

## Abdul Mannan Syed: His literary mystique

SHIHAB SARKAR

Abdul Mannan Syed's sudden and premature demise on September 5, 2010, at 67 appears to have occurred with the wattage and force that had stunningly accompanied his emergence on the Bangladesh literary scene about forty-six years ago. He was below-twenty at that time -- an age when average Bengalee writers just pussy-foot around the mainstream literature. But Mannan Syed was free of all kinds of awkwardness during his literary debut.

Self-confidence distinguished the poet from the very beginning.

The 'early bloomer' with his first creative piece, an experimental short story, set his foot on Dhaka literature with a flash, the dazzle that also lit his final exit.

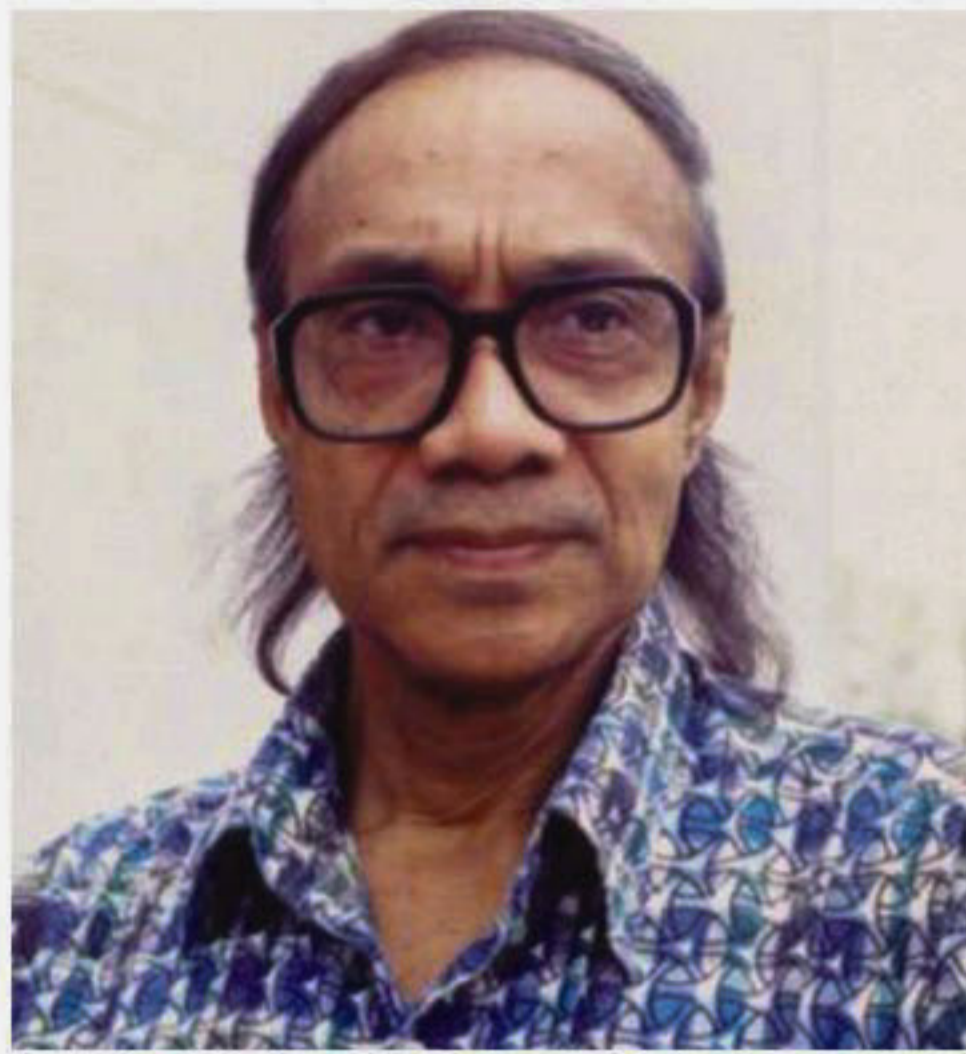
Syed strode across the length and breadth of our literature with aplomb, mastering a unique style that eludes many. He had achieved all this for his being gifted with an enviable creative genius. A born writer as he was, he kept immersing himself in the fathomless joy of literature, producing a massive corpus that included poetry, short stories, essays (Probandho), fictions, verse plays, assorted prose and myriad of other creative works. Until his death, he has published over 160 books. He also loved to call himself a literary activist as he edited a few little magazines.

