

PERSONALITY

SIC... teacher, scholar, activist

MD SHAFIQUIL ISLAM

Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury, a distinguished teacher, research scholar as well as leader in sociological, philosophical and political thinking, assumed the chairmanship of the Department of English of Dhaka University after the war of liberation to usher in an era of the democratic tradition of liberal intellectual exercise. SIC, as he is popularly known, has always been a brilliant, dutiful and compassionate teacher who commands the deepest respect and admiration of all the students.

The Department of English of Dhaka University has shaped the lives of many of us with Professor Choudhury at the centre of all important events. I am trying to go back to the mid-seventies stretching to the early eighties when my generation was fortunate to get taught by an illustrious teacher like Professor Choudhury. I will also try to recollect a few memorable episodes in connection with our growing to be trained students of literature under his mentoring and tutorage.

Professor Choudhury, who crossed seventy five years of his life on 23 June 2011, was only thirty nine when we got ourselves admitted to the First Year Honours class of the Department of English in 1975. He was a teacher of teachers and he imparted knowledge to us, rather taught us in the English Department precisely from 1975 to 1981 in B.A. Honours and Masters classes. In addition he instilled in us avid enthusiasm for literature in our tutorials, comprising five students in each cluster. While pursuing M. Phil, my friend and classmate Junaidul Haque and I got another opportunity to be disciples of our greatest guru in 1982.

Even the most casual student would be very mindful to attend his classes as they were not only 'intellectually energizing' but also fully rewarding. I never found any of my classmates unready or absent in his classes. Here is my classmate and friend Syed Badrul Ahsan describing our preparation to receive SIC in our class: "Our notebooks, pens and pencils were ready even before Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury walked into class. He was always a thinker, still is. His humility- and that comes from his greatness as one of the foremost intellectual voices in the country- was transparent. We were awed in his presence. His hands in his pockets, he went straight into the subject., almost as if he was engaged in reflections. Of course we noted it all down, and at the end of class, there was enough material to prepare a good tutorial on the subject."



SIC was unfailingly punctual in entering the classroom, staying there till the last second of the 50-minute session. When he finished just before the closing bell rang nobody felt that there was any other point left unexplained or unfinished. It was a rare and inimitable example of time management transformed into an art. His was a lecture or a speech, not a conversation and there could be no occasion when he would ever falter or fumble. All the students would listen to his spellbinding lecture with rapt attention and note down almost every syllable he uttered. His message was so clearly intelligible and voice so sweet and musical that I never found any of my classmates raising a hand for clarification. He was the only teacher in my life at home and abroad I found fully satisfying. I was used to raising challenging and thought-provoking questions or introducing a debatable topic very often in almost every session except that of SIC's. In my entire tutelage under him, I only complemented or added one word in his class on Sophocles' Oedipus when he mentioned Mother Earth. I enquired whether he meant Gaea the Earth Goddess and he replied 'yes', only to continue with the remaining session.

He was a teacher of a different kind when we used to meet him in his room as tutorial students. After giving a thorough introduction to the author we meant to discuss, he would proceed with the discussion on the specific text in Socratic method through probing questions and extracting answers from every one. He encouraged every student to take part in the

discussion and express his or her own opinion which he valued much. The textbook became so easy after his lesson that we hardly needed to study any other note.

He never gave us the impression that his view was the last or final. He was so exacting a tutor that he used to read the tutorial script line by line and word for word to point out any mistake even in spelling or punctuation. In my case, I found him even detecting a small 'p' looking like a capital 'P' or a capital 'S' looking like a small 's'. He wanted perfection and seriousness in all our efforts.

While discussing Francis Bacon's Essays, he sensitized in me the interest to study the great French essayist Michel de Montaigne. It was not available in the library at that moment. So I came back to Sir and mentioned that I was looking for a copy of Montaigne's essays. Without hesitating for a moment he stood up from his chair, walked a few steps and advanced his hand towards his own shelf packed with books to find the desired copy for me in a fraction of a second, without any deadline to return it. So did he do on different occasions whenever or even at night I visited his residence at 34/B opposite the Shaheed Minar.

