My colleagues in the bank keep me asking why I am not looking happy, why I am shrinking, why this and that... why this and that, you know, just unbearable, people are so nosy, and you

came to my life more like a curse, to destroy me. You have a wife; still you chase other women for sex... Sher chuckled, trying to make pointless humour. "Correction madam: I have chased only one woman other than my wife, and I can't have sex without love... And, and, it's not all for sex that I love you." Nishi's body was Greek-statue like, and leaning at her into the mirror, Sher added, "And you have a husband now."

"Oh! What an equation!" In high anger, Nishi moved away from the mirror as if disentangling herself from everything that related to her image. On the balcony, in the dark, she remained seated for most of the night, while Sher tossed restlessly in bed. Very late at night she finally submitted, sweet, soft and giving. Sher inwardly thanked her for being so artful. Sher stepped into the bath tub, his eyes felt wet, tears came brimming. One full year had passed but he has not yet been able to forget Nishi. He held the shiny silver-coloured metal hand-shower over his head, and soft, needle-thin streams of water coursed through his thick bunch of hair, and then streamed downward over his shoulders and on his back. Holding the shower in front of his face he spun it around and the full thrust of the flow sprayed over his face, giving him a soothing sensation. The bathroom door was kept ajar, though full privacy of the bedroom was ensured by having the door to the other rooms locked. The morning had about been two hours old. The children had already left for school. The maid servant was busy in the kitchen. He could hear Riti doing something in the bedroom. The music came on, a familiar English song, one of the slow rock numbers, though he couldn't just identify the singer. Lately Riti, in desperation to snatch her husband back, had taken to doing things he loved to do, one of them being listening to English songs. Now he doesn't have to go and buy the Eid special issues of *Protham Alo* or 2000 or the puja special issues of *Desh* or *Anandabazar*. Riti does it, and her reading hours have noticeably increased. The next number, Scorpion's *Wind of Change*, floated inside the bathroom, but he had already finished his bath and was wiping himself dry with a big sky blue towel sporting a brand sticker. "This was the life he got to resettle with Riti: comfort, regular meals, playing father, playing husband. He had a board meeting to attend. The organization he worked for was an NGO based in Geneva. It was a tough position to get, but his solid track record and his CA degree had got him the job. The organization, called Greenwood, was funding a large project dedicated to environment protection. He had presented a paper on the traffic jam two weeks ago at a five-star hotel, and today he was planning to convince the CEO about the budgetary allocation. From his wardrobe he chose a shirt, a brand product, green and white striped, and a tie with the caption, "The Lost World", printed across it. Against the thick green texture of the tie a close look would reveal an array of distinct features of wild animals and reptiles, which were facing extinction.

Sher, going out for office, hugged his wife lightly, before he left the bedroom. Their breakfast table was down the end of a narrow passage. As he

walked down the passage Nishi's sharp image suddenly bobbed up in his mind. Strange that on his own wife he was implanting some of the acts of adoration which he had become habituated to performing with Nishi. The caress, the embrace, the press, the deep affectionate guttural sounds in moments of ecstasy, the togetherness, all these he was in the phase of reconstructing on his own wife, as if she was the material on which he was laying a model brought from elsewhere. Riti, with her womanly acumen, suspected as much. "You do things now in a different way, Shoitan."

"I may be the Shoitan or devil, but don't you find me serious?"

"I'm only rice and milk for you, Shoitan. Oh, you were so blinded, I only prayed to God: O God, return him to me. What actually did you find in that slut, a blackish bitch."

Sher fumbled. "No, no, she actually had much respect for you, but she was helpless. I was helpless too. When we met we forgot the world."

"That's why when you said you would leave Rangpur, I at once agreed. Now, you are much better in Dhaka, a new job, a new house, children going to better schools, only if Mother had survived a little longer."

"But where would've left her in Rangpur, in whose custody?" Sher's voice choked. His eyes brimmed over with tears. All the way from Rangpur, the road journey was arduous for his ninety-three old mother, who frequently vomited into a number of plastic bags that Riti, sitting beside her, held up to her mouth one after another. It was a Noah super deluxe rented microbus, but what was that to age! She survived only six months in Dhaka.

