

FICTION

Mr. Jalil's Petition

HUMAYUN AHMED

(TRANSLATED FROM THE BENGALI ORIGINAL, JALIL SHAHEB-ER PETITION, BY HASAN FERDOUS)

With a smile, he said, "I am a father of two martyred freedom fighters. Two of my sons died in 1971." I looked up at him with surprise. There was nothing out of the ordinary in the gentleman's face or demeanor. He was around sixty years of age, though he looked rather fit for his age. He sat with his back held erect, wore no eye glasses and seemed to have very clear vision. I asked him, "But what brings you here?"

The gentleman remained seated, unmoved. Displaying no apparent emotion, he said, "We found the body of one of the boys. We buried him in Malibag. You see, my youngest daughter lives there."

"I see."
"Yes, near Chowdhuripara in Malibag."
"But what brings you to me?"
"Just for some chit chat. After all, you are new in this neighborhood; we should help you settle down."

Still smiling, the gentleman quietly sat there. I felt he was not really smiling; he simply had a smiley face. In a quiet voice he said, "I live in the alley next to your house."

"I see."
"Yes, at 13/2, there is a coconut tree right in front of the house. I hope you have noticed that."

I had not noticed it. Yet I nodded, suggesting that I had. I was beginning to recognize the kind of person he was. He must be a retired man, with not much for him to do these days. On a holiday like this, he was out here looking for some neighbor to idle away his time.

"My name is Abdul Jalil."
I was about to say my name, but held off at the last moment. The gentleman, in a raised voice, said, "I know, I know."

"How about tea? Would you like some tea?"
"No, thanks. I don't drink tea. In fact, I am into neither tea nor cigarettes. The only vice that I have is chewing *paan* leaf."

"Sorry, no one uses *paan* here."
"Don't worry, I always carry my own *paan*." He stretched his hand inside a carry bag and brought out a small *paan* container. It was quite colorful. Like a food container, it included two or three compartments. I managed not to exhale a deep sigh of frustration. Clearly, the gentleman had come with a plan for staying long. He would probably spend the rest of the morning here, narrating the story of his two sons. There are many who enjoy recounting their life stories to others in great detail. The gentleman, leaning forward, said, "My dear Professor, would you like to try a *paan*?"

"Thanks, no."
"But *paan* is good for your health. It keeps your gall bladder cool. Those who take *paan* regularly suffer no trouble with their gall bladder."

"Is that so?"
"Yes, sir! Juices from *paan* and honey, these two are the best medication for gall bladder."

I glanced at my wrist watch. It was half past ten. I had no classes today at the university, though it would have been better if I had some. Then I could have said, "Look, I am sorry, I have a class at 11:00. Maybe you would like to visit me some other time, when you and I could have more time to spend."

But on a holiday, this could not be told. The gentleman brought out various condiments from his container. He sniffed each condiment. Then, with great care, wrapped his *paan*. It was clear to me that someone who spent so much time in preparing a *paan* would find no reason to leave my place before noon.

Yet strangely enough, he stood up as soon as he slipped a *paan* into his mouth. Smiling, he said, "Sorry, got to go. I wasted so much of your time."

Overcoming my surprise, I said earnestly, "Please, stay a little longer. Are you in a hurry?" He declined to stay. I walked him up to the staircase. On my way back, I found my landlord waiting at the porch, his eyebrows crinkled. With obvious seriousness, he asked, "So, he was after you too, Professor. What, did you put your signature down?"

"What signature?"
"Why, didn't you sign Mr. Jalil's petition?"
"What kind of petition?"
"Oh, I don't have to explain all that to you. Soon you will know it all by yourself. He will bore you to death. My advice to you, don't encourage him."

Feeling rather prickly, I returned home. Moving to a new neighborhood can be quite hazardous. You have to introduce yourself to complete strangers, something not always a pleasant experience. However, with regard to Mr. Jalil, such a fear was rather unfounded. Since our first meeting, I saw him only twice. He turned out to be quite a nice gentleman. Once I met him in front of Green Pharmacy. Seeing me, he came forward with a broad smile, "Ah, Professor, how are you?"

