

# A poet's late appearance

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I find it remarkable that one other leading light of the English Department of Dhaka University has made an appearance as a poet. In Bangladesh, Prof. Ahsanul Haque could long ago compose poetry with his individual stamp. One may feel deprived, quite rightly, for the lately-appeared poet's not making it regular or quicker; but never will the poems be found to be a sign of mere self-gratification on Haque's part.

What we are given on the flap of the book confirms the idea that humanistic zeal is what has found manifestation in all of Prof. Haque's multifarious activities, which is of course truer of his generation than of people of later times. I would like to go more by that flap, and point out the very big range of his activism. In the seventy-seven years of his life, he has taught at different levels for more than fifty, and then inclusively completed one additional MA from Bristol University and one doctoral research from Dhaka University. Both the dissertations have been published by Dhaka University Press, and these books are world class. He has taken active part in politics, served prison terms for activities connected with the Language Movement and the War of Liberation. Twice he got elected as general secretary and twice as vice president of the Dhaka University Teachers' Association (DUTA). It is amazing that he even went into building up a tree plantation movement that has finally culminated in a countrywide tree plantation fare now organized annually by the government.

How many intellectuals are of this devotion, are possessed of such a and down-to-earth mindset in such matters? We generally finish by turning into careerists and paying lip service to public causes. Not so Prof. Haque, who looks like belonging to the school of Rabindranath and Nazrul, men who did not get blocked by their scholarship or creativity in moving across the country and taking part in all sorts of arduous activities. And then, for the last few years, Prof. Haque has been promoting a mass literacy campaign. With this end in view, he has developed a set of modules for imparting Bangla literacy. This has proved very effective, and he has now embarked on a mission of looking for ways of making Bangladesh one hundred per cent literate with the help of his books. One feels dumbfounded at his tenacious activism!

And now Ahsanul Haque has placed his poetry before us. Once his student and now his colleague at Bangladesh People's University, Asifur Rahman, says Haque, took an insistent initiative in making these see the light of day. Others also were surely insistent. His poems, whose dates of composition are very purposefully given, finally throw light on yet another case of a poet of unexplored potential. I would place some stanzas in part or full in my

translation, so that readers get a taste of his creativity. My main contention is that Ahsanul Haque's poems contain ideas and messages of the progressive stream, and his language or technique belongs to the post-Rabindra-Nazrul era. It appears that had he concentrated on poetry, he would have carved a niche as a prominent poet. Translation is never adequate in conveying the essence of poetry. And yet let me place some lines of some poems in English transliteration here. I shall add translation to that.

Let us begin with the title poem of the book, *Ratibahini Padma*, which, translated, may read as *The Padma Carrying the Night*. In transliteration, the opening lines are:

*Ksheeno ratri. Mlan chand,  
chhnedakhnoda  
ekhane okhane megh lagologo,  
majhkhane dhoante akash.  
Achchhanno tarar dal.  
Nimilito alo andhare bishmrito praya.*

My translation goes as follows:

*Slender-looking night. The dim moon is there,  
Shreds of cloud here and there almost close up,*

*smoggy sky hangs in between,  
number of stars look sullen.  
In hushed-up light and darkness they are mostly forgotten.*

Readers will find this to be rich, modern and smart poetry, by any standard. Let me then give the closing stanza of this poem to show the stark spell it evokes:

*The Padma flows, in a comparable stream;  
what a distant purpose she maintains concealed.  
In the hushed-up iridescence, her sandy waist  
flashes like a scimitar.*

The poems are well opened and well closed, leaving behind a deep impact of ideas or/and feelings, and sometimes the two remain in a mysterious blend. The measurement or balance is fine and tight. Those are simple scenes or episodes, as in Frost's poems, but the impact is reversely poignant. Students may remember the classroom lectures by Ahsanul Haque, smooth and simple flow of words there, apt anecdotes interspersed, and the lucid and total communication that resulted, instead of separate ideas or messages. Poetry also was there. Observe this short poem, *Inside All Hearts*:

*It's a swabbed graveyard inside every heart  
Fenced up with bamboo slips of ribs, covered up with taut muscles.  
A lot of silence, innumerable sighs are pent up there.*

*There blows the air of a lot of rending cries.  
Only in seamless darkness appears sometimes one person to light the lamp of affection.*

Poetry is wonderful understanding achieved in trance, and communicated easily, mysteriously. I think it is here in this poem. Depth in such understanding Ahsanul Haque has achieved in age-old ways of mostly down-to-earth observations of broad and vast life. A sense of wonder and fun are included among them. Let us take some instances of these.