I never found him absent in any of his classes in my entire student life except on one occasion about which he notified a week before the class. It suddenly caught my eyes on the notice board of our department on a Wednesday in 1976, when I was a student of Second Year Honours. The notice read, "I shall be unable to take your class next Wednesday. Please do not come that day." It was possible for only SIC to feel the predicament a student faces when he appears in the class from a faraway place only to find his teacher absent halfway through the class hour without any previous notice or no notice at all. I just wanted to mention the difference between teacher and teacher.

While I was a student of second year, I translated a short story entitled Araby by James Joyce and submitted it to SIC for his comments. He read every word meticulously, encouraged and also advised me on some needed improvement and finally asked our junior lecturer Fakrul Sir (Professor Fakrul Alam) to get the translation at least cyclostyled for the perusal of other students and teachers. On another occasion, while I was engaged in a so-called intellectual discourse with other 'young scholars' in the corridor of the Rashid-Guhathakurta Memorial Library of our Department, SIC walked out of his corner

room and beckoned me to follow him. He handed me a magazine entitled, probably Counterpoint, published in English in the Sixties and which included an article on Poet Ahsan Habib by SIC. He asked me to translate the article into Bangla for publication in the quarterly magazine of the Bangla Department of Dhaka University. I translated it, though it needed to be revised time and again with the guidance of SIC Sir. It was a sign of his keen interest in stimulating our interest in literature as a complement to our academic pursuits.

Professor Choudhury has always insisted on realizing the importance of literature in real life, developing awareness of the role of literature in the development of humankind and sensitizing the values for social change. He makes relentless and committed efforts to inculcate in us the ideal that literature is not only for literature's sake, it not only imparts artistic delight but also has a social and philosophical role to play. It can be a vital instrument for social change and human welfare. SIC loves to read books and wants his disciples also to read them but he never wants his students to be a generation of bookworms. Himself a great creative writer and avid social reformer, he is always an example to be followed. No matter which subject or author he has taught, be it Old and Middle English, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Bacon, Marlowe, Milton, Pope, Lawrence or T.S. Eliot, even the weakest student would find himself or herself comfortable enough to prepare notes for his tutorial or final examination.

Unfortunately standards have fallen. They have rather become substandard these days in the study of literature. Most students prefer to read notebooks or copy from the internet to prepare tutorial papers or examination scripts. It is a story of bookworms eating the entire book without understanding a single word or in this case without much caring for a mastering of the texts. The expansion of English departments in numerous colleges and universities without efficient, dedicated and trained teachers like Professor Choudhury on the one hand and erosion of values on the other have done great damage to standards in the study of English literature.

A teacher like Professor Choudhury is not born in every century. But the values and traditions he nurtures and stamps on our minds can be examples for us to be followed and replicated to eradicate unfairness and injustice in society. SIC has shown us the way.

Md. Shafiqul Islam, a senior civil servant, specializes in studies of William Shakespeare.

POETRY

Labyrinth of love

NAHID KHAN

Recollection of those days
So precious in some ways
When we lived in the maze--
There was the thrill of daze.

Little delights of discovering
your heart

Just like reading a thriller page
by page.

Oh, I so don't want this book to
end

Oh, I so don't want us to be
offhand.

I touched your heart and you
mine

You read my mind and I yours
I could touch the moon and
You could reach the sun.

Together we had the whole
world,
Moving around us, for us and by
us.

Oh, why does it feel the earth
may stop?

Oh, it didn't start to have a
pause!

We were so close not being near
I heard you sing, I saw you
dream

Your hands played with my hair
Your eyes had the perfect glare
When laid on my pictures so
mere.

And now we have found each
other

We know we belong together
No more maze to do and undo,
To find the truth in me and you.

Sometime you seem far off--
And yet we are so reachable!
Oh, I so don't want yearnings to
end

Oh, I so don't want to be non-
existent.

If distance makes dear ones
dearer
Why, then, love draws one
nearer!