Sher still finds it difficult to realize, which act had effected the severing of his relationship with Nishi. His mother's death or Riti's phone call to Nishi's mother.

The week after he came to Dhaka on his new job, he received a call from Nishi. "Mother is very upset," Nishi said. "Some woman called her and said something which Mother wouldn't tell me. But she's very silent and grave since then."

"Who might it be?" Sher queried back in total ignorance.

"I suspect it must be your wife."

"No way," Sher retorted, "she can't see the difference between one thing and another."

"This is a problem with you," Nishi said angrily from her mobile. "You take your wife to be too simple, but our land phone is a Caller ID set. I can sms you the telephone numbers of the calls that we received yesterday."

Surprisingly, one of the numbers Nishi sms-ed him was Riti's cell phone number. He saw his wife in a new light. For the first time in their married life he was jolted into a new realization. "My God," he muttered to himself. "What did you say?" Nishi's voice still vibrated in annoyance. "It's very natural," she then continued, "It's life and death for her, very natural for her to be so desperate. Another woman in her place would've committed suicide or gone mad. You're a devil incarnate; actually, even your shadow is disgusting!"

After many attempts he got Riti on her mobile. At first she denied having made the call. Then she broke into mischievous laughter.

Traffic halted on Mirpur Road every minute. Sher endured the rising heat of the day, soaking wet under his closed collar, but he kept looking straight on, thinking how it was that he tolerated Riti's misdemeanour. It was a counter-offence he had to digest for the life of him. But he made up his mind, so the following month he brought the whole family to Dhaka, drawing the Nishi chapter to a close. Obviously the telephone call worked, or so it seemed. But Nishi got married in two months and he showed Riti the invitation card. She sighed in great relief. All became quiet for sometime.

But the loss of sleep appeared like a problem that needed urgent treatment. Riti would do more than what she could do, at night her fingers would softly brush his hair through and through, and it would never stop, neither would she disturb him with improper questions, though he realized she knew why he was not being able to sleep. Daytime was no problem. Nishi's memory got diluted into his office work, board meetings, multi-media presentations and lounging. Nights became a testing ground for him, all memories would crowd in and he would merely turn on his side praying for sleep to come. And the dreams came, smart and bold, not in any docile mood, but in quite a physical way. When told about it, Nishi said, "It's because you miss me, that's why."

But the belching didn't stop.

One day in the morning at breakfast, he brought the packet out of his briefcase and showed all the reports to Riti. The physician he consulted was a specialist in gastro-liver malfunctions, and none of the reports had shown anything of concern, except for a non-ulcerous dysfunction, for which a tablet a day from the esomeprazole group was advised.

The jar on the table had emptied of water. As Riti rose quickly to refill it from the kitchen, Sher watched her minutely, though unaware that he was doing it. Her tall figure slightly bent now with age, her once tight body now loosened up, and the immaculate shape of her hands had shown parched skin. There was an uncommon degree of alacrity in her movement though, the way she left her chair, went past the fridge and disappeared into the kitchen. His practised eyes did not miss noticing the new body language his wife was showing. His heart filled up immensely with pity for the woman, the mother of his children, who had nursed his ailing old mother more than what a daughter would do, who had won her in-laws' hearts with her genial affection and simplicity. His heart warmed to her. His hands, like things invisible, went forth and started caressing Riti in deep affection. The image of a reconstructive effort, however, hung in the corner of his consciousness.

The traffic cleared, and his driver sped up the car on a different gear. Sher felt a growing sensation warming up in his groin. The next moment he began mulling over the idea of a visit to Rangpur.



... from MALEKA PARVEEN

Demarcation

Some lines are drawn;  
The moment is defined.  
Truth with transparency  
Stands stark before you.

You can't cross the lines  
That much easy as it  
Appears.

Demarcation is definite;  
Rights are restricted.  
Do think well while  
Taking the next leap.

Unconscious, it can prove  
Fatal without fail for you.

\*\*\*If it were not you---

That time it was  
Not to be the last good bye  
We bade each other.

We're destined to meet  
Once again in a peculiar  
Ambience eleven years  
later.

You stumbled on my foot  
In the jam-packed metro,  
Getting on a running train.

I bellowed a bad name,  
A dirty word at you,  
Abashed, at once.