In *Fire Is Aflame in Every House*, the household item of fire gains unexpectedly in meaning and significance when, in the penultimate stanza, Ahsanul Haque apparently goes for only a slight shift of context:

*Fire is ablaze in every house / flickeringly / flamingly / Or in ghastly burning / Fire of husks / coal, oil or electricity / Unless in raging sweeps all on a sudden / It burns down the whole household*  
The final multiplicity, range and depth of meaning is unimaginable even in the middle of the quite small poem. It is suddenly there, as a result of a few closing words, in the way a painter does it on the canvass, with a few finishing strokes. And the resultant extension or expansion in meaning is what leads to the creation of the allegory or symbol, of which Ahsanul Haque's poems are full. And those are so often dialectical frames, of contraries, in those poems. For Ahsanul Haque perhaps knows that life consists mostly of these, creating materials for painting, poems, etc. About another situation, for example, he finds that "As art of the artist has passed the test of time, / equally memorable is the uncouth person's / heightened veins in his neck, his stuck-up jaws." The small but very much meaningful situations conveying positive and vital messages are almost innumerable in the poems. Let us take as an example another small poem *Under a Statement*:

*When I proceeded to underline a statement / it got curved / at a touch from the hand of / the small girl / All the times I turn over that page / fickleness sticks to that trembled line / though the words have turned much old and stale*

It appears that in some poems, Ahsanul Haque tries to question and demolish some idea-frames going strong in society. It's difficult and challenging to do that, but Haque gives it a try, nevertheless. Conventionally, a musician enjoys an image of high esteem and reverence; but there may be a big gap between illusion and reality. Music may sometimes be a matter of performance and formal skill only with some singers. The same artiste may not be at all elevated in thoughts and aspirations; but rather a listener of such music may be exactly so. It is how reality has so many deceptive corners. In a very short poem, *Right When Music Comes to an End*, Ahsanul Haque places rather a counter-

discourse to the traditionally bright image of a singer:

*Right when music comes to an end, it's musician's taking seat on the chair / /Sitting gives stasis, rights, resource and wealth / But one who receives the music / Day and night, so often / Inaudible takes the place of audible music and goes on endlessly! /The listener doesn't get any / seat ever / stasis, rights, resource and wealth.*

These are indescribably rich and complex ideas in this small poem, true of the non-musical areas of life as well. The continuum between artists and art recipients is a complex web, and one cannot conclude in favour of or against any part. What is no doubt true is the arrogance that develops in a human against any performance in any art. The deep look or insight that Ahsanul Haque's eyes can thus execute is amazing. The fun and humor are sometimes Chaucerian, and one may trace that to Ahsanul Haque's brilliant lectures on *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*. Excess following from success or winning is the truth of human behavior that one finds in *Hers for Ever*. In the poem, the exquisitely beautiful girl has spoiled her appearance, "the way a small boy spoils his painting" by going to add a little more colour."

Ahsanul Haque has sometimes brilliantly played with some Bengali words. In *Leaves*, for example, his final and serious theme is damage done to nature or the environment. But to convey that idea, he has taken recourse to pun vis-a-vis the word 'leaves' --leaves of trees which we damage and turn into leaves or pages of books and yet we do not stop. We place on leaves or pages of books ideas of "deadly destruction", "sick, evil, torn thoughts / messages of deceitful death."

In a number of poems, Ahsanul Haque has raised issues of poverty, hunger and the like which still comprise the bigger realities for Bangladesh. He has critiqued the role of religion. He has not left out the question of genesis or evolution. Proof of his opposition to imperialism is there. Lamentably, these topics have now fallen out of favour, because of both conservatism and post-modernism. But modernity and modernism appear to compose his school of thought and poetry his grain. I would like to take cue from what he told me on hearing a Rabindra-sangeet that I most amateurishly sang in his honor at the farewell accorded to him by the Department of English, University of Dhaka. He was pleased and rather went on telling me, time and again, that I could still begin learning how to sing Rabindrasangeet, hinting that I would make a good singer. In my teacher's case, I would request him to go on doing it actually writing and publishing them, poems, more and more. Both his art and ideas demonstrate quality and potential.

