

Periods, commas and a poem

IFFAT NAWAZ

Poetry was floating in midair one bright afternoon. There was sunshine, and the soft voice of a child from afar, perhaps coming from one of the slums outlining the high rises, "Amar ma'r shonar nolak, hariye golo sheshe, hethai khuji hothai khuji shara Bangladeshe." He repeated the lines once, twice, nth time, memorizing the periods and commas, just like we all once did, when we too were young and our voices were more merciful.

The open pages of *Amader Boi* lifted the alphabets up, they shook hands, stood side by side, forming rhythms and rhymes. They exchanged places and one poem became another, forming all the ones we needed to know, for school or because our parents thought we must. Sukumar Roy, Rabindranath, Nazrul to Jasimuddin.

Is it because our country is full of emotional stimulants, and there are visual sensory overloads at every moment, with negative and positive images, in between the chaos? Is it because we are all emotionally more productive than we give ourselves credit for? Or is it because we like shorter verses, full of passion, evoking feelings, thoughts, and then ending quickly, just like many of our lives do here in Bengal.

If one looks up the definition of poetry one would read about ambiguity, symbolism and irony. One would read about metaphors, and the birth of poetry through folk tales and songs created by the ones who lived long before us for the sake of oral history and romanticism. In the context of Bangladesh, isn't all of those only appropriate, the ambiguity and irony? The Bauls creating a culture of spreading the words of the lone boatman and the

melancholy Rakhal, and their hard and soft philosophies, so many, so true, so fitting even in our modern way of living?

Late one night in Russia, I met a few who could recite Pushkin and Sergei Esenin with tears in their eyes. It was surprising to see so much passion coming out of the hard exteriors of my Russian companions. The hardship of communism, the dictator's rules, and the freshly bleeding poems, hungry and powerful. Is poetry about not eating a full plate of food, when you have known the many names of misery, not through someone else's experience but your own? Like the Russians, Bangladeshis also have their own individual wars, their own struggles, the bleeding nation, the many rulers, and the rebels. Does it then mean we have a part of Sukanto hidden inside many of us? Creating, writing, committing suicide every few days?

Or maybe it's none of these, and the reason why poetry matters to Bengalis is something as simple as the fact that we thrive to be perceived as learned. We still have our bourgeois mentalities carried on from our parents, no matter which part of upper, lower or just middle class we come from. We know Bengali culture demands refinement and knowingly and unknowingly, understanding or not comprehending, we make poetry important, and we judge and assess each other accordingly.

The reason why poetry matters to Bengalis cannot be determined, cannot be put in one box. It cannot have a conclusive answer. But what really matters is, that poetry is here, everywhere in Bangladesh, even with the half built houses staring with their missing windows and doors, construction workers crawling in and out of the concrete skeletons, traffic noises, and mud on the street.

There is poetry here...and you and I are the commas, periods and ironies of the poem called Bangladesh.

**IFFAT NAWAZ, WRITER AND LITERATURE ENTHUSIAST,
HAS MOST RECENTLY BEEN ASSOCIATED WITH HAY
FESTIVAL DHAKA 2012 .**

would be happy with so little for so long. When I come to Kolkata now I look for the best shops and the best cuisine. Gone are the days when I could have a Cadbury and a quality ice cream costing me just a rupee.

Life has changed and so have people's desires and level of achievement. My brother took me to Raichak on the Ganges. The serenity there reminded me of Belgium or Florence in Italy. The sunset brought back fond memories of the sunset in Kolkata when my father would take me for ice cream to the maidans of Victoria Memorial. There was no security in those days, no traffic like today, just smiling safe pookhawas and ice cream sellers making you feel at home in the open maidan.

A visit to Loreto Elliot Road was so

And I still remember the little boy with one eye who I watched from my family home go out every morning to get water for the day's work for his mother. Maybe he is old now, still with one eye trying hard to meet up with life's many demands. The birds still fly over the Howrah bridge to far off lands and the time will come, not much later, for me to leave this land of dreams and blatant reality that India has to offer. I shall leave with the sweet smell of grass that grows around my parents' graves and indelible impressions of love and fondness with which my friends showered with on this visit.

**SYEDA ZAKIA AHSAN, FREELANCE PARENTING
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POETRY

A photograph of a sunset or sunrise sky. The sky is filled with soft, wispy clouds in shades of pink, orange, and blue. A small, bright, circular object is visible in the sky, positioned slightly to the right of the center. The bottom of the image shows the dark silhouettes of trees and the roofs of houses, indicating a suburban or rural setting.

Dearly departed

RASHIDA ISLAM

Looked up from the table
Saw him going down
He takes the back stairs
I wondered why
That's the last I saw him.

I heard from him
But never answered
Never asked him why.
He had his reasons
I never got to know them
Surely they were logical
According to him.

Yet a day never goes by
When I think back
Should have asked him why.
A stranger passes me on the
street
Looks familiar
Yet so distant.

