

ESSAY

FICTION

Jaladas and images of life

SUBRATA KUMAR DAS

At the last Ekushey book fair, Harishankar Jaladas's (b.1955) *Ramgolam* brought him much fame as the writer of the 'best book'. Before that, he won the Prothom-alo best book award for his *Dahankaal* (2010) and came to the limelight as a successful fiction writer. We can recall that he debuted with *Jalaputro* only in 2008 and in 2011 came another novel, *Kosbi*. The most significant point to notice is that all the four novels produced from Harishankar's pen sketch the life of the downtrodden, some of whom are from among fisherfolks, some from among prostitutes and some others are the 'hajibans' or 'methors'.

A well-known fact about Harishankar is his getting a doctorate degree on the theme of 'Bangla Novels based on Riverine Life and Fishing Folks'. Along with that he has written some more research books on the life of the fishing community and the place of the community in the various genres of our literature. In 2008 his debut novel came out and we discovered the appearance of a mighty subaltern in the novel world of Bangladesh.

Jalaputro (Sons of Water) opens with Bhubaneshwari waiting for her husband, who went on fishing the previous night but did not return. This waiting of Bhubaneshwari, a woman of only nineteen and the mother of a child named Gangapada, never ends. When the novel ends, we find her waiting for the oncoming baby of Gangapada in the womb of Sumitra. Since his boyhood, Gangapada has experienced the severity of the fishing folks in the matter of access to education. Bhubaneshwari has always cherished a desire to make education accessible to her son Gangapada just as her son equally cherished a desire to educate his oncoming babe. With the light of a little education, Gangapada tries to unite the people of his community against the conspiracies of people of the well-off community. Seeing his efforts, his mother fears for him. Gangapada only tells her, 'Mother, please don't be afraid. The fishermen are very helpless. No one is there to show them the right way. As they love me, I have to do something for them in return'. They live in an area alienated from gentlemen's society, in the north Patenga. They have no access to education, but have access to all the evil elements of life. Out of the ignoble life they live comes a rebellious son named Gangapada, who realises only too well that only education and unity can only bring about a change in their accursed life. And consequently, Gangapada makes his people aware of the tricks made by Shashibhushon and Sukkur. In the face of all enmity even from people of his own profession, Gangapada tries to fight and at last is killed.

Gangapada can be seen in juxtaposition to the protagonist Haripada of *Dahankaal*. Ganga meets death but Haripada endures. Both of them rise from the same societal conditions, and as a result the first and larger part of *Dahankaal* seems to be an improved edition of *Jalaputro* itself. The differences

that are prominent between these two novels lie in the last part of the second novel where we find the story of *Dahankaal* delving into the time of the Liberation War.

Haridas, the eldest son of Radhanath and Boshumoti, will be an educated man when he grows to adulthood. That is the dream of his parents. The dream arises from the incident of Radhanath's father's death at sea, a happening which makes him determined to educate his own son. With a plot similar to



Harishankar Jaladas

that of *Jalaputro*, *Dahankaal* proceeds and with the passage of time it takes on a different story to express life and society and the struggle of people who survive on fishing. But the second novel takes in many more facets and thus becomes a better literary endeavour.

Haridas of *Dahankaal* also leads his people against the military occupation forces and that event has added an additional value to the novel, though the sub-plot has not been delineated that successfully in the book. Every reader must admit that *Dahankaal* has many excellent characters to remember. The most noticeable one is Adabsir alias Chittaranjan Dey, who sparked Radhanath's desire in the matter of educating his son Haridas. There have been many hurdles on his way, but Haripada does not retreat and at last we find him crossing the door of secondary school, which is somewhat inconceivable to the outcastes of his society. Other characters, such as Harabanshi or Khu-u Buijja, are also worth mentioning.

In the delineation of a fisherman's life, Harishankar Jaladas is compared with the noted novelist Adwaita Mallabarmar (1914-51), author of *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* (A River Called Titash, 1956). But even after all these, the novels *Jalaputro* and *Dahankaal* fail to reach the zenith that was the expectation from a meritorious novelist like Harishankar Jaladas. Along with that we must admit that in respect of successful plot and rendering of a story, *Kosbi* is an excellent outburst. The rebellious attitude of the protagonist for betterment has been very extraordinarily delineated in *Kosbi* followed by *Ramgolam*.

The story of *Kosbi* evolves out of the life of prostitution, ranging from individual to general points of view. It centres on a woman named Devjani, before whom Padmabati was

the most celebrated whore in the Patenga Sahebpani. It could be noted that small touches of historical tints have added novelty to the sorrowful story that tells of the emergence of a 'jelepalli' (a village inhabited by fishing folks) and its decline into harlotry. But the greatest success of the novel is in the significant use of all sub-plots to contribute to the main plot of the story.

