

## ESSAY

# Syed Manzoorul Islam: Tales of the post-modern

TUSAR TALUKDER

Successful post-modern Bengali writers of short stories in Bangladesh are few in number. And surely Syed Manzoorul Islam, professor of English at Dhaka University, is among those few who have embellished the genre of short story in many ways. In contemporary Bengali literature Syed Manzoorul Islam is one of the remarkable pioneers of postmodernism and is equally well-versed in writing on a number of genres, namely short story, essay, novel, literary and art criticism. However, he disagrees with the notion of himself as an author of multifarious genres. He simply considers himself to be a storyteller. The way he relates stories is similar to the way Gabriel García Márquez tells his stories. Both move from one point of view to another.

Let me mention a relevant line to point to the similarity between Márquez and Islam. If one goes through Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Islam's *Shukhduker Golpo*, he/she will surely find some elements of similarity in those books, particularly magic realism, surrealism and meta-fiction. However, Syed Islam and Márquez have dealt with these matters through maintaining their distinctive styles. Syed Manzoorul Islam's style of storytelling is very frank and incisive. He says he always feels much more comfortable writing short stories than anything else. All his brilliant postmodern short stories have been written in the last two decades. One is tempted to think that these stories will give him a permanent niche in the history of modern Bengali literature.

Islam has obviously come by a unique readership following in the Bengali-speaking world. Every episode or incident in his stories is underlined by an intense symbolism; and yet readers are not segregated from the stories amidst these continuous symbolizations. On the contrary, readers unknowingly become part of his stories as they go reading them. The storyteller himself becomes an inseparable part of his stories. Every story told by Syed Islam has a transparent resemblance to some practical incidents he has experienced. The subtle theme of the stories is that real incidents are continuously happening around us. He writes about what has happened in his world and of what he has heard from others. This message flows to readers again and again. He seems to be inviting readers to be part of his discourse. Syed Islam has a special fascination for unusual happenings. For instance, in the story *Kathal Konya*, Absar, a major character, informs the writer that he has seen a girl emerging from inside a large jackfruit. It does not seem strange to Syed Islam, for he has grown used to writing stories based on such surrealistic content.

The language employed in the stories distinguishes Syed Manzoorul Islam from other contemporary short story writers, which is why we consider his language to be postmodern. It is fat-free, artistic and facile. The unique power of using words appropriately in his stories gives him a special ability to discover the inner strength of the words. He never tries to lengthen his sentences unnecessarily. Indeed, the lyrical quality of his sentences depicts a consistency of theme. Every

story centres on some individuals and their problems. Contemporary society's political unrest, individual psychological issues, economic dilemmas faced by people etc find a place in his tales. Islam never hesitates to focus on the true picture of the society he is part of. In a word, he captures the real essence of his society. In characterization he has used some extraordinary techniques.

Islam dwells on the mystique that is humanity. He approaches realism from the perspective of postmodernism, juxtaposing present and past. He is also capable of exposing the conscious as well as subconscious aspects of the human mind. The predicament of urban life is predominant in his narrative, with his continuous conversation with the characters giving life to the stories. Students immersed in the crisis of existence, a wayward terrorist, a robber-turned-billionaire, an honest worker of meagre means, middle-aged pleaders, idealistic young men's shattered dreams, an aristocratic housewife of Sylhet, a lady owner of a ferry ghat hotel, Ferguson

or villain in many of his stories, implying another substantial feature of post-modernism. In addition, a blend of high and low culture is visible in some of his stories. Surely this feature has helped readers to differentiate post-modern stories from those of other ages. Our cultural elements and some moral implications have added a new dimension to his post-modern short stories.

For a glimpse of the features mentioned above, one needs to peer into some stories from the collections of the author. In *Daedelus-er Ghuri*, a story from *Prem O Prarthan Golpo*, Enam Miah, a worker in Hossain Miah's garage, flies kites without informing his master, though he knows his father died flying kites. Hossain Miah himself dislikes flying kites because his brother also died while flying kites. Journalist Abdul Mueed Talukdar gives his Vespa to Hossain Miah to restore its disordered parts. Despite being on holiday Hossain Miah puts Mueed Bhai's Vespa back in order because the journalist had saved this garage from the furious clutches of the mayor's henchmen. And thus the story moves on. Setu Miah, commonly known as an expert in making kites, is compared with Daedelus of Greek mythology by the writer. Islam portrays the vacuum prevailing in the present political arena through this story. *Daedelus-er Ghuri* indicates that the general masses are completely hostage to political degeneration. A very substantial feature of post-modernism, modern man's segregated and lonely life, is revealed in the story.