What if it were not you?  
Rather someone else nameless  
Who could easily ignore  
me?

No, that was not to be...  
You looked back regretfully,  
Pleading your apologies.

Maleka Parveen is senior assistant secretary in the Foreign Office

TRIBUTE

# Two of our foremost intellectuals

JUNAIDUL HAQUE

SYED Manzoorul Islam and Kaiser Haq are two of our internationally known intellectuals. While the former is one of the foremost of story-tellers or essayists or critics, the latter is our best poet writing in English. Why have I decided to focus on them? Both of them reached sixty in January this year, the former on January 18 and the latter on January 20.

So, even Syed Manzoorul Islam reaches sixty! Slim, always smiling, he is almost boyishly young. And now we hear that he is sixty. Wasn't he fifty only the other day? Even a boyish, long-haired forty a few years back? God knows time does fly truly quickly. What do His angels gain by making these bright, brilliant people getting on in years?

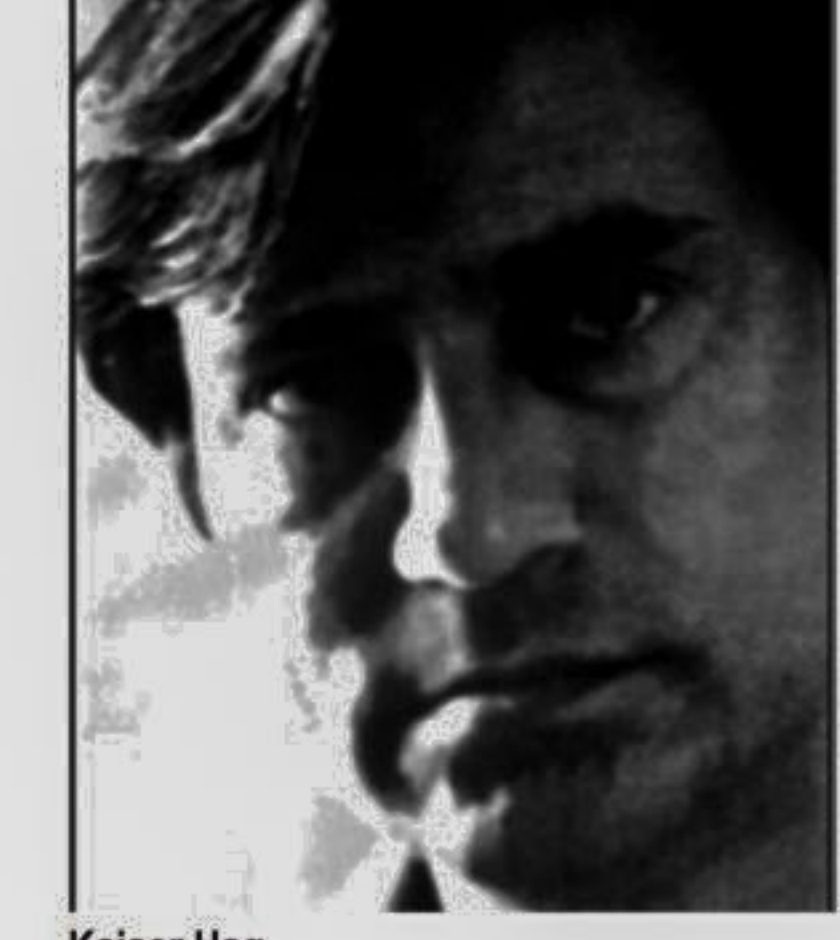
Syed Manzoorul Islam began writing as a student. And what a student he was! One of the very best to study in the English Department of Dhaka University. He graduated in the mid-seventies and joined the department as a lecturer. Today he is one of Dhaka University's most popular senior teachers. He has written stories and essays, art criticism and columns during the last thirty seven years or more. He has earned his popularity as a writer and a teacher. He has written his brilliant, postmodern short stories during the last two decades. I sincerely believe that these stories will give him a permanent place in the domain of Bangla literature.

