

KABIR CHOWDHURY

My teacher, the nation's teacher

JUNAIDUL HAQUE

National Professor Kabir Chowdhury died a Keatsian death in his sleep on the morning of December 14, 2011. He was eighty eight. He wrote even on the last day of his life. Like Tennyson's Ulysses, he drank life to the lees. 'I was ever a fighter', he wrote in a magazine edited by yours truly in 2005. He dreamt of one fight more, the best and the last. He was eighty two then. And what an elegant, gentlemanly and refined fighter he was! He was the nation's finest and ever reliable friend, philosopher and guide.

I am proud that Kabir Chowdhury was my teacher. I am even prouder that he liked me as a student. He considered his students his own children. His own children, his three daughters? He simply doted on them. In a society which has always looked down upon its women, Kabir Chowdhury was a great exception. His love for his wife and his three daughters was boundless. He was such a proud husband and father! If I met him in the department corridor, he would show me a Penguin book of Greek tragedies and smile proudly, 'See, my daughter has gifted me this book'. I had to pretend that it was the most beautiful Penguin book I had ever seen. If I met him in a New Market shop of sweets, he would beamingly inform me, 'Going to meet my daughter, you know'. I had to smilingly and most affectionately approve his great paternal love. I admired the loving father in the handsome, well-dressed professor. I often wondered: did his daughters know that they had the best father in the world?

The always happy, always active teacher taught us in the mid-seventies and the early eighties. We loved to listen to him, to be taught by him. I fondly remember his brilliant lectures on the Greek tragedies. I was in my Third Year Honours when I got him as my tutor. He was then the chairman of the department. We did our tutorial classes in his chairman's room. He could easily identify good students and, more importantly, clearly assess all the good traits of a meritorious student. We were so happy that we received the highest marks from our best teachers, Kabir Chowdhury and Serajul Islam Choudhury. The best teachers were not only the best judges but the most affectionate persons too. After a few tutorial classes with him, I was one day on the stairs of the porch when an affectionate hand touched my shoulder. I looked back to find a beaming Prof. Chowdhury. He didn't say a word but patted me on



my back several times. He then hurriedly uttered, 'How are you, Junaid? and left. I later tried to guess what he had wanted to say. 'I enjoy reading your tutorial essays' or was it 'Do you know that I like you a lot?' Thirty three years later I still feel his affectionate hand on my shoulder. The same man was so charming that he always touched me while talking to me.

In one of my stories the sad hero laments that other than the affection of elders, the love of children and women, he doesn't remember getting anything else from life. Who are these elders? Certainly men like Kabir Chowdhury and Serajul Islam Choudhury. I put them ahead of women. Women made you happy but wise elders gave you knowledge and peace of mind. They guided you so effortlessly and so beautifully through life's tortuous ways.

Recently I used to meet him in our annual departmental get-togethers. He always looked so smart and fit even in his eighties. Only a couple of years back I found him walking a little slowly. Alarm bells rang within me. Thank God he was not bed-ridden even for a single day. He could think clearly and write even on his last day.

How will the nation remember Prof. Kabir Chowdhury? As our courageous conscience, best teacher and guardian, and our wisest guide. Always happy, always active and always affectionate. Fatigue and laziness were words he detested. We never saw him getting angry or upset. He was the best student of the department of English after the legendary Buddhadev Bose. He was such a successful teacher! Authored more than two hundred books of essays, translations and diaries. He gladly translated the poems of his favourite Shamsur Rahman as well as the youngest poet. He translated the classics of world literature for our readers and at the same time translated the gems of our literature into English. He was so liberal and so untiring in this job. He always fought war crimes, fundamentalism and communalism. He fought against all sorts of injustice like the wise Greek hero Ulysses. As a young man he played cricket. As a senior professor he helped the Cricket Control Board with his wisdom. He loved good food. The nation will never forget the elegant and brave fighter in him.

I have always loved worshipping my heroes. They paid me back sometimes with affection. Kabir Chowdhury was the senior-most among my heroes. He was also the handsomest and the most liberal of my heroes. How can I forget him? How can I not carry the sweet burden of my debt to him, my great teacher, all my life? And most happily, with great satisfaction?

JUNAIDUL HAQUE WRITES FICTION. HE IS ALSO AN ESSAYIST.

FICTION

The crater

SUNANDA KABIR

After hearing the words I do not know how long I sat still. Suddenly a bitter taste rose up in my throat. I rushed to the washroom. I washed my hands and face and feeling a little better I came back to the room somewhat later. I could not see the traces of anyone in the living room. Did the gentleman go to the washroom? No, that was not so. I came out of the room and went towards the main door and saw that the hat was not on the hat-rack and the overcoat was missing. He was surely gone. I saw that the time was a quarter to one at night. The snow was still drifting down outside.

