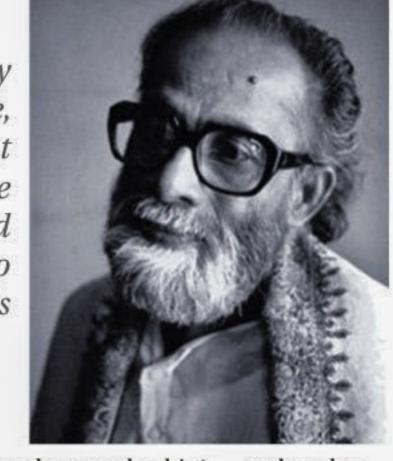
FICTION

Two Brigadiers

Born in Hoogli, West Bengal, on January 2, 1917, Shawkat Osman passed his B.A. in Economics followed by an M.A. in Bangla from Calcutta University. His teaching career started at the Institute of Commerce, Calcutta in 1941. After the partition of India, he came back to the then East Pakistan and taught at Chittagong Commerce College first and then at Dacca College from 1958 to 1972. Alongside creative writings, he has translated and edited some works, but he is mainly known as a novelist. He introduced Arabic and Persian words in modern prose; his writings expose social inequality, and are a testimony to democratic values and non-communalism. "Jononi', his first novel, was published in 1958, and his 'Kritodasher Hashi', is a widely-held novel. He was awarded the Bangla Academy literary prize in 1962.



SHAWKAT OSMAN

Translation: Haroonuzzama

A fire broke out in a jute godown. Thousands of bales of jute were piled up in a tin-roofed shed. Nobody could say how the fire started. When the all-engulfing fire, darting out its hungry tongue, was licking everything on its way, it was learnt that it didn't take much time for the fire brigade to get the news.

The firefighters went into action immediately to stop the advance of the enemy, the fire. The spot was near the river, so they had the necessary ammunition, the water. The source was readily available to douse the flame. Jets of water were gushing out through the hosepipe as if they were shells fired from a cannon. But this enemy was advancing at a gallop. That was why the firefighters thought the arrangement for spraying the jet of water from the top by opening one side of the roof was right. Soon after, some firefighters climbed up the ladder and started unscrewing the nuts and bolts hurriedly to separate the sheets of tin; some of them slid the hosepipe through the gap and then began to shoot water.

The fury of that fire was simply uncontrollable. The tin sheets of the roof, heated gradually by the fire, were on the verge of giving in. After all, the fire was fuming with anger! The tin roof was about to burst open with a crackling sound. The wooden support beneath the tin sheets was either burnt or scorched. Why would the tin sheets then remain positioned in their assigned places?

In this case, the firemen who had climbed to the roof were the ones in danger. Some of them either looked silhouetted against the heat and smoke or like a group of moving ghosts.

In the stack, there might have been some wet jute. As a result, plumes of smoke were billowing out as if they were all coiled pythons, just maneuvering, but yet to launch an

But hats off to the firefighters! So sincerely were they carrying out the order of their officer! None of them were moving an inch from their positions. Of course, the situation was grave. Gradually, the situation was going out of control. It was as if water and fire were fighting out a duel, a boxing or a wrestling competition. At times, they were engaged in pushing and pulling by holding each other's waists.

Katata

Nuts and bolts were coming off, making such noises! Accompanying this was the whistle of the hissing hosepipe. Gritting their teeth, they were engaged in the encounter. Amid the hellish smoke and flashes of fire suddenly came a commanding voice like a mysterious sound from nowhere: "Firemen! Get down." Also, an officer climbed to the roof to draw up a line of action ascertaining the movement of the enemy. It was realized that the war strategy should be changed.

On the other hand, two junior officers were on the ground. The senior one was up on the roof and was giving the order. But there was no trace of the person who had released such queer commands from nowhere. Where was he then? Again came the strange sound: "Firemen! Get down." Where was the source of the puzzling sound? It was difficult to spot it. Amid the swirling dense smoke, one could hardly feel the importance of eyes. Where did the sound originate from?

Down on the ground, some were combating the fire as per the old strategy. Meanwhile, all the firemen, including the junior officers, started yelling: "Where's Bhuiyan Shaheb? Where is he?"

