

Swimming in the Clouds

FROM PAGE 3

A quick series of events followed thereafter. The man went tumbling into the ditch with a long scream. People began to gather quickly. A huge chaos ensued. Everyone seemed eager trying to locate the man, craning their necks as far as they could into the dark pit. All kinds of questions were being hurled: how did it happen, how could he fall, did anybody push him? Amid the growing chaos, he too attempted to locate the man in the darkness resting at the bottom.

As he moved to leave the place in a short while, he experienced a sudden shiver. He felt an absolute lightness: all seventy five kilograms spread out on his five feet and ten inches frame felt as light as a feather. And a cool breeze blew over his forehead where the pain had lodged.

Back home, he had a wonderful time that evening. He had called his daughters, all three of them to come and sit beside him. He wanted to call his wife too. But before he did, she had emerged with a cup of tea and a portion of toast. He felt an urge to apologize to Minu, his wife for not bringing anything for dinner. But sensing that his wife would be taken aback at such an extraordinary gesture, he told her he had forgotten to go to the market. To his surprise, his wife informed she had bought a hilsa cheaply from a fish vendor.

Taking the tea cup and toast from his wife he looked at his full family in a quick glance. He particularly noticed his eldest daughter whose face, he imagined, was beginning to look mysterious at the very mention of hilsa.

He had no memory of ever sitting with his family in this way. As he thought of it, he felt uneasy thinking what he could talk to them about! For once, he wanted to ask the two older daughters about how their studies were going. Moments later, he wished to pick the little one, four years old, and sit her on his lap. Finally, he chose to talk to his wife and said to her, 'Minu, why don't you give them something to eat?' But barely had he finished when he noticed his wife's face turn edgy. He then tore small pieces from the toast and despite some opposition from the daughters, gave a piece to each of them, holding those to their mouths one by one. Lastly, he poured some tea on to the saucer and held it out to his wife who, he was amazed to see, turned mysteriously bashful like the eldest daughter.

That was how strangely pleasant he felt in the company of his family soon after the incident. That was the very first time. And from then on, one incident followed the other. He soon began to realize that a complex, uncertain life had taken over him. He felt helpless because it was as if something from beyond was pushing him into a game but without allowing him any clue as to the rules of the game.

There was nothing unusual about him either in his office where he worked at the accounts department or in the family. He was rather too ordinary. He kept to a more or less similar daily routine, setting out in the morning with a plastic container stuffed with hand-made bread and vegetables, reaching his office right on time by a bus or a tempo, whichever was available.

In the office, he was at ease with his work and also managed time for some adda with the colleagues. His colleagues were the same bunch as in most other offices: some good at heart, some fucking crooks. He didn't mix freely with them, neither did he loathe anyone. During lunch-break, he would join them in the canteen where gossips of all hues ran wild, no different from those in other offices. The daily newspapers were the source of most of the lot. The newspapers apart, there were other subjects that would make their way in. Women, for example, were one such subject which everyone, aged whether twenty five or fifty seven, savoured delightfully. He himself was no exception. But at times he would find himself withdrawn, barely able to follow what others were talking about. It was not that he remained engrossed in some serious thinking. Sometimes he would feel a pinch somewhere in the chest, and would soon get weary and restless and gulp long glasses of water.

At home, he was a quiet soul. With his modest income, he tried to patch up his poverty up to the point he best could. There was a time when his wife appeared a little demanding and occasionally the daughters too. However, it didn't take them long to conclude that with his five feet and ten inches frame, he was but a dwarf who couldn't be expected to reach out to the moon.

As days passed and he moved from one incident to another, he came to realize that he was not like the rest: he was different. He didn't consciously try to recollect the incidents nor

did they stay on in his memory. But when one of those visited him unawares, he would feel totally lost wondering if it had ever happened! Sometimes he would ask himself: was it anger of a different variety altogether that crept into his brains, prowling around for the moment to rouse him, to make him act? Sometimes he would ask himself who it was that he was angry with and why? Was he angry with everything? Did everything, beautiful or ugly, cause him anger? And what kind of release was it that came upon him with a shiver and from where?