I made a mug of coffee and mixed some brandy. I took up the mug and stood near the window, sweeping the curtain aside. It was not snowing now. But the wind was blowing. The landscape was white all around; just to the right of my gate the carrot teeth of the snowman made by the children were hanging out. It seemed I was a resident of some other planet.

My thoughts went back to some time in mid-February, about eight or nine years ago. I was staying in London's Ilford. My husband Shahryar Choudhury was at Moorfields. He was an ophthalmic surgeon. In this small family of mine busy times and rest periods had never been in conflict, and so the feather of each day dropped off in a carefree manner. The lifestyle was that of a middle-class family, neither exceptional, nor of a different state of mind.

My introduction to the gentleman was quite sudden. I came to know him at a party at Siddiqur Rahman's. He came and stood before me with a glass of gin and lime where I was pinging away on the piano keys, possibly a music piece by Stravinsky. He looked at me with his deep, dark eyes, and said, "Still believing in classical?"

While playing on the piano I said, "My belief is in any immortal thing."

He was still staring, measuring me up with his eyes. "From Bangladesh?"

"How could you guess?"

"By observing"

"By observing what?"

"Your eyes!"

Then in a solemn deep voice he recited:

"Jine na denga aankh tere

dilruba mujhe

In khirkhose jhank rahi

kaza mujhe!"

And then he laughed and laughed, whole-heartedly, amazing everybody.

I smilingly nodded to indicate that his guess was correct.

The familiarity and friendship started thus. Many days have passed. I have met him many a time. For a variety of reasons, at informal and national functions of India and Bangladesh, Shahabuddin was a personality much in demand. And he was a lively personality, to be remembered. He was six-foot tall, and his whole visage had the smooth firmness of rocks. Just seeing him made one feel that the source of his physical strength emanated from his mind. He was learned and also an attractive conversationalist. With his closest friends sometimes he was very loquacious. He was equally enthusiastic about eating and inviting others and had countless international recipes at his fingertips. As such it was quite understandable that women would be both

eagerly welcoming and also tense about such a type of gentleman! And it was so. Besides, the gentleman was a bachelor, and it was quite a plus point.

Our friendship became closer and closer more swiftly than the length of time we knew each other. Besides, both of us had some common favourite topics. As such whenever we met there was no delay in striking up intimate conversations. And there were some favourite matters of discussion between us, beyond those also some trivial stuff that deepened our intimacy, drew us closer. Even then it seemed to me that there was one facet of the gentleman's personality that was still unknown, probably his own place of refuge, where nobody had been allowed in.

One day, after returning from the hospital, Choudhury said, "I met Shahabuddin today at Leicester Square. His mother died a few days ago. He is very upset. So I asked him to come over this weekend, exclusively. He will stay here overnight. And because it was Shahabuddin I did not wait for your consent!". He smiled mischievously at me. Shahabuddin came on Saturday evening. He kept the dinner table enchanted with his stories and his laughter. He made a funny remark about my lousy cooking, but after dinner he said: "After many days I have got the taste of my mother's cooking!"

This was praise that touched my heart. I felt so happy. After dinner the gossiping became even more intimate. When asked about drinks, he was silent for a while and then said, "I am now trying to be off drinks for a few days." And some time later, almost to himself he said, "My mother did not like me drinking alcohol."

Matters about the mother were kept away, wished to be kept away, but came back time and again. On that night at the intimate homely sitting many subjects and topics were discussed, beginning with sex, violence, social colonialism and ending with the instability of Bangladesh politics. Comments were made and heard.

At times some personal incidents took us far away in our mind's realm for a while and the three of us returned to that era of our lives, memories of which were ambrosia: a 'taste of honey'. Time changes, society changes with time, and that is why we are so nostalgic. Staying amidst such splendour and riches, we are still anxious about one of the poorest and denuded countries, and its 'kalboishakhi', the 'rajanignadha' of the monsoons still intimately set our feelings vibrating! At close to midnight, my husband got up. He is very punctual and a time-conforming gentleman, and does not break the routine except in emergencies. While leaving he said, "You carry on."

This midnight, seated before Shahabuddin, I somehow felt that the friend that could connect up with his own private world was possibly me and me alone! I proceeded with that confidence. "Won't you go home at this time?" I asked.

He replied "What's the use?"

"You will meet friends and relatives. You will feel good."

"But the person who I would have been the happiest to meet is no more. Not only for my happiness, there was further need for me to meet her." After a pause, again he said, "She died with an unrelieved and unfathomable grief!"

"What was that?"

"Leaving the country, not getting married to the

woman of her choice", saying which Shahabuddin smiled.

"Was it an unreasonable grief?"

"The marriage was not unreasonable if it was for social and family needs, but if this was for my personal desires and comfort, it was absolutely unnecessary!"