Syed Manzoorul Islam's short stories are not at all traditional. They differ a lot from the stories that we have been reading. He is a post-modernist with a very racy prose style. His characters are varied: an old, aristocratic housewife of Sylhet, a lady owner of a ferry ghat hotel, Ferguson Dinnerwallah, a tea garden 'combined hand' with an interesting past, a police detective, a struggling garments worker and a garage apprentice, commonly known as a 'grease monkey'. He treats them with great affection and turns ordinary people quite known to us into memorable characters. He delineates them with his effortless postmodern craftsmanship. He practices magic realism and often shifts time sequences to blend the past and the present. He is a very sensitive and careful observer of human nature.

He dips like a poet into the conscious and subconscious areas of the human mind. He portrays the complexities of city life with enviable ease. He describes our loneliness, our nostalgia and our sorrow. A craftsman like him is rare on either side of Bengal. His deep insight turns him into a truly brilliant writer. He is smart, fresh, witty and completely original. He begins his stories in an easy conversational style and slowly takes the reader to the bottomless pit that is the human mind. He is brilliantly satirical. He is a master of narrative and that makes his characters

very lively.

Syed Manzoorul Islam paints contemporary Bangladesh quite skillfully in his stories. A student struggling to survive, a wayward terrorist, an honest worker of meager means, a sad and affectionate housewife, a robber-turned-billionaire, a poor farmer, a nice middle-aged lawyer, a working adolescent sacrificing his boyhood, a poor youth with shattered dreams and a dignified 'fallen' woman are some of his memorable characters. He is an effortless turner of the ordinary into the sublime. We find it difficult to forget his Dolai Khal garage mechanic, the terrorists of Bangshal and Shankar, the poor but noble tea garden worker, ordinary police detectives and the old lady aristocrat. The grandma of his story counts time with the help of an earthquake or an epidemic. The poor, middle-class boy who loved to go to school one day finds himself in Nantu Miah's 'Car King' garage after the death of his father.



Kaiser Haq

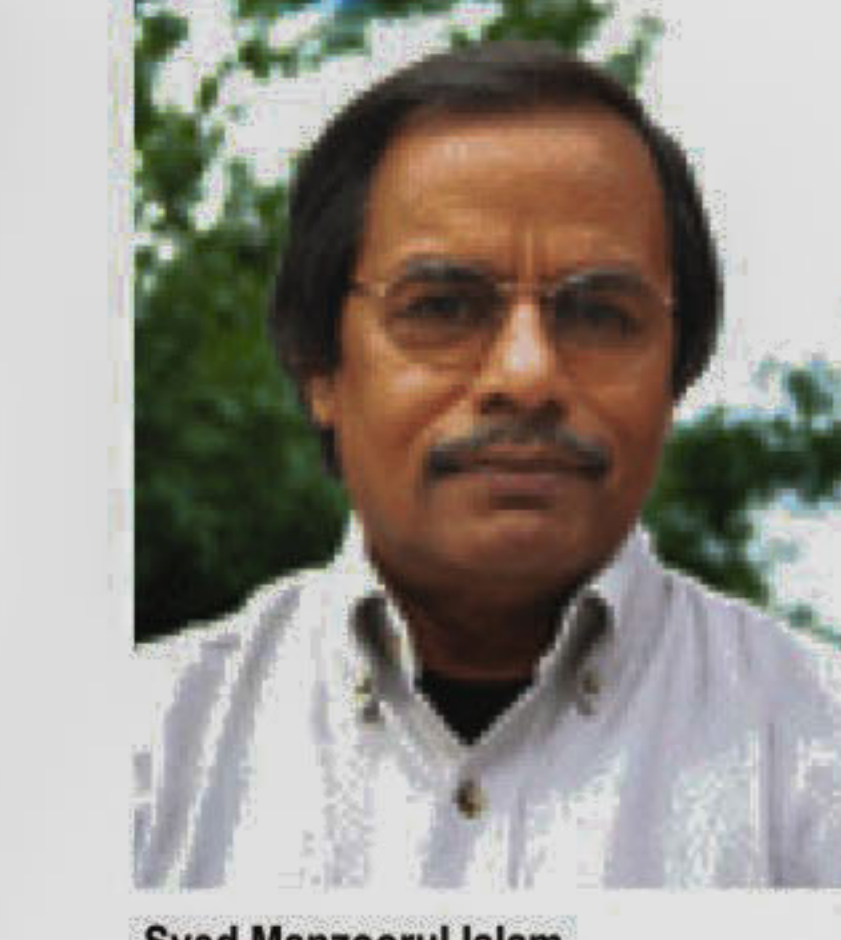
He must support his mother and sister. Before reporting for work, the boy grabs his books and cries bitterly. The reader weeps with him. Observe Mr. Alam, an established doctor and formerly a farmer's son. He loves to call Jafarabad 'West Dhanmandi' and sometimes only Dhanmandi. He can't be a Jafarabadi and equate himself with a police sepoy or a bank clerk! The only distance he walks is up to the mosque and he likes the big salute of the darwan. The writer brilliantly satirizes the *nouveau riche*. He doesn't spare the old aristocrats either. The zamindars of Prithvi Pasha bring blankets from abroad for their horses. 'The horses slept well but the grooms shivered'.