Once there was an electric short circuit at his office. In the beginning it was the smell of burnt rubber and a swirl of thin smoke accompanied by tiny sparks here and there. The incident occurred in the most secure place of the office, in a room which housed the computer servers. As the news spread out quickly, his colleagues rushed to the spot. The sparks that had erupted from one of the cable junctions didn't look very dangerous but threatened to turn into a flame. There was chaos and confusion, but someone with a presence of mind hurried to a metallic box fitted to the outer wall of the room and turned the switch off.

Standing huddled amongst others, he watched the proceedings. Looking at the sparks, disjointed and unable to come ablaze, he felt his heart choking. Soon the feeling became unbearable as the sparks started to die down. He stood still for a moment but then was drawn, as if by a frenzied charm, to the box on the

wall. Having made sure that no one noticed him, he let the switch on. The dying sparks got back to renewed life rocking the room with a mild explosion, and in no time all four walls of the room lit up with a bright red and yellow.

He had thought about the incident many a time. He was not angry with his office or was he? There were other incidents which in comparison were trivial at times.

Lately however, he has been observing that there was an interval, and a lingering one. He hadn't been called upon to act for sometime. He found this strange. When he pondered this, he felt very shrieved fearing an impending action he would be called upon to accomplish.

But as nothing actually was coming his way, he began to think whether the force inside him was gone. Abandoned him? He got confused, as there was something new happening to him too. Every once in a while he felt as if he was being chased by events that happened in the shadowy past. Memories of events that had nothing to do with his present state, events he had come across as a child.

Once it was an Eid day, he was moving about sad faced in and around the house. He hadn't been bought new clothes. His father noticed him, didn't like his depressed look and got angry and dealt him with all five fingers across his right cheek. There was a kind of numbness to his right cheek all his life. There was another, that too from his childhood. At the age of seven or maybe eight when one night his mother died, he woke up from his sleep and watching others cry he

too started crying still under the daze of a broken sleep. At that time a woman, a neighbour from next door, had tucked into his hand a custard apple whispering something into his ears. The soft ripening smell of the fruit in his hand made him absolutely amazed. The smell lives on his nose even to this day.

But what did all these mean for him? Why was his head heavy with such memories of a cracking slap on the cheek or a custard apple making him forget his mother's death? He began to feel increasingly tired day after day.

Then it happened. He woke up one night trembling. Slipping from the bed quietly, he came out of the room and in no time felt himself being carried away like a feather into the staircase, and up the stairs to the roof of the six-storey building. He couldn't tell how he reached there; all he felt was an unspeakable shiver that traveled from his head to his toe over and over again. Looking up, he saw a heap of white cloud. He was soon to discover it was but a gigantic elephant lumbering across the sky. An elephant it indeed looked like with a slightly hunched trunk, much longer than that of a zoo elephant. He soon noticed the trunk rushing down towards him.

Jumping in the air, he grabbed the dangling trunk at the very first attempt with both his hands. As he flew over the roof of the six-storey building securely grabbing the trunk, he snapped his fingers. Now, now ...

Wasi Ahmed, acclaimed short story writer and novelist, has published six collections of short stories and three novels in Bangla.

From Kalo Borof to Black Ice

FROM PAGE 7

Once I finished a draft of my novel, I decided to translate one of his books. I chose *Kalo Borof*. Mahmudul Haque wrote *Kalo Borof* in a ten-day burst in August 1977. The novel was soon published in an Eid Supplement, but it didn't come out as a book until 1992.

I chose this novel because it is about Partition. Lost in our other preoccupations, we often overlook 1947. But that event played a momentous role in shaping who we are. Born in its aftermath, I come from a family only tangentially affected by it. I was familiar with some Partition narratives from writers who migrated to West Bengal, but I could find few stories of those coming east. Kalo Borof was the first novel I read that showed the long reach of Partition into a person's adulthood in Bangladesh.

The book's construction also appealed to me. Tightly composed, it is written in two alternating voices. One voice is intimate, the first person memories of childhood in Barasat. The other voice is in third person, slightly distanced; this one depicts Abdul Khaleq's adult life, his growing alienation, and the stresses in his married life.