From the very start, Syed displayed his distinctive literary character and temperament. Cliches and conventional expressions were anathema to him. Unlike many of our poets and prose writers, he had an innate aversion for shibboleths, i.e., anything hackneyed.

Mannan Syed's first collection of poetry 'Jonmanho Kabitaguchcha' (1967) spoke profusely of the freshness he had been endowed with. As he progressed with poetry and short stories, apparently under a spell of creative trance, Syed went on publishing books, one surpassing the other, displaying an exceptional artistic vibrancy. By the early nineties, we found the writer securely placed at the zenith of his career. He was the author of over seventy publications then. Those included some of his major research works, notably his pioneering tome on Jibanananda Das. By that time the great Jibanananda had already begun passing into a kind of oblivion.

It was Abdul Mannan Syed's vision and tireless efforts that brought the poet to light again, long after the end of Buddhadev Bose era. In fact, Mannan lifted Jibanananda Das and his works out of a twilight zone. The publication on Jibanananda titled 'Shuddhotomo Kobi' in 1970 indisputably was a phenomenal event in the whole expanse of Bangla literature, for this single book in no time sparked a renewed interest of Bengalee readers and researchers in the fading presence of the poet. It may not be an hyperbole if we liken Mannan Syed's rediscovery of Jibanananda to TS Eliot's, in which the great English poet presented before the readers the long-lost Metaphysical Poets.

In the following years, Mannan Syed, employing all his artistic zeal and scholar's insight, concentrated on Jibanananda and his works. He discovered hundreds of unpublished poems by the poet and included them in the volumes containing Jibanananda's poetical works. Syed has also brought before readers dozens of unpublished (in



the form of handwritten manuscripts) short stories, fictions etc by the poet, who is now acclaimed as the greatest Bengalee modern poet.

Another remarkable aspect of Mannan Syed's literary scholarship was, undoubtedly, his in-depth research on Kazi Nazrul Islam, the Rebel Poet. Through his arduous analysis, Syed has attempted to offer us a total portrait of Nazrul, thus nullifying the many myths that at times distorted the poet's real image. Upon reading Abdul Mannan Syed's evaluation of Nazrul, we came to learn that Nazrul was not just a Rebel Poet, but a poet of colossal height, whose many splendoured genius eventually made him the greatest literary figure after Rabindranath Tagore.

Mannan Syed also shed light on the works of

the Kolkata-based poets of the decade of the thirties, especially the group of the Great Five comprising Buddhadev Bose, Sudhindranath Dutta, Bishnu Dey, Amiya Chakraborty -- and the earlier mentioned Jibanananda Das. His researcher's focus spotlighted our Shamsur Rahman, Al Mahmud, Shaheed Qadri, and almost all the major poets of the sixties and the seventies. In fact, no poet of note in Bangladesh belonging to the decades ranging from the forties to the first decade of the 21st century escaped his scholar's attention.

Of late, Syed has especially focused on the works of Tagore.

In spite of his penchant for scholarly studies, Abdul Mannan Syed was quintessentially a poet. His exuberant style and content coupled with an evocative diction has singled him out in the Bangladesh poetic landscape. A firm believer in the principle of 'art for art's sake', he had been developing a romantic, and somewhat arcane, poetic self since his early career as a poet. Most of his poems take a tour of his subterranean world interspersed with the real, the quasi-real and the absurd -- which he called the Surreal. Syed spent a major part of his over four-decade literary career composing verses tinged with surrealism.

In short, Abdul Mannan Syed was a fully charged writer. Literature turned out to be his lifelong passion. Shutting out all earthly engagements that 'gag a pure artist's soul', in the semi-classical sense though, Abdul Mannan Syed chose the life of a virtual hermit in order to retain his artistic perfection.

Shihab Sarkar is a noted poet and journalist.

### I Must Say

AINON M

I am the poem of life  
You extol me in fables of love  
Fellows admire me for lust  
Desires invent moonlight in me

You drape me in seductive poem  
And yet equal I was not meant to be

In religion you revere my Mahatmya  
To you Coatlicue I become creating celestial  
Purity of my soul you uncover  
The messenger of gods I come to be  
At the altar you sacrifice my chastity  
And yet equal I was not meant to be

You find warmth in my arms  
On soft nights gentle longing I become  
But as I harvest from others  
The freedom of my being  
You find the whore in me  
Come change the language labyrinth

I cradle human kind in my womb  
You I have nurtured through history  
Without me you bind the limitless horizon  
I have tongue of endless tenacity  
Yet you define my right to speech  
Come see me actuate the new diary

Through centuries you translated my being  
At the crossroads of paradox  
Today I break the chain of your definition  
Not you but I have the power of creation  
Come see the human in me

My swan song, I am a woman  
The creator of life, the gentle, the force ...