"Fine, thanks. How about you? How come you never visited me again?"
"I am hard pressed for time. Very busy with the petition."

I chose not to continue the conversation. Saying I had to attend a lecture, I hopped onto a rickshaw. The second time I saw him was at a news stand at New Market. Sitting on his heels, he was busy scanning newspapers. The newspaper boy kept staring at him coldly.

"What are you reading so attentively?"
Mr. Jalil looked up at me; it seemed he did not recognize me instantly. He had his glasses on. "I see you are wearing glasses?"
"Oh, yes. I get headaches in the evening. These are reading glasses anyway. But, how are you, Professor?"

"Thanks, fine."
"Will visit you soon, I would like you to see my petition. I already have some 14,300 signatures."
"What sort of petition?"

"You will know once you read it. You are a learned man. You should have no trouble finding it out."

I thought it must be a petition to the government, appealing for money, though I was not sure about the 14,000 signatures he mentioned. I showed no particular interest in finding out. After all, there is no dearth of crazy people in the world. If collecting signatures gave him some kicks, I saw no reason to be concerned about it.

However, the matter did not end at that. One evening Mr. Jalil arrived at my place with the files containing all the 14,300 signatures. With a smile pasted all over his face, he said, "Please read it carefully, Professor."

I began reading. It said, about a million Jews were killed during the Second World War. Everyone found guilty of this heinous crime was prosecuted and continues to be prosecuted. Why did the criminals responsible for killing over three million people in this country go off scotfree? How is it possible that no one thinks it necessary to raise their voice against it? In his rather lengthy petition, Mr. Jalil asked the government to take action.

I looked squarely at Mr. Jalil. He spoke quietly, "I am not doing this because I lost two sons. My boys were killed in the war. I seek no retribution for their death. I demand justice for those who were dragged out of their homes and killed. I hope you understand what I want."

"Yes, I do."
"I knew you would. You are a learned man. But there are others who fail to understand. There are some who seek forgiveness in the name of humanity. They say, forget it, forgive them. Why, is forgiveness so plain, so cheap?"

I remained silent. Mr. Jalil took out his *paan* container and started wrapping a *paan*. In a quiet voice, he said, "Do you think I will give up? Never. Two of my sons went down fighting. I will fight, too, until I die. If necessary, I will collect the signatures of each and every one in Bangladesh. Three million people lost their lives. How is it possible to remain silent? Are we human beings, or what?"

I examined his signature file. It was very well arranged, with present and permanent addresses neatly written next to each signature. It also included the names and addresses of relatives of those killed in the liberation war.

"Some say I have gone crazy. The other day I went to a newspaper office. The editor refused to see me. A lad there told me, 'Why bother about bygone? Better forget them, brother.' I must be as old as his father. Imagine, he called me 'brother!'"

"And what did you say?"
"Don't you want these people to be put on trial?" I asked. He said nothing. As a matter of fact, he did not dare to say 'no'. Just imagine, kids of his age had gone to war and fought so bravely, haven't they?"

"Yes, you're right."
"Take your landlord, for instance. One of his brothers-in-law was snatched out of his home and butchered. Can you believe that this man refused to sign my petition! Such people don't even want to know what exactly I am asking for. One of them said, 'You better apply for an abandoned property. You have lost two sons in the war, you have every right to get a house.'"

"What did you say?"
"What is there to say? Am I petitioning for property? Why do I need a house? The lives of my sons are so cheap that they want to pay me off with a house? How dare they? All I want is a trial. A fair trial, that's all. It should be held as per rules of civilized societies. Got it?"

"Yes, I do."
"I know you are a learned person. It is easy to convince someone like you. Unfortunately, most are unwilling to understand. Sometimes I have to visit three times for a signature. Well, that's no big deal. I am not going to give up, no matter what, you bet."