From Ahmad Mostofa Kamal's interview I also knew this was Mahmudul Haque's favourite novel.

Six months after I started to visit, Hosne Ara Mahmud passed away. Stricken with grief, he moved to Lalbagh.

The tragedy spurred me to get moving with my translation. While working on it, I put aside phrases that stumped me. Some involved dialect, others were more of a mystery. I intended to take these puzzles to the author when I had finished a full draft. Meanwhile during my visits I tried to get as strong a sense of the novel as I could.

In a few months, I was ready with my list. On July 21, 2008, taking a break from cooking lunch, I dialled his number to let him know I would be coming over. A different man's voice answered. He said that Mahmudul Haque had died during the night.

The news hit hard. He had often talked about dying, but I paid him little mind. Though I knew he was in poor health, he had looked fine when I visited. I never imagined that death would visit this couple so suddenly, one after the other.

I wrote a tribute to the author and man who befriended me. Then I set about solving the remaining puzzles from *Kalo Borof*.

For a translator, an author's assistance can be immensely helpful. With the author gone, I had to draw in new resources. I reached out everywhere. Help with Oriya dialect came from a South Asian literary discussion group on the internet. Translators and writers I knew helped decode some Bangla dialect. I was down to one thorny mystery.

In the book, Poka and his friends come across a man who chants, *Hambyalay jambyalay, ghash*

kyambay khay? What did this mean? No one I asked knew. The author's younger brother Nazmul Haque Khoka came to my aid. He vaguely remembered a saying from West Bengal putting down people from East Bengal. The words were attributed to Bangals' supposed confusion upon encountering an elephant: "A tail out in front, a tail while going, how the heck does it eat grass?"

The next step was to find a publisher. To gain a wider readership, I wanted the book published outside Bangladesh. Many excellent translations have been coming out from India for some time. During a literary festival in Dhaka, I had met Moyna Mazumdar of Katha, a Delhi based publisher. Eager to support my project, she connected me to Minakshi Thakur, an editor at HarperCollins, and Minakshi carried it the rest of the way.

When we put together the book last year, we included a P.S. section with an introduction to Mahmudul Haque. This includes excerpts from Kamal's interview. Minakshi was a pleasure to work with and with her keen eyes and strong instincts, she helped clarify and smooth out the final version.

I had failed to get written consent from Mahmudul Haque. In the end, their children came through. Both Tahmina Mahmud, living in Toronto, and Shimuel Haque Shirazie, living in Los Angeles, were excited to support the translation of their father's work.

With all the pieces in place, HarperCollins released the book this January. It has received mention and reviews in publications in Chennai, Bangalore, Lahore, Mumbai, and Delhi.

When I visited Barasat, I recalled that Mahmudul Haque himself never returned as an adult. Once during a trip to Kolkata, he agreed to go, only to change his mind and ask the car to turn back. He was still haunted with the pain of departure and preferred his childhood memories intact.

In recalling his life, it is hard to detach the sense of the tragic. The writer and his wife who I met at the start of this translation journey are gone. Last year his younger brother also passed away.

But those images of Poka's childhood in my head are etched deep. The reality of Hati Pukur did not make them vanish. Mahmudul Haque's writing remains alive.

What is the point of repeating lament? When we remember him, is it not better to celebrate what he gifted? I say, may more readers discover his books. May those who cannot read Bangla find him in translation. And may more translations come forth in coming years.

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Backbone of a Nation

FROM PAGE 9

A middle-aged man was clasp the grill of the vehicle. The vest he was wearing must have had a hundred holes and the lungi was so grimy that the checks on it were almost invisible.

"Baba, my son's going to sit the es-es-cee exams next year and I'm short of three hundred taka for his exam fee can you help me, baba!"

The deep-set eyes of the man reflected a despair which might have been the cause of unfulfilled parental encumbrances.

Zahid took out three hundred takas from his wallet. The man's eyes lit up and as he was handed it, he said: "God bless you, baba. God'll definitely fulfil your desires". As the man walked away, Zahid observed him closer; may be he had lied or may be he had not but the overwhelming feeling of helping the unfortunate father took his breath away. It felt like he had made himself useful at least once.