Kosbi sketches the daily life of the streetwalkers as well. It delves into the bygone story of Devjani too... the tearful story of how this much-loved and cared for daughter in ordinary Bengali life village turns into a bawd. But she does not retreat. Rather she takes revenge.

How elevating it is to read that Koilash, an SSC-passed son of Mohini, has come forth to educate the children of the prostitutes. Mohini, also a leading figure in the prostitution area, educates her son at a Christian school and thus her son emerges as a saviour for the children of the red light area. He cannot survive because of Kalu, but he shows a sort of way to the women of the locality. They demand their rights. They revolt.

It is true that the savour of *Kosbi* dies, but the savour of *Ramgolam* does not die. Ram survives even after staying for fourteen years behind bars.

When we read of subaltern life in Bangla literature, the names of writers that come forth include those of Satyen Sen (1907-1981), Gunamaya Manna (1925-2010), Mahashweta Devi (b. 1926) and Avijit Sen (b. 1945). Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and Saratchandra Chatterji (1876-1938) wrote about them. Jagadish Gupta (1886-1957), Tarashankar Bandopadhyay (1898-1971), Manik Bandopadhyaya (1908-1956) are the other stalwarts of Bangla literature who sketched the life of outcastes with necessary sincerity. *Bidrohi Koiborto* (1969), *Chotti Munda O Tar Teer* (1980), *Rohu Chandaler Haar* (1985), *Mute* (1992) are the very few instances that have enriched the genre with rich creations.

We know the Ulgulan was the indomitable spirit of the Santal people, as is *Ramgolam*, or Koilas or Haridas or Gangapada of Harishankar are spirited. Among them Gangapada and Koilas have been killed but Haridas and *Ramgolam* are alive even after much hardship. And thus the spokesperson of the downtrodden community Harishankar kindles the optimism that shines in his protagonists and that has his readers shine as well.

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Erratum:
In the article, 'The genius of Abu Mohamed Habibullah', published last Saturday, the academic's year of death was printed as 1484. It should have been 1984.
We are sorry.
-Literary Editor

Tomorrow's journal

HASAN AMEEN SALAHUDDIN

13TH DEC'78

... it will be night once more, and there will either be that 'click' or that 'bang'. Well... the outcome of tomorrow's events will bear different meanings altogether, depending on what comes tonight.

One thing remains certain though: she will be here with me tonight, as every other night. Just the question remains: whether or not she is with me physically or spiritually. Well... let's not fret about it; I am happy either way.

But still so as only to torture myself I will remind myself in writing what the outcome of this night has to offer me if the revolver does go 'click'. I will lay down the weapon and I will close this diary, and I will replace the pen in its spine. I will then lie down in bed, pull the sheets up to my chin, and close my tired eyes after the candle extinguishes itself on my desk. During this time I will have not a single thought on my mind. But as soon as darkness engulfs my sight, I will start dreaming of her. I will dream of what would happen if the gun went 'bang'. I would dream exactly how I would have spent the night with the woman I speak of. I would dream of how I held her the last night of our life together.

We lay naked in our bed that night. But neither had any physical urges towards the other. It was a night to while away with talk. It was a night for the souls to mate, without any desire for the flesh. The warmth from within each was enough to beat the cold trying to sear through the other. Her being there was all I could have asked for.

We went to sleep. She rested her head on my right arm, and I breathed life through her hair all night long. I had my left hand crossing over from her left hip, through her bosom, clutching her right shoulder, in fear that she would slip away from me. I let go of her in the morning, only because I held her in my sight then. I had no fear of losing her, as she was there. But, something horrible had happened. I woke up that morning. She never did.

I buried her that day with all my dreams, save one. The one of never letting her go. The one portraying our last night together.

After burying the woman my life I went and bought this diary, and this pen. On returning home, I went straight to the basement. This room, actually my den, is devoid of any light, and any opening except for the door used for entering it. It has a wooden floor with a small trapdoor, big enough to accommodate a cube of ten inch in dimension. The bed, hiding this compartment, is situated halfway from either of the east or west walls. The desk is in the north-west

corner, and the walls are all stacked with books in shelves. The only way a living being can find its way around in here would be if: that being has the senses of a bat, or only if that being lights up a candle.

It's strange how people react in different ways when they lose someone so close to the heart. Basically all break down. Some keep their dignity they refuse to cry. Others go into depression. It really depends on how the person perceives death. I guess I am not much different from the average person, except the fact that I have shown no emotion regarding my loss even though I have lost all urges to live.

Coming back, I have always been carefree towards everything that has happened to me, but I just couldn't bear the loss. Just so that I don't feel hypocritical, even though I am a hypocrite now, I devised a game to play with myself.