He left after collecting my signature. Several days passed before I saw him again. I was very curious about his campaign. Each time I saw him on the street, I inquired, "So, how far have you gone?"

"I am still continuing, Professor. Please pray for me."
"Are people putting down their signatures on your petition?"
"Not everyone. Many are scared."
"Why, scared about what?"
"One really can't tell. For some, fear is in their blood, it is in their nature. However, I am not the one to give up. I am determined to force them to a trial. What do you say? Isn't it the right thing to do?"

"Yes, yes."
"I have now divided people by districts. I plan to visit each and every district. It's not easy, but what to do! What do you say?"
"Yes, that's right."
"Besides, collecting signatures alone won't be enough. You need evidence to pursue a case. You have to prove that those who were killed were innocent. I know they will hire tough and seasoned lawyers. Right?"
"Quite likely."
"Do you know some good lawyers?"
"Not sure, let me find out."
"Of course you will. After all, you are not blind. You know what grave injustices were done. But most people don't. It's a country full of ignorant fools."

Since that meeting, I lost track of Mr. Jalil. I thought, with the fat file under his arm, he must still be canvassing for signatures in districts around the country. Signatures must be piling up, leaping from 12 to 15 thousand, then to 20 thousand. Who knows, maybe he has already reached half a million signatures. If he is able to do so, that would carry a lot of weight.

At the beginning of the monsoon, I learned Mr.

Jalil was suffering from asthma and rheumatic fever. My landlord commented, "Oh, he is nuts. He has never taken care of himself. He is unlikely to survive this time."

"What, are you sure?"
"Ya, the doctor at Green Pharmacy told me so. I also visited him the other day."
"Is his condition really that serious?"
"He won't survive the rains, I think."
"Oh, no!"
"It's really very serious."

However, Mr. Jalil survived the monsoon. Soon he was out on the street, his file under his arm, seeking more signatures. I met him one day in the afternoon. I could hardly recognize him. He came forward to greet me, "Why, isn't it the professor?"

"My, my, you look terrible."
"Looks like I won't survive much longer."
"What do you mean? What about your project? This is a heavy responsibility."
"That's the only reason I am still alive."
"How far are you with collecting signatures?"
"Some 15,000. Can't collect more than three or four hundred per month. Getting old. But remember, I am not ready to give up."

"Please don't."
"I will put each and every swine on the dock. The Jews have done it, why can't we do the same? Right?"
"Yes, absolutely."
"They killed three million people, not just a few. Bangladeshis are not cheap. They have to pay a price for this."

I lived in that neighborhood in Azimpur for about two years. During that period, I got to know Mr. Jalil rather intimately. I visited him several times. A widower, he lived off the income from the rent of part of the two-storied house that he owned. His eldest son's wife with her two little daughters stayed with him in the same house. Probably the girls were twins. They were very jovial. I really loved visiting them. Mr. Jalil's daughter-in-law was always very caring.

It seemed the two kids knew everything about the petition. With utmost seriousness, one of them once told me, "After grandpa finishes writing his notebook, the people who killed my father will be put on trial."

Little girls like her aren't supposed to understand such a grave matter. I thought Mr. Jalil must have spent time explaining everything to them.

I often visited them even after I moved to another neighborhood. As time progressed, these visits became few and far between. Soon I left for a long trip abroad. Before leaving the country, I went to see him. He was in Faridpur collecting signatures, I was told. No one knew when he would return.

When living abroad, one always feels a different kind of affection for home. That could be the reason why I often thought of Mr. Jalil. I found myself agreeing with him that it was not right that those responsible for killing three million people would remain untried. What Mr. Jalil was doing was the right thing to do. After all, we did not live in the Middle Ages, such crimes should not go unpunished now.