As soon as Mizan saw Zahid open his cubicle, he came to him running.

"Chhar, Vee Chee Chhar wants to see you right away. Zakaria Chaar's also there."

Zahid lost no time. Throwing in his attaché case, he locked the door and scooted to the Vice Chancellor's office.

Dr Elahi was seated in his leather swivel-chair. "Salamuwalaiikum, sir." Zahid greeted him.

"Walaikum. How are you, Zahid?"

"Fine, sir." He sat down.

Dr Zakaria waved from one corner.

"Zahid, I don't know how to tell you this but we have a situation here", the Vice Chancellor had no time to kill with a preamble.

"Two students of yours have got B in this semester in Principles of Management. May I ask why?" he took off his glasses.

Zahid's throat felt dry. "Sir, can I know which students you're talking about?"

Dr Zakaria rattled off the names.

"Oh, these students actually deserve a poorer grade, sir. I think I've rather overmarked them."

"The students think not. They say you're holding out marks from them on purpose."

Zahid's parched throat could use some icy cold water as could his head. "Sir, obviously I'm not. Why would I do that?"

"One of them went to see you after a quiz and mid-terms but you refused to cooperate with the Department Head."

Dr Zakaria had just gone out to talk on his mobile.

"Sir, these students, as I said earlier, don't deserve", his voice trailed off.

"Leave it to us, young man. Let us do the worrying for that." Dr Elahi cut him short and smiled curtly.

Zahid kept mum.

"We must remember that these students have come to us to get the best education and we try to help them achieve their goals. When you're depriving him of his grades, it's contrary to what we stand for here we're working on creating opportunities."

"But, Sir, it doesn't mean we give them the moon

should they ask for it", Zahid found words to say.

"I admit the system is not perfect but what's the harm if you give them marks a notch better than they really deserve? It couldn't possibly harm anyone! It would rather be like encouraging them..."

Dr Zakaria entered and apologized for his phone-call.

"Sir, talking of what they deserve, on my way here I helped a man pay his son's exam fee. He was short of three hundred takas only and when I gave him the money, it felt so good. Now think of them who can't even pay their exam fees and here we're...we're..."

"Here what, Zahid? Why did you stop? You're still wet behind the ears." Dr Elahi smirked and looked at Dr Zakaria.

"So far as I'm concerned, the man lied to you and tricked you into robbing you blind", Dr Zakaria opined.

"Exactly! These beggars will go to any lengths to earn money no conscience or shame. This is disgusting!" the Vice Chancellor gave a bitter expression.

"Sir, in our classes in the university you used to say it was our duty to..." Zahid reminisced.

"Yes, and I still stand by what I said then. However, the two places are different you have to give me that. When you invest a lot, you should at least be rewarded accordingly. It's the nature of this world. The system's such ha, ha." He looked into the young teachers' eyes piercingly.

"Students here come with some expectations and some just some may not be as deserving as others but that doesn't mean we should discourage them."

"That's what I told him", Dr Elahi nodded.

Zahid did not feel like saying anything further. He looked resigned to the truth.

"Here's two grade-change sheets for you. Take them and pull up their grades, at least to respectable positions", Dr Elahi pointed.

Sharmin, the personal secretary opened the door panting: "Sir, Mr Wilson and Mr Petersen are here."

"Oh, wonderful! Show them in." He turned to Zahid and said: "Ok, Zahid, the sooner it's done, the better". He patted his back. "And now if you'll excuse me, I have some diplomat guests I must meet. Dr Zakaria, I want you to stay it's about the American and Danish guests we're expecting for next month's international seminar."

Zahid crept out silently. On the way to his cubicle he did not feel sad. A profound understanding had just settled upon him instead. Apparently he was mistaken when in the morning he had thought of accumulating a lot of experience in the previous three months.

This past half-hour's learning had thoroughly eclipsed everything else. Funny how everything works, he chuckled.

Submitting the final grades that day, Zahid came out of UAST. He had a fortnight off before the next semester began. Once outside the campus, he thought for a while with his back to its gate and then, turning round and looking back at the blazing motto of the university, gave a snort.

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