As a critic and essayist, Syed Manzoorul Islam has written extensively on world literature, art and culture. He has discovered and promoted many a brilliant young writer. He has also written on politics and society. But I admire him most as a novelist and a writer of short stories.

His fiction speaks against social hypocrisy and tuggery, the heart-rending repression of women and the dishonesty of the fake men of religion. He depicts the great sorrows of small people. At the same time he gives us hope and helps us to dream of the noble and the beautiful.

Kaiser Haq is our premier English language poet. He is admired by poets, pundits and common people alike. Shamsur Rahman once said that Kaiser Haq was to be compared with the best of the English and American poets.

Kaiser Haq, two days younger than Syed Manzoorul Islam, passed SSC a year after the latter from St. Gregory's High School. He passed HSC from Dhaka College. He was first in both his BA Honours and MA exams in the English Department of Dhaka University. He did his PhD from Warwick as a Commonwealth scholar. He was a senior Fulbright Scholar and Vilas Fellow at the University of Wisconsin in 1986-87. For the last thirty five years he has taught at Dhaka



Syed Manzoorul Islam

University and is now a senior Professor. He fought valiantly during our war of independence as a company commander. He is a freedom fighter poet like Rafiq Azad and Abid Anwar. At sixty he is as fit as a young athlete. It is said he knew judo and karate as a young man and even today doesn't miss his daily exercise. Added to that the fact that he is a sensitive, soft-spoken person.

I had the privilege of knowing Kaiser Haq as a boy. I was a junior student of the same school, five years younger. He was a teenager with very sharp features the eyes and the nose were prominently sharp. He was tall and slim too. The famous bushy moustache appeared a few years afterwards, only to disappear more than twenty five years later. The superb physique came after twenty. At sixteen or seventeen Kaiser Haq wrote brilliant prose for the Young Observer page of what later became *The Bangladesh Observer*. Brother Hobart, to whom he dedicated his *The*

*Logopathic Reviewer's Song*, was meanwhile discussing the rudiments of critical appreciation with him at school. They discussed *The Snake* of D.H. Lawrence. Brother Hobart used to tell us that he would never get a student like Kaiser, whose Observer prose and poetry endeared him even more to me. We enrolled ourselves as first year Honours students in English only a few months after Syed Manzoorul Islam, Kaiser Haq and Fakrul Alam had joined as young lecturers. Fakrul Alam will be sixty on July 20, 1951. I shall be writing on him too! He also looks amazingly young. 'Spending your day with young people helps, you know', he was telling me the other day.

I can still see the twenty-five-year-old Kaiser Haq walking down the English department corridor, a barrel-chested young man with long hair and a big moustache, talking little but smiling a lot at friends and students. Six of us classmates formed an *adda* group that lasted all through our university life. We were the six Pandavas Badrul, now a very senior journalist, Farhad, now teaching at Frostburg and coming to Dhaka every year, Shafiq, now a senior civil servant and a Shakespeare buff, Sadaquat, a successful businessman, Khairul, a 'softie' teaching at Wollongong and myself, a modest writer of fiction. The other five certainly remember how much I praised Kaiser Haq with them. I used to do tutorials with him in my second year Honours and I enjoyed every moment of the stint. The girls of my group, Ruhil and Shopna, very decent and beautiful young ladies, would sweetly envy our rapport. They would affectionately 'threaten' me not to discuss Jibanananda Das and Sudhin Dutta with him!