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NOTES

Celebrating the Bard of Avon

RAFIQUIL ISLAM RIME

Paying tribute to the Bard of Avon is a task that itself calls for sublimity. For such an endeavour at once demands a cluster of skill, enthusiasm and an endless love on the part of those concerned. And when it comes to the matter of staging his famous plays on stage, it demands a variety of skills, varied enthusiasm and incessant efforts, to say the least.

Shakespeare buffs are of course familiar with the subtle intricacies of the great minds in his tragedies and comedies. They know how difficult it is to dramatize them on the stage.

Performers in his comedies, especially, face different kinds of challenges in as much as the subtleties in the great characters like Rosalind, Hermia, Helena, Bottom, Oberon and Puck are to be portrayed. Imagine the range involved in enacting the famous forest of Arden scene. Note how aptly the Hollywood icon Jack Lemmon puts

semester students performed in the second on 26 April, while sixth semester students performed in the last one on 27 April. Directing the performances were five young teachers: Roushan Jahan Chowdhury, Shahidul Alam Chowdhury, Syeda Roushan Ara Hasmin, Shantanu Das and Syeda Salma Akhtar. The coordinator of the event, Lecturer Shaibal Dev Roy, hosted the whole event.

It was a display of sheer energy and enthusiasm on the part of the young actors, a manifestation of the truth that they have the potential to present literary traditions through a diverse presentation of skills. Their spirit was lively and kicking; their deliberations, dialogue delivery and movements were spontaneous. The stage setting and the multicolored costumes were a bewitching spectacle.

Fortunately for us, Prof. Mohit Ul Alam, a Shakespeare pundit, flew from Dhaka to be with us and enjoyed watching his play *Hamlet in Love*



it: "It's hard enough to write a good drama; it's much harder to write a good comedy. Which is what life is." He of course had that point in mind while working on them, the comedies of the Bard!

The Department of English Language and Literature (DELL) of Premier University, Chittagong, organised a three-day Shakespeare Drama Festival marking the Bard's 447th birth anniversary that ended on 27 April this year at the university seminar hall.

Three dramas were staged --- *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hamlet in Love*. The first two are Shakespeare's immortal creations while the last one was Prof Dr Mohit Ul Alam's maiden play. Eighth semester students performed in the first one on 25 April; fifth

enacted on stage. In his remarks before the audience, he dwelt on Shakespeare and his art before responding to queries from the audience. The skilled performance of the students and the department's holding of the festival overwhelmed him. He had proudly initiated this healthy trend, along with many others, in the department in 2003. The festival was a grand success. With echoes of the joyous celebrations ringing in the mind, we look forward to yet another dawn of literary beauty.

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SHARMEEN RAHMAN

I stretched and yawned as I started to wake up. I rubbed my eyes vigorously and opened them. I blinked and looked around. To my surprise, I was surrounded by rectangular wooden slabs instead of my cosy bed!

I quickly sat up to realize that I was lying on a wooden bench! In fact there was a row of benches in front of me. I looked around. I was actually surrounded by rows of benches, on both sides, in front of me as well as behind me! Within seconds I recognized I was in a church!

I slowly stood up and walked out from the row in which I was and stepped to the aisle. It was dark except for some flickering candle light from the four corners of the hall.

I walked along the aisle, slowly proceeding towards the altar. The sound from the heel of my shoes echoed all over the hall, sounding like a hammer hitting a nail on the wall. The silence was deadly and the darkness made me feel not only gloomy but also scared!

As I walked further towards the altar I heard the sounds of slow piano music. It sounded familiar; it was a funeral hymn. Then, slowly, Father Arthur came into my view, playing the piano.

Suddenly I started feeling weird about everything. What was going on? Why was I here? In the church? All the questions rushed to my head instantly. Then immediately I looked at myself from head to toe. I was dressed in a black suit, white shirt inside with a black tie, black socks and black shoes on my feet!

I wondered why I was so well dressed in brand new clothes at the church!

I looked around and it took a few seconds to recognize that I was in St. Francis' Church in the neighborhood. By looking at the windows on the two sides of the hall I could see it was dark!