I was twenty, and there was a new trend in fashion. Everyone carried a weapon with him in those days. It wasn't long before my friends had to give theirs up to the law. After all, all of them were unlicensed. Somehow I got to keep mine hidden. And nearly three decades later, on that fateful night, I took it out of hiding. The box in the compartment under the bed in my den served as a fine resting place for the Colt. It's an antique, but in working condition.

The game is simple. Every night I finish my entry in this diary, I take a bullet; after loading it in one of the six chambers of the revolver I spin it. While the chamber is still in motion, I cock the safety to off, and I point the nozzle to my right temple; I pull the trigger. Next, I am either punished with a 'click', or rewarded with a 'bang'.

The 'click': I close this diary, replace the pen into its spine and put the revolver on top of the table on the right side of my daily journal. I go to bed, pull the sheets up to my chin, and close my tired eyes when the candle on my desk extinguishes itself. I fall into slumber, dreaming the same array of events that took place on the night of 12th Dec'78. I will wake up on the 13th the next morning, and she will not be there. I will bury her my life once again. I will buy this diary and pen once again. I will write this whole account once again, and repeat the whole process.

The 'bang': this page and the next will be splattered with my blood and brains. I will be reunited with my love. I will not need to bury her ever again.

Strange... the candle has almost extinguished itself now, just like the first night. Guess it's time now to take the revolver in my hands.

HASAN AMEEN SALAHUDDIN WRITES FICTION AND POETRY.

MOVIE REVIEW

A fable with a twist

AFSANA TAZREEN

Everyone I know has a special relationship with fairy tales. Those were the first stories we heard and the first books we read. Our childhood days were spent flipping through the pages of those classic tales by Brothers Grimm and gazing dreamily at the vivid illustrations till we knew the characters by heart.

Each story was different but similar in a way. There was always a "happily ever after" ending where the evil was defeated and the virtuous prevailed. The prince always came to the rescue of the hapless princess, bestowed with all the beauty and virtue under the sun. By now you can tell how much I loved those fables.

If you happen to be like me you should think twice before heading off to a cinema to watch "Mirror Mirror", which is supposed to be a light-hearted entertaining version of Grimm's "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs".

I cannot figure out why the movie marketers claimed that "The Snow White legend comes Alive", in its latest adaptation. If anything, it is a sure attempt to strangle the legend to death.

There are no glass coffins and the poisoned apple does not make an appearance until the end of the movie.

The dwarfs do not dig for gold either

but are bandits (with compressible stilts on their feet) who rob the rich. Their names have also been changed to Napoleon, Half Pint, Grub, Grimm, Wolf, Butcher and Chuckles, which might make you Grumpy.

The lovely Snow White (Lily Collins) with her snow-white skin, blood-red lips and ebony-black hair has also lost her



naïveté. Not only does she cook and clean but this new sword-wielding princess also punches her Prince (Armie Hammer) in the face and breaks his nose!

Mirror Mirror ends up being a mixed bag. The screenplay by Marc Klein and Jason Keller rewrites the fairy tale convention that finds every damsel helplessly imperiled until a prince rescues her from danger. The Prince himself gets saved by a kiss from the princess, who is far from defenceless.

Like Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland*, Mirror Mirror tampers with the original which could be detrimental as the narrative fails to enchant with its political correctness.

A few scenes like the one in which the Prince turns into a whimpering puppy after ingesting "Puppy Love Potion" or the one in which the Queen's manservant and official bootlicker, Brighton (Nathan Lane) turns into a "Cockroach" were included purely for ridiculous comic relief. However, such scenes tend to lower the quality of the film.

The script writers also went over the top in their effort to sound funny, resulting in some excruciatingly unfunny lines that made it very hard to sit till the end of the movie.

However, the archetypal power of the stepmother-daughter, age-beauty conflict



is present throughout the movie. Julia Roberts outshines everyone as the jealous queen while the newcomer Lily Collins, daughter of the singer Phil Collins, is a convincing foil for the jealous Queen, personifying intelligence, innate goodness and beauty.

Director Tarsem Singh does not disappoint visually. One scene after another is a sensation of colour and costumes. However, Singh's singular knack of impressing the audience with a grand spectacle sometimes overwhelms the

characters and stops the story cold. I am referring to the scene where he indulges in the puppets sequence which seemed absolutely unnecessary.

Nevertheless, if vivid production design and some laughs are what you desire you will not be disappointed. The script still has heart and means to entertain children with its creativity. Amidst the twists in the tale remains the earnest tale of a girl who falls in love with her prince.

AFSANA TAZREEN IS WITH THE DAILY STAR