Ainon M writes from Carbondale, Illinois, USA

### REMEMBRANCES

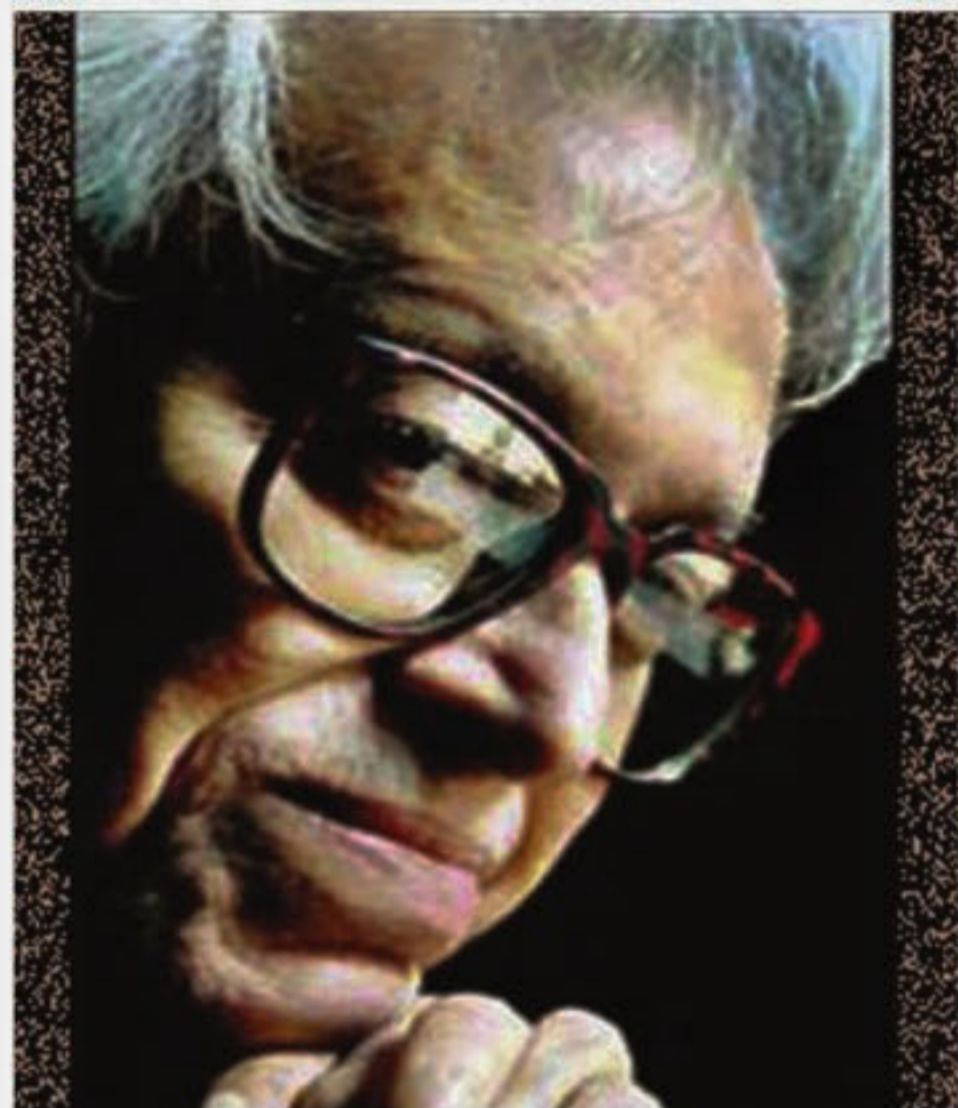
## Shamsur Rahman ... defining modernism

MOHAMMAD SHAHIDUL ISLAM

If Tagore was the last poet in the Bengali tradition, Jibanananda Das was the first of a new breed. And this new breed, in the trend of Bengali modern and post modern poetry, has been unarguably sustained by the powerful contributions of Shamsur Rahman.

Shamsur Rahman emerged in his time as the most popular poet of modern Bengali literature. Popularity apart, Shamsur Rahman had distinguished himself as an extraordinary poet presenting a paradigm hitherto best chosen. It is a fact that his most familiar poetic diction, choice of words and thematic preferences took not much time to reach the heart of the readers. Today it can be said without exaggeration that the poetry of Shamsur Rahman has become the defining essence of modernism in 21st century Bengali poetry.