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## Ode to Baghdad

SAYEEDA AHMAD

Baghdad, I will always remember  
the cobalt slide in your neighborhood park,  
your multi-storied, brick apartment buildings,  
rows of stores on concrete streets and muddy roads,  
flowerbeds in shades of periwinkle, crimson,  
aquamarine, tangerine, and yellow topaz,  
alabaster statues of Sheherazade's Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,  
your mazaars, burial tombs of ancient Islamic leaders  
whose lives intertwined with yours, as has mine.

I will never forget your Hanging Garden of Babylon, its stone stumps and short walls,  
remnants of an ancient wonder;  
the arid mountains of your Kurdish north;  
in summer, sand, and in winter, snow;  
hidden waterfalls of Beikhal and Gully Ali Beg;  
your Tigris and Euphrates rivers;  
and your "city of two springs,"  
Mosul, built into the hills.

Baghdad, I have not forgotten your Arab storekeeper who sold brown bags of sookkar, salt, and other seasonings to my mother when she shopped there every other afternoon;  
the old woman who rushed us into her house,  
cried Yallah! Imshee! Imshee! Hurry! as sirens screamed outside: bombers from Tehran.  
My mother and I ran down the stairs to the woman's basement where she fed us loaves of thick pita-like *khobooz*, and stayed until the sirens stopped and the bombers returned home.

I can still recall a bearded young man and the tall boy who passed me as they walked down the tunnel's stone steps, and I waited for my father to return from the bus stop.  
They pointed at me, laughed, and called out Doctora! Doctora!  
as I, a three-year old toddler in brand-new, thick, black specs stood wide-eyed beside my mother.

## NON-FICTION

# Pubail sojourn

TANVEERUL HAQUE

It was like a 1950s Hindi movie set. Or was it like a Hawaiian movie set or a scene from the TLC channel set in the Maldives? Beautiful straw and bamboo cottages evoking memories of a Caribbean paradise with beautiful ladies, frolicking children, gentle breezes, wide expanses of hyacinth infested water bodies, delicious food, charming conversation, singing and dancing. Impromptu poetry recitals. Romantic interludes under a humongous moon peeping in and out of autumnal clouds. Torrents of rain - then flashes of sunlight, temperatures not too unbearable. Distant rolling thunder. A firefly or two setting hearts on fire. Cerebral conversation, evocative laughter. Loud singing in the distance in accompaniment of kortals, cymbals, dhokol and the harmonium.

Gentle reader, you could be forgiven for writing off the wild imaginings of this writer. But the fact remains there indeed is a place like this only thirty eight kilometers out of Dhaka and a comfortable hour's drive. But a word of caution: you need to have the mindset to enjoy such a situation, such a semi-rustic idyll. No air-conditioning, no sit down dinners with fancy china and starched napkins, no candlelight but enough moonlight and starlight to make you wax lyrical. Yes, a bit of mud thanks to the rain, where ladies' stilettos could get dirty or fancy saree hemlines get soiled. But, c'mon, when you want to have fun you have got to overlook the lack of the usual amenities! An adventure is an adventure and how can you have fun without some unforeseen obstacles in your path?

Ah! The joys of facebook. You see pretty ladies in idyllic settings and your heart yearns to be a part of the picture. You mope and you swoon, then gather enough courage to ask the beautiful lady, "Where have you been?" She plays hard to get, then relents out of compassion for a poor soul and let's out the state secret. Immediately you start planning and scheming for an outing there! What more fun could there be than to have that beautiful lady as a companion on a trip there? So the plot thickens and you start recruiting unsuspecting friends into a troupe for the "outing". No wonder there are other wolves out there in sheep's clothing and the unsuspecting wives have to be cajoled into playing bit parts in the grand scheme of things. Slowly and surreptitiously the plan starts taking shape and before you know it, it snowballs into a life of its own. I start getting calls like "Tanveer I'm in".