"But tell me why. You are not allergic to women. Not only that, I have seen you get close to some women. You had gone steady with Sudesna for quite sometime. Did you not feel that one of them was indispensable to you in your life?"

He brought shifted his legs from near the fireplace, stretched himself and, leaning forward, said in a rough, hissing voice: "How well do you know me? How well do you know about me?" Saying which he stood up like a confused person. He quickly stepped into the cellar, opened the door and shut it almost immediately. He returned to his seat. In a tired and lazy manner, leaning against the sofa, he said: "Can't you be an exception? Can you not forget that you are just one among the many females?" I looked at him his eyes were closed, his face unusually red, drops of sweat on his forehead even in this cold weather. I stared at him without speaking. I knew this much that just now was that mythical moment, when Shahabuddin would become voluble, pick up pearls from the depth of his mind like a diver. And I waited At last the ice broke, broke up in pieces, melted in the heat of emotion.

"All of my conversation is not for listening, not for uttering. But even then I am saying, but they are cruel tears and really they are!"

"In each person's life there is a part" the gentleman started, eyes still closed "which is to him like a rare dream, much wished for, and much needed, if possible to get it back, but at the same time it is a great feeling of pain. My young days were such a wonderful time. I grew up amidst plenty, but riches did not spoil me. My parents kept me under control. They did not take away my freedom though.

I started playing football from my very young days. At first I was encouraged by my father, and then carried on with my own enthusiasm. While playing I found that many people were praising me as a redoubtable player of soccer at the back field. My defence tactics and heading were supposed to be incomparable. By that time I had joined the best team in Bangladesh, and my university days were over.

A combination of so many virtues is very rarely seen, and as such what was inevitable, occurred. At this time some bad habits came by as my life's companions and, in those days of irrepressible youth, women crowded around me. I would have liked this, but I did not, even after trying. I have seen beauty, brains and wealth from up close, and so these did not tempt me at all!"

He stopped speaking for some time. He took up the lighter from the side table but did not reach for the cigarettes. Sitting upright he stared at the lighter for some moments. I gave him time to make himself ready. After the silence he clutched the cushion behind him and pressed it against his chest in a somewhat helpless, impatient manner and I was staring at him.

"And just then it happened. The game with the Thailand team was going on and we were sure to lose. But Bangladesh won by one goal and the credit was mine.

But in the last few minutes my knee was injured and I

had to watch the match from the sidelines. And then I passed a few days as the prey of the doctor's cruelties at the hospital, On such a day the girl came along, when it was blazingly sunny outside, and there was no one else in my cabin. I was dropping off to sleep, there was a light sound and I woke up to see a bunch of white roses in my vase. And behind it stood a girl a sari of turquoise blue worn sloppily, and a long lock of hair lying on her bosom.

On seeing me awake, she asked: 'Will the leg have to be amputated from the knee, or is there a possibility of healing?'

She came forward when she saw me giving her a surprised look.

'I have come as a proxy for Kaiser, I am his sister Mahua.'

I was still looking at her amazed there were no eye shades, no additional redness on the face unkempt but a lively beauty. It does not dazzle, but attracts you by the features. I asked her: "Then you have come to see the miserable situation I am in?"

I wanted to, but you have really disappointed me!"

We were introduced thus. After that we have met quite often, spoken needfully and needlessly. She was a surprisingly innocent girl, without unnecessary shyness, like a dazzling sword. There was no way one could not avoid liking this free yet decent nature. But not that I became acquainted with that much of liking which makes a man forget his own existence, or the honeyed aches which relieve all failures, that remained unknown to me. I was losing myself into another crude desire! The requests and entreaties of my mother, sister-in-law, above all for the sake of my own sanity I wanted to return, tried to sink myself in the inebriety of 'Mahua'. But whenever I tried to deceive myself I was prevailed by excess of emotions.

So my excesses and immoderations were observed by many, and they assumed that in Shahabuddin's life has come that remarkable delusion, which in your dictionary is termed 'love'.

Probably this would have gone along like this, and I would have gone on. But one day my mother faced up to me. And then a colossal tremor shook me up and I felt that I was standing beside an infinite depth an unbearable longing and mental conflict wounded me it seemed that there was no solution, except to flee. I fled to this place. But before I left I could not tell Mahua anything, I could not explain why I had fled like a coward

But, believe me Diti, love still makes me restless, and I want to quench my thirst with both hands. I long for a healthy, beautiful life! But I can't, I just cannot."

A surprisingly tired voice, as if a breast full of grief was being suppressed!

I did not make any queries till then. It was not necessary. But I wanted to know what the source of his pain was, and to know why this man was so lonely.

He was silent for a while on hearing my query. Then he gathered strength, and in a damp but unwavering voice said

"You know, chick, I'm gay, I'm homosexual!"

SUNANDA KABIR WRITES FICTION AND IS A POET.