I slowly started recalling everything, me asleep on the bench in the church? At night? Well dressed? Nobody around, except Father Arthur?

Father Arthur! As soon as his name flashed across my mind I thought that was it. He could tell me why I was here and what I was doing.

I looked up at the altar again. Just then he stood up from the piano seat to leave. I started walking quickly to catch up with him but he opened the door behind the piano and went inside, to go upstairs where he lives.

I ran to get a hold of him but I was late. I

At the church

could hear him lock the door from the other side of the door and also hear his footsteps taking the stairs.

I started knocking at the door. I knocked harder and harder, but he didn't open it. I repeatedly knocked, harder, and still he didn't open the door.

I wondered if I was loud enough. Then I remembered. I needed to try the main door of the church in order to leave instead of just asking questions to myself.

I quickly ran towards the main door and tried to open it, but in vain. It was locked from the outside. I started getting nervous. Blood started flowing backwards from the veins in my hand and I could feel them go numb.

I gulped down air from my mouth and pressed my lips together. Just as I was about to start banging on the door a horrific thought came to my mind --- that I was locked in! I was locked inside the church and everybody had left!

Slowly, everything started making sense. I probably had come to the church for something and fallen asleep. Everyone had gone and I was left alone. But what irritated me was I couldn't remember why I had come to the church! A sermon? A wedding? A funeral? What for?

I felt frustrated and angry; but I didn't know that my frustration and anger would quickly turn into fear.

I started looking around the hall to find an open window by any chance or a way out. But I didn't find anything. Instead, my eyes caught something that terrified my whole body. A coffin at the centre of the altar! An inexplicable fear came over me.

I always thought that I was brave and led a tough life. At least, that's what a teenage boy like me should think. But I was wrong. I was scared to see the coffin. Scared of the dead inside. Scared to be alone with a coffin in an empty church locked up, at night! Father Arthur had probably been practising for that dead person's funeral.

My whole body shook. I slowly sat on the floor by the main door. I curled up and sat down, wrapping my legs with my hands. Sweat soaked my whole body but I trembled. I started feeling dizzy and closed my eyes.

A shrill cry shook and woke me up. I slowly opened my eyes and found myself lying on the floor on the inner side away from the door of the church.

I quickly got up and looked around. It was morning. A big sigh of relief crawled inside my

chest. To cheer me up more the church's main gate was open, letting bundles of light into the aisle.

A small crowd on the altar quickly drew my attention, a group of people surrounding something in a circle.

I wondered what it could be and started walking towards them. It seemed like forever to reach the altar as the gloom and suspense of the moment made me feel I was walking in slow motion. As I approached, a faint and muffled murmur started getting louder. People crying. Father Arthur's voice, perhaps reciting from the Bible?

All of them were wearing black. So it didn't take me long to understand that it was the funeral of the dead person from last night. Last night Father Arthur must have been practising the piano for this funeral.

I walked closer and some of the people's faces could be seen, but..... As soon as the people's faces came into view a stroke of horror blew in upon me. They were familiar and that moment a confusing chill went down my spine.

They were my family --- grandpa, mom, dad, Jake my brother, aunt Lily, uncle Saul, Bridgett my cousin sister.....etc.

They were crying, some of them with the typical handkerchief on their cheeks, some leaning on each other and some just yelling their cries out! Even Father Arthur had tears in his eyes!

What on earth was going on? Did a family member of mine die?

But, then, how wouldn't I know?

I quickly jumped on to the altar andnever got the chance to ask anybody anything because what I saw took my breath away at once.

The person in the coffin.....It was me! I was dead? I kept staring, too stunned to even blink.

Then suddenly I remembered....I had died the previous morning in an accident! The truth was too emotional to even emotionally react. I stood still, surprised that my soul had forgotten its destiny.

Then, as Father Arthur started closing the coffin and picked the hammer to nail it, everyone's cry grew louder. I started feeling light and drowsy. My breath stopped and I began to choke. I closed my eyes while everyone's voice faded away and I was left alone in the dark alone, forever.

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FICTION