The two junior officers even began screaming: "Bhuiyan Shaheb, Bhuiyan Shaheb."

But there was no response. In one direction, scattered

went two tin sheets. The importance of one man overshadowed the fire at the entire godown. The jute bales, whatever their price may be, would stand as nothing compared to the cost of a human life.

Could it be that Bhuiyan Shaheb had been caught by the ring of fire under the godown?

There were anxiety-ridden screams all around: "Bhuiyan Shaheb, Mr..."

The furore echoed everywhere. There was a two-storied tin shed, ten to twelve feet away from the godown. Although the fire did not spread that way, everything still remained buried under the smoke.

Suddenly, there was a thump on the roof of the twostoried tin shed; it was as if a monkey had jumped onto the roof. The fire did not attack this side. The roof was steep. Up on the roof were only nuts and bolts, some of which could be held on to by fingers. The rest were all flat. Besides, the corrugated tin sheets were serrated. They were placed lengthwise, not crosswise. Therefore, how could there be any scope of clinging to them?

Maybe a monkey had jumped onto the roof. But this monkey was exceptional; it could outsmart all other apes. Jumping onto the roof, the monkey adjusted its swift and nimble fingers against the support of the small nuts and bolts in such a way that instead of falling on to the ground with its heavy body and then breaking its hands and legs, it not only slid down the slope on to the ground but also took some paces forward before coming to a final halt. 'What were you doing there, Bhuiyan Shaheb?"

The aforesaid monkey replied to questioners who were busy unburdening themselves of their uneasiness: "Duty is duty...responsibility is responsibility."

Without uttering a single word, Sayedur Rahman Bhuiyan picked up the hosepipe and joined his coworkers in their fight against the enemy.

Such an incident had occurred many a time in officer Bhuiyan's personal life. He would appear as a different personality altogether during any fire incident or dangerous situation. The firemen would jokingly call him 'Mr. Brigadier'. In fact, Bhuiyan would get ready to sacrifice his life as and when he would come across a fire incident. Once he had narrowly escaped while trying to extinguish a fire in a locality. Many more incidents like this could be mentioned, but it would be useless to fatten the list.

Bhuiyan would say: "Listen, the fire is not fire; in so many cases, it destroys people. So many years a person takes to build a factory, but in five minutes the fire engulfs it. Forget about the factory; a house is nothing but bricks, wood and cement. But people can stay in it. Is it possible to measure the life of a person by money? Besides ... " Perhaps you would interject at that moment, saying:

"What else, Bhuiyan Shaheb?"

Bending his slender, sinewy black body and then lighting a cigarette, he would

reply: "Listen, duty is duty...responsibility is responsibility. Take this jute godown thing as an example. In exchange of our jute, we import foreign goods like medicines, equipment for railways, motor launches and steamers, etc. How many things are made in Bangladesh? If these things don't come from foreign countries, the entire country will face a lot of problems. Now you see what fire means to us? And I am a fireman. Don't I have any responsibility? Then why do I take my salary every month?"

Unknowingly, Bhuiyan's voice would reach the treble. Soon after it would plummet to the base notes.

"Life is invaluably important." When his friends and well-wishers would draw his attention to the maxim, Bhuiyan would swear on his father and say: "My father, late Abdul Majid Bhuiyan, used to tell me that I should consider other people's sufferings as my own. That is the only way to become a human being; he would tell me not to forget that ever."

Perhaps his father's words or image would give him the necessary impetus to bolster his strength and courage to help him confront any danger or times of troubles. That was all about Sayed Bhuiyan, and to his friends he was known as 'the brigadier.'

Like an earthquake came the 25th March 1971. Does this day or night need any explanation for anyone claiming to be a Bangladeshi?

Sayed Bhuiyan returned home after the day's work and excitement. As usual, he had his dinner in time and went to bed by 10 p.m. Since he was tired to the bone, he fell asleep so early.

Suddenly, Dhaka city woke up to a rattle of mortar shells and fire from machine guns that night. Time and again it happened during the night, as if doomsday had begun. Hastily, he got up from bed and came out into the open along with his fretful wife. Sayed Bhuiyan looked around, and all of a sudden, he saw a blazing fire darting out and curls of smoke coming out from the southern side of the city. It was clearly visible from his area.