Again in *Tara Vabhe Tara Saph Ashole Tara Rozzu* Syed Islam develops the character Wakilur Rahman as a moral man struggling against the immorality prevailing in contemporary politics. To view the gradual degradation of morality as well as political philosophy, the writer feels the need for philosophy. The writer has expressed his philosophical thoughts through Wakilur Rahman. The story informs us that Wakilur Rahman's brother-in-law, a politician, flees once Operation Clean Heart gets underway countrywide. It is transparent that he does not possess any strong ethics. Why else should he flee? Islam holds forth on the thought that if people had accepted philosophy not merely as a subject but as a totality of life-defining principles, then Operation Clean Heart might not have been promulgated to net the wicked.

As a critic and essayist, Syed Manzoorul Islam has written extensively on world literature, art and culture. He has captured the vast arena of human life on a tiny canvas, demonstrating the truth that life consists of a fullness of variety. His fiction speaks against social hypocrisy and thuggery, the heart-rending repression of women and the dishonesty of those who trade in religion. He depicts the great sorrows of small people. At the same time he gives us hope and helps us dream of the noble and the beautiful. To me, his sense of proportion regarding the use of words and the diction he develops in his works are magnificent manifestations of his literary imagination.

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Dinnerwallah, a passionate housewife --- such are the characters peopling Syed Manzoorul Islam's short stories. Elements of realism and surrealism prevail in the stories. Islam attempts to discover the reason behind the reasons of an incident.

To the question of why we regard Islam as a post-modern literary figure, be it noted that his language in the stories is plain but playful. To be more specific, in his diction he proves that he is a minimalist. He has gone through deep experimentation on the form of the stories. When he shifts from one character to another, he gives readers the details of the characters, proof that he is a minimalist in character developing. He dislikes developing traditional characters and gives his characters enough freedom to express themselves. He has an interest in metafiction indicating that his fiction is about the nature of fiction. What makes Islam a post-modernist is the interplay of various literary genres in his narrative --- thriller, detective, realist psychological story. At times Syed Islam has used the stream of consciousness technique in his stories. It is difficult to find a real protagonist or hero

# Dream evening in Heidelberg

NAZMUN NESSA

The launch of the Bengali-German poetry compilation of Bangladeshi poet Sheikh

Hafizur Rahman took place on a beautiful summer evening in Heidelberg recently. Draupadi Verlag's publisher Christian Weiss has great love for the Bangla language and Bengali culture. He learnt Bangla at Heidelberg University and has been making efforts toward publishing translations of Bengali and German works on Bengali literature. He recently launched *Mein Tagore*, a translation of well-known poet Alokranjan Dasgupta's work on Tagore.

Alokranjan Dasgupta was present at the launch, along with the Mayor of Schöneberg, Marcus Zeiler, and Bangladesh's Ambassador to Germany Mosud Mannan.

The evening lighted up when Sheikh Hafizur Rahman recited his poem *Shopno* in Bengali in a packed hall in Schöneberg, on the outskirts of Heidelberg, before a predominantly German audience. The audience appreciated the sounds of the Bengali language. Christian Weiss read out the German translation of the poem, *Der Traum*. Sustained applause filled the room.

Sheikh Hafizur Rahman comes from Tungipara, a small village in Bangladesh's Faridpur region. A cousin of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder of Bangladesh, he began writing during his student life. He used to write under a pseudonym at the beginning and only later did he publish his books in his own name. His recent book, *Droher Podaboli*, has earned much praise. The other works which sealed his reputation as a renowned writer are *Oporanner Mlan Aloy* (2010), *Modhumoti* (2003) and *Nongorer Tori* (2001). His compilation of love poetry, *Khola Chuler Megh*, was published this year.

Rahman also wrote the weekly column *Itihas Kotha Kau* in the newspaper *Khobor* in Dhaka. Later those writings came together in a volume called book *The Birth of Bangladesh*. Sheikh Hafizur Rahman's *Gonopachali* was published in India in 2007. Recitations of some of his poems have also been brought out in audio-CDs. Some of his poems, set to music, have been sung by Hoimonti Shukla, Srikranta Bhattacharya and Sri Radha Bandalopadhyaya. He has received two awards in Bangladesh --- Sufi Motaher Hossain Prize in 2000 and Bangabandhu Memorial Prize in 2002. The Michael Madhusudhan Prize, from India, came in 2003.

The presentation of a book in two languages by Christian Weiss could be a beginning to a big step, as Mosud Mannan noted in his remarks. The ambassador pointed out that Bangla is the fifth most prominent language in the world. A hundred and eighty million people speak this language.

Poet Alokranjan Dasgupta, in his remarks, said, 'We are here celebrating the Bengali mind and culture. Today we do not belong to any place but, in the words of Schiller, we are citizens of time'. Poet Sheikh Hafizur Rahman made a request to Christian Weiss that the latter's translation of Bengali literature include the history of Bangladesh. About his poetry, he noted, 'Time will show whether my work is valuable. Critics will write about my poems. But it will be a gift to me if I can touch the heart of even one reader.'