Shamsur Rahman was born on 24 October 1929 in Dhaka. He studied at Pogose High School [matriculation in 1945], Dhaka College and Dhaka University. Shamsur Rahman wrote most of his poems in free verse, often with the rhythm style known as Poyaar or Aakhsharbritto. It is popularly known that he followed this pattern from poet



Jibanananda Das. He also wrote poems in two other major patterns of Bengali rhythmic style, namely, Matrabritto and Shorobritto.

Shamsur Rahman was equally popular in both Bengals. Surely, his early poems bear the influence of Jibanananda, Satyendranath Dutta and Buddhadev Bose. However, before long, he thoroughly overcame all influences and created a post modern poetic diction of his own. As his style and diction matured, his message appeared to touch urban hearts. In fact, he placed huge attention on liberal humanism, human relations and romanticised the rebellion of youth. Emergent events in Bangladesh and opposition to religious fundamentalism in his poetry and other writings underpinned his thoughts. His poetic talent has reserved a special niche for him in Bengali modern poetry.

The poet's literary creativity transcended borders and revealed his literary, social and political commitments. He not only came to be looked upon as the keeper of the nation's conscience but also as someone who provided intellectual and moral sustenance to liberals. And when the real test came, he led from the front and inspired them to emerge victorious. His role in ousting autocracy from power is well known. Also quite widely known is his abhorrence for those elements which had once made an attempt on his life. Their intense and pronounced hatred for him centered round his

stout commitment to the values of the Liberation War, especially secularism.

His most celebrated works include *Prothom Gan Ditto Mrittur Aage* (1960), *Roudro Korotite* (1963), *Biddhosto Nilima* (1967), *Bondi Shibir Theke* (1972), *Bangladesh Shopno Dakhay* (1977), *Udbhot Uter Pithe Cholche Shodesh* (1983), *Buj Tar Bangladesher Hridoy* (1988), *Octopus* (1983), *Adbhut Adhar Ak* (1985), *Alating Belating* (1974), *Robert Frost-er Kobita* (1966) and *Robert Frost-er Nirbachito Kobita* (1968).

The awards Shamsur Rahman received include Adamjee Award (1962), Bangla Academy Award (1969), Ekushey Padak (1977), Swadhinata Dibosh Award (1991), Mithubishi Award of Japan (1992), Ananda Puroshkar from India (1994) and TLM South Asian Literature Award for the Masters, 2006.

Shamsur Rahman died in Dhaka at the age of 77 on 17th August 2006. His death was a body blow to all those in Bangladesh who have fought authoritarianism, and who have upheld the cause of secularism, democracy and Bengali nationalism. We remember this prolific poet with due homage four years after his passing.

Mohammad Shahidul Islam is a tourism professional.

### SHORT STORY

## Destination

SHAHIDUL HAQUE KHAN

TRANSLATION: MD. SIMON RAHMAN

There were fairy clouds wandering all over the sky. They were the wet and blurry clouds of autumn. Mahub stopped for a while, as if to feel the breeze carrying the smell of sunshine. The wheelers all around started beeping coarsely as the red light of the traffic signal turned green. Mahub did not bother. He knew that he did not have to bother about everything all the time. The white Pajero was threatening to run over his rickshaw, so Mahub tied his lungi tightly and put his feet on the paddles. Getting enough space, the white Pajero whistled past. The driver did not even look at him. Mahub looked inside the vehicle. A gentleman was relaxing on the luxurious seats, as if licking the newspaper through his spectacles.

-Hey man, where are you from?  
Mahub did not have any time for himself. He had to keep paddling, to take his passengers to their respective destinations. Which destination? Everyday he takes so many people to so many places. Is that their destination? Then what would be his destination? Where does he want to go? Mahub thought.

-Where are you from?  
Mahub could not ignore the same question for a second time. He turned back and answered -  
-Here, in this country.  
-Which district?

Perhaps the passenger did not have any thought to reflect upon. Neither did Mahub. He was busy thinking about his destination.

-Don't have a home. We are poor folks. I live near Shialbari.  
-Who are there in your family?  
-There is none.  
Mahub halted for a while. Did he really have no one in this world? Then he spoke again.  
-There was my mother. She died last year.  
-You don't have a family of your own?  
-Nope.

The roads of Dhaka city are getting to be unable to carry the burden of such traffic. So many vehicles! Where do these people go? Mahub thought.