"Don't leave me out". And guess what - many such calls from other beautiful ladies "Tanveer Bhai, don't forget me!" What's this "Tanveer Bhai" thingie I think. Why can't I just be like Tanveer, cut out the "Bhai" for Chris' sakes it makes me feel ancient, an anachronism. Soon I'm spoilt for choice! I've got my hand in the cookie jar, the honey pot! All I need to do it now is to pull off the entire effort with aplomb, with perfect timing and get away with it without the wives getting wind of the real fun that's going to be involved.

So the die is cast, an introductory Friday morning breakfast at our favourite haunt, "Star Kabab", Banani, is chalked out and the date for our trip to Pubail is set in stone. Necessary text messages go back and forth over the next few days to recap all details and the excitement level

builds up. We are to start right away after Juma'a prayers and assemble at Gulshan Circle 2 at 1:45 sharp 6 vehicles, 16 people.

But Mother Nature has other plans. Heavy downpours start at 1:30. It rains cats and dogs but our hardy participants are not to be discouraged. We gather by 2:30 p.m. and set off at 3 as the last of the crowd joins in, doused in the rain. The deluge dampens the spirit of one lady and she decides to pull out. We bid her fond farewells as we rev up our engines and off we go through knee deep water on the Gulshan-Baridhara road.

Our stomachs are grumbling by the time we reach our destination after some mild hiccups with the directions. Wow but what a feast was awaiting us! There was an abundance of typical Bangali deshi food chittoi pitha with kacha

morich bhorta as an appetizer. Ilish paturi, three dishes of chhoto maach simmered in vegetables. Umpteen bhortas and bhajis begun, aloo, kacha kola, shak you name it with polao and murgir korma thrown in as well. Ghono dal with shada bhat, what have you! Jewel had rightly said you will remember your childhood trips to your Nanar Bari (read Mamar Bari) in the 60's! Sadly, Jewel couldn't join us as he had left for Bangkok an hour earlier and called from there as we were digging into the Barmecide's Feast!

With a meal like that inside of you, one tends to get horizontal. And that's what exactly many of us did on the comfortable beds and the beautiful bamboo jetty abutting into the water body right in front of the dining hut. Mercifully the rain had abated and we waited with bated

breath for the moon rise that I knew was at 11 minutes past 6 p.m. Alas! The sky was cloudy and no full moon was to be sighted till 8 p.m. I took upon myself to inform anybody interested to listen that this was a Full Harvest Moon. The last time the Harvest Moon coincided with the Autumnal Equinox was on September 23, 1991 and we won't see this phenomenon again until 2029. To be sure no body was listening.

Gorom cha with gorur dudh as also lemon tea was served with freshly made beguni, piyaju and aloor chop and, surprise of all surprises, spicy muri bhaja with just the right proportion of kacha morich, piyaj, shorishar tel and adar kuchi! We dug in with relish. The local musicians who were busy singing *kirtans* in a different hut came over with their accoutrements and everybody joined in the singing and dancing with gusto!

Ultimately the Full Moon did make a show after playing hide and seek many times through the clouds - and then we were bathed in a bright silvery ethereal light. What a heavenly body! The moon outshone all the other five heavenly bodies around me as we floated gently on the beel/haor with Arun the majhi and myself the only other male on the large flat-bed country boat. Scenes from "Amar Prem" flashed through my mind. I spouted lines from Alfred Tennyson's "The Beggar Maid" and Wordsworth's "Daffodils" but made nary an impression on the ladies they were enjoying singing a few lines from long lost songs with me joining in with my "beshura gola". We spent an hour in paradise and plucked lilies (shapla) from the beel. We planned other similar trips to Srirangol (Hyler haor) and the tea gardens in Sylhet. Oh, it's fun to dream!

A late dinner was served at 10 p.m. barbecued chicken, khasta porota, chaler atar ruti, bhuna chicken, ghono dal, mixed vegetable a sumptuous dinner. By 11 p.m., fully satiated with joyful memories and heavy hearts, we departed from our new found paradise and returned home driving through blinding rain. The heavens had again opened up after giving us respite to enjoy ourselves the whole evening and into the night.

Past midnight we were home and after a flurry of phone calls to make sure everyone else had reached home safely we were off to bed to sleep perchance to dream.