On the weekends, expatriate Bengalis would gather at my place, most of them undergraduate students. Among them was also a professor of Mathematics at Muirhead University, Mr. Afsaruddin. Everyone agreed to support Mr. Jalil's project. If necessary, on behalf of the people of Bangladesh, we would raise the matter at the International Court of Justice, and write articles in foreign newspapers to organize international public opinion, we resolved. We even formed "Abdul Jalil Action Committee" at Fargo, a city in North Dakota in the US, with me as its convener and Professor Afsaruddin as president. Expatriates always love thinking about the welfare of their motherland. There is always a desire to do something that would make a difference.

I returned home after six long years. In the years gone by, Dhaka changed significantly, but Mr. Jalil's house remained the same. It had the same pock-marked walls. The same coconut tree stood in front of the house. As I knocked on the door of his house one day, a pretty young girl, aged around 15, opened. She stared at me inquiringly.

"Are you Mr. Jalil's granddaughter?"
"Yes."
"Is he home?"
"But grandpa died two years ago."
"Oh, really! I am an old friend of your grandfather."

"Please come on in."
I spent sometime there. I was very keen to speak with her mother, but she was not at home. The young girl wasn't sure when her mother would return. Before departing, I asked, "What happened to the signatures your grandpa was collecting? Do you still have them?"

"Yes, we do, but why?"
"I think the work that your grandpa had started should be finished. Don't you think?"
The girl seemed rather surprised. "I will come again," I said, rising.

"Okay."
The girl walked me to the door. In a soft voice she said, "Grandpa often said, there will come a time when someone will ask for this file."
That was the last time I saw them.

My interest in the matter soon disappeared. There were other priorities to look after. In fact, there was an abandoned property in Mirpur, and I was busy negotiating to purchase it. I had no time to waste over Mr. Jalil's file and his signatures.

Mr. Jalil's granddaughter is perhaps still waiting for my return. Perhaps she dusts off regularly her grandpa's file. After all, most girls her age tend to believe in everything people say.

HASAN FERDOUS WRITES FICTION AND IS A COLUMNIST AND CRITIC.

TRIBUTE

Humayun Ahmed and his stories

TUSAR TALUKDER

It is much easier to give pain than to entertain. It was Humayun Ahmed who invariably regaled us with his innate power of storytelling. Some days ago I was thinking I would include an essay entitled '*Golpokothon Humayun Ahmed*' in my first book of selected essays. For this reason I desired to take an interview of Humayun Ahmed. Since I didn't have any contact with him, I planned to make it through one of my favourite storytellers, Syed Manzoorul Islam. However, when I heard the news that Humayun Ahmed had been affected by colon cancer, I abandoned the hope of interviewing him. But I didn't give up hope of penning an essay on his storytelling. Whenever I take interviews of different authors I question them about Humayun Ahmed.

I can recollect the day when, in an interview, Professor Fakrul Alam said he did not support those who made very plain and general comments regarding Humayun Ahmed, who had proved his abilities in a number of novels like *Jostnya Jononeer Golpo*, *Nondito Noroke* and so on.

Last year I was taking an interview of Syed Manzoorul Islam, an eminent litterateur and storyteller of Bangladesh. It was he who made me rethink Humayun Ahmed. Before this conversation I, like the average critic, was accustomed to believing that Humayun Ahmed wrote targeting a particular age group and that no work of Ahmed could scale literary heights. Syed Islam first told me that Humayun Ahmed was an author who followed our age-old tradition of story telling in lieu of story writing. Story writing is a form which has come to this region from the West. Humayun Ahmed discarded this borrowed form of story writing. He believed in the power of our culture, myths and tradition. He had a great passion for nature and his love of nature made him village centered. In many of his discourses he narrates the tales of rural people, avoiding the hustle and bustle of city life in search of integrity. He believed that the integrity which characterises village people is absent in urban people. The very design of *Nubash Polli* is remarkable proof of it.