The audience listened to Rahman's reading. With rapt attention Thomas Klaffke, principal of a local school, has studied German literature and history. He told me that hearing the poem *Der Traum* (The Dream) in Bengali was for him an imbibing of the sound, music and drama in it. Ashraf uz Zaman, associate professor of German language at Dhaka University, was also present and translated Sheikh Hafizur Rahman's Bengali address into German.

Nazmum Nessa, broadcaster and poet, writes from Berlin, Germany.

## NOSTALGIA

# Kolkata revisited . . .

SYEDA ZAKIA AHSEN

I was visiting Kolkata after ten long years. It was last December. One of my childhood friends received me at the airport. As he drove down the roads I remembered the times when I would travel with my mother from India to what was then East Pakistan. Night had fallen and I could hardly recognise the roads that took me to the area I was quite acquainted with -- Elliot Road in the Park Circus area. It was the place where I had gone to school. Yes, we, my husband I, were going to live with my friends on Elliot Road, the spot where I spent twelve formative years of my life. It was Loreto Day School which had opened up my world to the world which beckoned outside. The roads seemed more crowded and pollution had increased. But the sounds and smells were the same that I had known earlier.

I felt strange. There was that certain tug at the heart. The next morning after a traditional breakfast, with cuisine from Lucknow, I decided to visit my parents' graves in Gobra. My parents lay beside each other inside their white cement graves covered with nettles and moss, beside the old familiar pond ringed by coconut palms. Close by were the remains of numerous relatives, including a niece who passed away a few years ago. Little children, expectations glowing in their bright eyes, meandered around me for alms. A mouli sahib emerged from the graveyard caretaker office and asked me if I would like to have my parents' graves washed. I nodded and the task began. I stood in silence as four men hauled water from the nearby tubewell in ancient buckets to wash the graves and little boys and girls surrounded me in sharing the scene. The moss was soon wiped off the graves. I stood there, in silence, conjuring up the times in my mind when my parents, seven years apart, shuffled off their mortal coil. I prayed once the graves had been washed clean. Hands were raised to pray for the salvation of the departed souls.

I spent much of my time in Kolkata visiting friends and places of enduring interest for me. But things had changed. I wanted to have cake at Flury's and so went to Park Street. I was surprised to see that we needed to queue up and had to pass through an electronic detector check at the door. Since the queue was rather long, we had to return home without tasting the cake, something we used to have every New Year's Day in my



childhood. We walked down to Loreto College before returning home. It had been Vansittart's summer house. The foundation stone of the college had been laid by Sir Elijah Impey. I stood before the gates as my husband took snapshots of me.

A visit to the National Library was a particularly enriching experience. I toured the Buhar Section that is made up of rare collections of Persian and Arabic manuscripts donated to the library by my late uncle Moulvi Sadruddin Al-Musavi in the early years of the twentieth century. I had carried a letter that had been sent long ago to my uncle by a secretary to the then Viceroy. It would help in my getting access to the section. And help me it did. The assistant librarian who showed me around, a Muslim gentleman speaking what one would describe as tehzeebi Urdu, turned out to be a prominent Urdu poet of West Bengal.

I trekked down to European Asylum Lane (now Abdul Halim Lane) near Wellesley, the purpose being to see my childhood home. It was an exercise in

heartbreak: the house, defined as it was by a plenitude of memories, had been demolished and an apartment block had risen in its place. Our caretakers were now the proud owners of flats in the complex. They treated me and my husband with much warmth and care. We dined with them and looked at the ancient teak furniture which once had been part of my mother's collection. It is now in the possession of our former caretakers. The architectural pattern of the flats made it hard for me to guess where my study had been or where my parents' room used to be. I was also amazed to discover that the arched gate to the entrance had now been replaced by a narrow staircase. The huge green wooden door was gone, replaced by a simple opening.

My heart ached as I walked down the stairs --- to get ready for my flight back to London.

Syeda Zakia Ahsan, educationist and charity worker, writes from London.

## POETRY

# Wayfarer's song

MOHSENA REZA SHOPNA

Why did you coalesce with me?  
Neither am I the rose of Isfahan  
Nor the lotus of Bengal  
Or maybe I was the rain  
Drenched bud blooming on your windowsill

Night comes, uniting with the pursuit of day  
Darkness giving birth to light  
The gold-rayed sunflower seen  
Frolicking in gold dust  
The mandolin playing through the heart

Why did you merge with the wind  
In the distant sky?  
I was happy to have been a wayfarer  
Until an aroma wafted by, on the breeze  
Enthralling this solitary being  
Intoxicating the soul once again

Now my joy lies in this path-gazing  
Charmed in interplay of sunshine and shadow  
And as I gaze all day long  
You suddenly appear with that abandoned song  
Ferrying that long-lost sweet fragrance  
Impregnating the air, hovering around me

And so I remain  
The hem of my dress spread out...  
Waiting!

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