The red light flashed once more at the signal near Shyamoli. Mahub takes out the pale gamcha from the handle of the rickshaw and wipes his sweating face. With time to relax for a moment, he looks up at the sky. Up there he could not see the white clouds. He rather saw a deer, bows and arrows, a bearded face and so on. Mahub looked back at his passenger. He did not have a beard. He rather had a headful of uncombed hair. He was reading a piece of paper. A letter, perhaps? Who could have written it? His beloved? Wife? Elder brother? Father?

Mahub never saw his father. His mother used to say, 'We lost him in the war.' People around him used to hurl epithets at him: 'bastard', 'son of military', etc. Mahub did not even

know the meaning of such words back then. Yet he could understand that they did not mean something nice. His mother used to get agitated whenever he would ask about his father 'Didn't I tell you he was lost?'

Mahub thought about it a lot while growing up. Often he felt enraged, even distressed at times. He often got into fights with many for this reason. But he had stopped caring since he started to realize that some people took pleasure in others' pain. He never embarrassed his mother after that. Once he grew up, he came out of that slum with his mother. But he could only change the address that reminded him of his past; he could not find a destination for himself.

A sudden smile appeared over the face of the gentleman. Mahub felt blissful at the sight. Someone had embedded some beautiful words from the heart to that paper. And the gentleman riding Mahub's rickshaw was carefully collecting each word in the depth of his heart. His brain cells were getting animated, which brought the smile to his face. So beautiful! So delightful to look at!

-Bhaijan, who has written that letter?  
-Hmm... this one? It's from Sharbari.

-Who's she, bhaijan? Your wife?  
-No, no... she's just a friend.  
-Friend! I thought she's someone you love.  
-What?  
-Don't get angry, bhaijan. It looked so good seeing you smile as you were reading the letter. What does sister do? Still studying?  
-No, in fact she teaches in a college.  
-And you?  
-I do a bit of writing.  
-What do you write?  
-I write for a newspaper. I'm a journalist actually.  
-What's the use of writing?  
-People come to learn about new things by reading.  
-But what is the benefit of so much reading?  
-What do you mean? People need to learn about plenty of issues. They require knowledge and wisdom, and for that they have got to read more and more.  
-Do you read a lot too?  
-Yep. I do read a lot.  
-Then you must know a lot about a lot of things.  
-My brother, there is no end to it when it comes to learning.

-I had a question, bhaijan.  
-Go ahead.  
-Is there something people don't know about?  
-It's a tough question. Even for me. Alright, can you tell me what people do know about?  
-I'm an illiterate person. How can I answer that?  
-It's funny. Though, I don't have the answer about what people don't know and you can't tell me what they do know.  
-It's getting quite confusing...  
-No, no... actually it's pretty simple. The thing is, people don't know what they don't know.  
-One more thing, bhaijan. Do people know what their destination is?  
-What's that?  
-I mean, I picked you up from College Gate, and I'll drop you at Darussalam. But that's not the end. Maybe you'll go to many more places from there. But do you really know where you'll stop? You don't. None of us know where we'll stop. But we are running day and night. Why? We don't quite know.  
-Hmm, you're right. I need to think about it...

Once again the vehicles seemed desperate to go ahead of one another as the green light flashed on the road. The tinkling of the rickshaws, the beeping of the cars and the honking of the buses tore through the web of Mahub's thoughts. The gentleman was still busy with the letter, with a smile and delight on his face.

Mahub had to spew out all his thoughts near the over-bridge at Shyamoli as he concentrated on paddling again. He had to take his passenger to his destination. He was still smiling and reading the letter from someone who must be very close to him. The letter had something blissful about it. Mahub had to take him to his destination safe and sound; he must be precious like the whole world to someone. And Mahub knew that his smile and happiness were invaluable too.

Mahub kept paddling carefully, keeping an eye on the uneven roads, wheels of nearby rickshaws, cars, buses, tempos, cycles, motor-cycles, CNG taxis and so on. 'Bastard' Mahub was paddling, Mahub the 'son of the military' was paddling, but he was paddling to his delight after all, taking note of the delight of the passenger. He had to take his passenger to his destination. There was only one problem: the final destination was unknown to all. Mahub had no clue if there was any final destination for people at all. Did the autumn clouds know anything about it? The deer? The bearded man with bows and arrows? The entire sky? It was not clear to Mahub. The only thing he knew for sure was that the red light signals were for stopping, and the green ones for moving ahead.

Shahidul Haque Khan writes fiction. Md. Simon Rahman is a critic and translator.