Humayun Ahmed penned over two hundred books. Of course all of his novels or discourses will not achieve literary value because it is true that a writer cannot live in the hearts of his readers for all of his works but rather for a selected number of his noted works. Humayun Ahmed is noted for such creations as *Nondito Noroke*, *Jostnya Jononeer Golpo*, *Badshah Namdar*, *Deyal*, *Maddyanno*, *Himu* and *Misir Ali* sequel, et cetera. Syed Manzoorul Islam suggested that I read *Badshah Namdar*, a novel based on history. Humayun Ahmed has successfully proved that a novel can be written by taking history as the main ingredient. He distinguishes himself by a unique, simple literary diction that was quickly to become popular. His storylines often blend reality with supernatural episodes. This blend is in some ways similar to magic realism. He dealt with rural as well as urban life with equal intensity of observation.

Frankly speaking, in the early 1980s when readers almost left off reading Bangla novels, except the literary works of Tagore, Sharat Chandra, Manik Bandhopadhyay and their contemporary writers, it was Humayun Ahmed who caused a breakthrough in this system. Readers are compelled to read his tales due to his unique style of storytelling, which has a great resemblance to our oral tradition. And the way we speak has been portrayed in his novels or stories. Consequently, readers find their own life tales in those stories of Humayun Ahmed. The masses were directly involved in his discourses. Conversely, when people got bored watching the same kinds of stories in television dramas or serials, it was Humayun Ahmed who turned people from monotony by infusing wit or humour in his stories.

A few months earlier when Syed Manzoorul Islam wrote a review in *Prothom Alo* after reading the press copy of Humayun Ahmed's latest novel *Deyal*, some critics emerged to identify this novel as a narrative of dead history. Possibly they have skipped the story behind history or simply failed to understand the science of composing a historical novel. In addition to this, it is my request to them to go through the review of Syed Islam with much concentration in order to understand the strength of Humayun Ahmed as a creator of the historical novel. Readers may wonder about frequent references to Syed Manzoorul Islam in this write-up. The truth is I have learnt much about Humayun Ahmed's style of story telling from him. And I think Syed Manzoorul Islam has rightly evaluated him more than any other critic. Hence the repetition.

Needless to say, a writer of huge number of works may fluctuate in maintaining a standard. But at the same time there is no way to deny that some works of such writers generally have such qualities that touch literary heights. A writer has strengths as well as weaknesses and our Ahmed is no different from it. However he had those strengths which we find in few storytellers in Bangladesh. We all know that Humayun Ahmed was harshly criticized for many of his works in his lifetime. But in future will it be possible to write the history of Bangla literature by discarding Humayun Ahmed? Of course not. I salute this magician of tale.



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POETRY

Her Mystery

MAHIN SIDDIKI

Beneath her dwindling thatch of hallucinogenic heathers worn,
Mystery lies alonetrails of dewdrops upon her pale cheeks
The shimmer of her wet lashes be brighter than the shine of a crystalline
For herein, in the place where Mystery was born,
Pain has been roused within her heart and made brittle dolls of her bones
And sweet Mystery does lie still in her bed of nails;
Made up in honeyed hues of russet brown,
And her lips can't stop their dulcet melody of times lost and frozen minds
For she finally understands in agony's crippling throes,
That sometimes awaiting paradise does happen to be harder than it sounds.

Elation graces her heart when flies her feet through ashen grounds;
Wherein the hunchbacked trees let her ponder her life's whereabouts,
Within the recesses of their chain-like boughs without any a

frown,
Which they'd fling her way; her loving strangers, inside her cold house.
Lies have been roused within her heart and made a diary of her mind,
And therein Mystery hides all day and all night long;
While those around muse about her wayward ways hitherto.
And what does sweet Mystery do?
Mystery stays mute, for she did choose for herself the path everyone scorned
And these are the times, when awaiting paradise turns her lights into shadows.

Each new morn makes of her a young flightless bird born and lost
And at last Mystery curses her life and her broken soul.
For still-born dreams had once roused within her heart;
Dreams which made a mockery of her!
And what now shapes the paradise of sweet Mystery lost,
Neither they, nor does the Lost Mystery herself know.

MAHIN SIDDIKI IS A YOUNG POET.