Having given the necessary safety and security directives to his wife and others, Bhuiyan dressed --- the khaki uniform (brown shorts and a shirt) --- and made a dash for the exit. His wife did not stop him because she knew that it would not be appropriate to do so in such a situation.

Revving up the engine of his jeep in the garage, he

zoomed along the motorway to reach his office, which was close to his house. Everything was happening so fast! On the other side, the clatter of the weapons was rising. Boom...shoo...ta...ta...

The firemen were ready; they always are. As soon as he reached the station, the firefighters zoomed past the station into the road followed by the jeep driven by Bhuiyan.

Then it was fifteen minutes to twelve at night. Death and destruction were everywhere in the city. The extent was cataclysmic.

The telephones are dead.

Bhuiyan had ordered his co-workers to continue driving the fire truck following the flame of the fire. Accordingly, they were crossing road after road. They could accelerate their vehicle as there were no people around. An unusual calm gripped the city.

Their vehicle was approaching Plassey barracks, and it was facing Salimullah Muslim Hall. A bombshell fired from a military van fell on the fire truck, and it was a straight hit, followed by a round of brushfire.

The shell burst, ripping through the huge fire truck, and its engine stopped after it tilted toward one side. Immediately, all the firemen lay dead; some bodies lay strewn on the truck, and some were on the soil of Bangladesh

Ta...ta...ta...

Rifle fire was going off as well.

Bhuiyan could not understand what happened. What happened so suddenly? A bullet hit his chest as well. Still he was driving the jeep. With one hand he was in control of the steering while he clasped his chest with the other. A military vehicle was rushing towards him. Bhuiyan felt relieved. It was not a scream; rather in a challenging mode, he called one of the officers: "Brother officer..."

The jeep had already stopped.

"Brother officer..." He shouted at the top of his voice. It was as if he wanted the whole world to listen to his call.

Meanwhile, two military jeeps arrived, stopped beside him and some people disembarked. As Bhuiyan saw one brigadier named Aslam leaning against his jeep, he yelled: "Brothers, why did you kill all my firemen? We all were out in the city on duty. The city is in flames. We all are from the fire brigade..."

"What?" Another officer who was beside Aslam asked. "What?" This time it was the brigadier who raised the question.

"We..." A prompt answer escapes Bhuiyan's lips. 'What?" The brigadier asked the question again. "We came out to do our duty." Sayed Bhuiyan

answered. "Come for duty, eh?"

'Yes."

"Duty?" Aslam's companion laughed.

"Yes." Again Bhuiyan replied.

This time the two officers synchronically barked: "Listen, son of Bangal, we are also on duty. Now our duty is to set fire to everything, but your one is to put it out. Did you understand?"

Perhaps that day the entire education of Bhuiyan's life stood before him as a question mark. His lips moved a few times as he tried to answer. But he could not, as the next moment his hand slipped from his injured chest, and he fell over on to the other side.

What did Sayed Bhuiyan want to say that day on his jeep?

None of us would get a clue to it, ever.

Professor Haroonuzzaman teaches English at Independent University Bangladesh (IUB)

NOTES

IUB Book Club

MD. SHAIFUL ISLAM

The love of learning, the sequestered nooks, And all the sweet serenity of books.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

I have always found that no matter what I read today relates to one or another aspect of my life. Reading books directly creates kaleidoscopic impacts on human life. A good book soothes our troubled minds, sparks our imagination, provokes our dormant thoughts, guides us in setting goals and, most importantly, enriches us.

A book club on the university campus should be an imperative co-curricular platform for both faculty and students. It benefits them in various ways. For one thing,

a book club is like a community. It provides an opportunity to be alternately silly and serious. I'm exposed to reading material that I might otherwise pass over, and I get to learn about others' experiences and how they have opted to look at the world as a result of those experiences. We generally park our worries at the doorstep at meetings and it becomes a refuge from whatever is a stressor in the rest of my life.