Is Kaiser Haq our best English poet only? He is perhaps our best writer of English prose too. His brilliant essays would testify to that. He is perhaps our best translator too. Shamsur Rahman used to tell yours truly that Kaiser Haq was the best translator of his poems. Scholars as brilliant as Dr. Fakrul Alam are calling *The Wonders of Vilayet* a superb 'original' book. As a poet he is as good as Nissim Ezekiel or Dom Moraes. Forgive my audacity I consider his ability to create striking, memorable images better than theirs. And I find that he has a deeper insight. His emotions are honest and deep and his craftsmanship superb. His use of words is brilliant and his use of wit and irony matchless. He coins new words and gives old words new meaning. He is a brilliant painter of modern man's loneliness, nostalgia, boredom and fatigue. Read his *Starting Lines*, *A Little Ado*, *A Happy Farewell*, *Black Orchid* and *The Logopathic Reviewer's Song* and find out for yourself.

May the Almighty grant these brilliant, creative men forty more years to live in good health and write profusely!

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NON-FICTION

# What fathers can teach daughters

NEELIMA ISLAM

BEING a father to a girl is not all that different from being a father to a boy. Nevertheless, there are some unique features to the 'father-daughter' relationship, which plays an eternal melody as life goes on in its multi-dimensional spheres.

The father influences his daughter's ability to relate to other men. Since he is the first man in her life, she gets an impression of what men are like from him. His acceptance of her helps her feel positive about being female and tells her that men are worthwhile persons.

The father's relationship with his daughter determines the quality of her marriage to a large extent. A close, warm father-daughter relationship will usually result in a stable marriage for the girl. As she trusts and loves him, she will find it easy to be romantic and trusting towards the man she marries. By contrast, girls who do not have affectionate, loving fathers often have great difficulty in their marriages.

I am among those fortunate women whose life has been ordained with this golden bonding. It has been eight years now that my beloved father passed away, leaving a pain that is as real as an open wound. Yet his spiritual presence in my life keeps me going on with full vigour and enthusiasm.

Deep down in my heart, I realize how my father's unconditional love was the obvious foundation blocks on which he built my self-esteem. He taught me that self-esteem is at the core of everything we do. It affects our learning ability, our social skills, our faith, our future career success and most of all our ability to enjoy life. It was his image that nourished my esteem for men and prevented me from generalisation even when confronted with negative male attitudes.

It is from my own experience that I have briefly drawn the following tips for a good father and these will show why the role of a father is so significant in a daughter's life:

Be warm and affectionate towards her

A hug and kiss or sitting close on a couch would be enough. Just let her know you love and care for

her. Give her compliments and praise her accomplishments. Refrain from giving negative statements about her ability. Girls without this kind of affection in the early years often become 'boy crazy' when they reach the teen years. Their search for male attention leads to silly behaviour.

Prepare your daughter to be independent

Make sure she learns tasks that will help her in adulthood and meet the challenges of the modern world, whether she marries or not. Let her develop herself as an individual rather than a 'belonging to a man'. Do not protect her from tasks that you think are only for boys. This will create the sense of discrimination in her and weaken her self-confidence.

Talk to her about men

When she is reaching puberty, explain how boys think and act. She will get answers to most of the rising questions from you. Let her open up to you. Warn her of dangers and give her suggestions for relating to boys. This will prevent her from concealing matters and making obvious mistakes. Tell her about men's needs and responsibilities, especially in marriages.

Let your daughter see the close relationship you have with your wife

Treat your wife with respect and admiration. Seeing these things will help the daughter understand what a good husband-wife relationship means and she will look forward to a healthy married life. She will also learn to respect and admire men, which is vital for ensuring harmony in her married life.

As a father you have to remember that for a few very important years, you are the most important man in your daughter's life. It is your contribution that will shape your daughter's personality and illuminate it with all the attributes of a worthy woman.

Today, I remember my father with special gratitude. I pray for eternal peace of his soul. To me, he was a great man and it is for him that I have never for a moment regretted being born a woman. I have the confidence to meet new challenges and the courage to survive alongside with men as I enjoy all the privileges of being a woman.

Neelima Islam is a freelance writer and loves listening to and singing old songs.