A book club gives us exposure to the wealth of publications occurring across the world and like a catalyst stirs our stagnated intellect. Books and book clubs can pull everyone up out of his world when life becomes hard. Joining a book club is both an escape and a journey into something rich and wonderful. Book club meetings give members an opportunity for selfexpression and self-revelation. It's a safe place to exchange and challenge ideas.

With only 25 members, IUB Book Club (IBC) started its journey on 02 February 2009 as the brainchild of Professor Razia Sultana Khan, Head, Department of English and Department of Modern Languages. It grew

very rapidly and now the number of its members is nearing 70. The members meet once a month, on the last Thursday. Over the last two years IBC members have read a number of books (My Name Is Red by Orhan Pamuk, Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys, The Hobbit by J.R.R. Tolkien, The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini and many more) and the readings were followed by discussion.

IBC fosters a very lively and liberal environment for members. It is now coordinated by Noora Shamsi Bahar, Lecturer, Department of English, IUB. Those who are interested in joining the club may contact her at room number 8005 of the academic building of IUB Bashundhara Campus. Membership is free and open for all IUB faculty and students. There is only one requirement. You must read the selected book before the discussion.

Md. Shaiful Islam is Senior Lecturer, Department of English, Independent University Bangladesh and member of IBC.

At Kathmandu

After three days of readings, workshops and literary discussions, the Kathmandu Literature Festival came to a close on Sunday, September 18. The festival, which took place in the Patan Durbar complex in the ancient part of the city, was the first of its kind in Nepal. The topics covered pertained to Nepal as also South Asia in both a socio-political and literary context.

The festival hosted 30 national and 10 international writers, William Dalrymple, Tarun Tejpal, Mohammed Hanif and Shazia Omar.

With the first Kathmandu Literary Jatra behind her, Suvani Singh, festival director, says "We will most certainly try to make it happen every year. It will happen if this event continues to enjoy the support we have received this time.'

In a discussion on the topic of "Selling Out or Telling it Like It Is? Getting Real in South Asian Literature" along with international and national authors P Sivakami, Shazia Omar, Alka Saraogi, and Rabi Thapa, Shazia Omar spoke about the emerging voices from Bangladesh that represent varied aspects of local realities. She encouraged international publishers to explore the growing literary talent in our country and said the upcoming Hay Festival, scheduled for late November in Dhaka, would be an ideal opportunity for such interactions



Requiem for Lost Love

SADIA ARMAN

The Earth is shifting tectonic plates, Her moods are gone all awry-She is raining in the dry season, Heating and freezing in fits, Erupting unreleased anger.

She is pulping us under a foot. Slapping us here or swatting us there,

As she lies down,

Pinning us under an elbow, or smearing to the ground With the back of her hand Clusters of human pests.

The Earth is growing restive-Her mothers' breasts milked to the last drop of patience. They're drilling her knees for coal.

Inside her lovely abdomen long syringes have been inserted to suck out the gas. She is feeling ill. With elbow over eyes she waits,

As hordes of bloodthirsty gnats throw daily death-bombs to destroy communities. Stuffing chunks of oil ore inside power greedy mouths.

They're justifying black deeds by tall speeches. In the Centres of Learning the resounding claps drown out the cries of dying children.

The Earth body is bleeding daily. Her true children are forced at gun-point Inside 'Aborigine' camps and 'Red Indian' reserves. with their toppled godshiding their manhood with the last shreds of defeat.

In the Institutions of Democracy they decide who to kill next or which country to destroy. They make nuclear power from a collection of the best brains, washed and compressed in their factories, so they can kill in masses.

The Earth is not wellthey've got in her hair. With long scalpels they're now drilling her icy scalp for more oil reserves.

The Earth rest is broken. She will rise soon for we've lost her love. Then as her body stretches up she will tread, jump, throw herself about, In a primeval dance of renewalher goddess-corpus rid of maggots.

of tsunamis and floods she is perfectly clean, She will rest once again.

When after the last wash

New seed will enter her womb And after her confinement, She will give birth once more to a new breed

Ready to run all over their mother's body with lovely kissing feet, In a new children's world of innocence and play, Striking joy in the once again ripened breast of feeding and growing

Sadia Arman is a Lawyer.