I wonder again
Did he have a reason for leaving?
Or did he just do it for his own
sake
For his sanity

Or his vanity
Was hurt?

He never came back.

A newspaper awaited me
When I came back home
He was there
In the obits.

Not familiar to me
As I could recognise the face
But not the relationship
To the person
I once knew

He is gone
Maybe a better place
In a wider open space
I remain in a void
With so many questions
Unanswered and unresolved,
Maybe this is better
Than what could have been
Let it be
And from here, I go on
My memories and reasons
Help me.

RASHIDA ISLAM WRITES POETRY

The legendary Khan Sarwar Murshid never taught me. I always feel sad when I remember this fact. My six-year stint (1975-81) as a student of the Department of English (two years more because of the session jams due to our war of independence) of the University of Dhaka was otherwise the happiest period of my life. Professor Murshid was in Europe as our Ambassador to Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia and then the Assistant Secretary General of the Commonwealth during that period. He returned to teach again from 1983 onwards. I remember looking at young Azfar Hussain with envy when he happily discussed the great teacher's classes with me.

The life of Professor Murshid teaches us how to live. He aged so gracefully! He always looked smart and handsome even in his seventies and eighties. He never looked a helpless old man. He was the best dressed person around and always in total control of things. He died at 4-40 p.m. on December 08, 2012 at the Apollo Hospital after an illness of a few days only. A brain haemorrhage and two heart attacks put him in a deep coma and finally took him away. We have perhaps not seen a person more learned, more refined and more patriotic. With his knowledge, wisdom and creativity, he served the nation for six decades. He enriched our education and culture.

Khan Sarwar Murshid was born in Nasirabad of Nabinagar in Brahmanbaria. His father Ali Ahmed Khan was a noted Muslim League leader of undivided Bengal. He later joined the Awami League. Prof. Murshid passed his Matriculation from George High School of Brahmanbaria in 1939. He studied at Feni Government College and Comilla Victoria College, passed IA and joined the department of English, Dhaka University for his BA Honours and MA. He joined as a lecturer of his department in 1948. Immediately afterwards he launched and edited *New Values*, a literary quarterly of great merit. Among his students were Shamsur Rahman and Zillur Rahman Siddiqui. He returned from Nottingham University with a PhD in 1955. He also taught Serajul Islam Choudhury, the great teacher and writer. In 1957 they were colleagues. 'He was my guardian and friend', Prof. Choudhury remembers. A cultured man, his firm and honest nature brought Prof. Murshid many admirers. He later researched at Harvard too. He spoke softly but clearly and was a brilliant orator. His PhD dissertation was 'The Influence of Tagore on the works of WB Yeats, Aldous Huxley and TS

Eliot'. He was the Yeats specialist of the department. He read a lot, spoke brilliantly but wrote very little. Teachers and students always urged him to write more.

Prof. Khan Sarwar Murshid participated actively in the Language Movement. In 1961 he was the General Secretary of the Committee to observe the birth centenary of Tagore. His job demanded great courage in an adverse situation. He was general secretary of the DU Teachers' Association during 1965-67. He was one of the formulators of the Six Point program of The Awami League. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib took him along as an advisor to the round table conference in



Rawalpindi in 1969. Prof. Abdur Razzak, Prof. Murshid, Prof. Mozaffar Ahmed Chowdhury and Prof. Rehman Sobhan were the intellectual group which advised our great national leader.

In 1971 the whole family of Prof. Murshid crossed the border without any hesitation and participated in the War of Liberation. Murshid was a member of the planning commission at Mujibnagar and a close aide to Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed. In fact they were close friends. His wife was an MP and played an important role as an organiser of our War of Liberation. Their older daughter Tazeen Murshid joined as a staff artiste of Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra and was an English news broadcaster there. Sharmin Murshid, her sister, sang songs of freedom on the battlefield. Brother Kumar Murshid fought as a freedom fighter

in sector 9 under Major Jalil BU.

Begum Nurjahan Murshid died several years back. She was a minister of state in Bangabandhu's cabinet in the early seventies. Eldest son KAS Murshid is now the Research Director of BIDS. Kumar Murshid is a leftist politician in Britain. Tazeen Murshid taught in Belgium and now teaches English at BRAC University. Sharmin Murshid is CEO of Brotee, a women's development and research institute.

Prof. Murshid wrote little but came out with brilliant prose in both Bangla and English. *Kaler Kantha*, a collection of essays, is his only book. He discussed our liberation war, politics, culture, education and literature (Yeats, Tagore, Shamsur Rahman and others) in it. The eulogy he wrote on his favourite student Shamsur Rahman's 70th birthday is simply wonderful. I haven't read finer words on the poet. He edited two anthologies, *Literature in Bangladesh: Contemporary Bengali Writing (Bangladesh period)* and *Literature in Bangladesh: Contemporary Bengali Writing (pre-Bangladesh period)*. He edited *New Values*, his brilliant literary journal, from 1948 to 1965. He was awarded the Bangla Academy award in 2011. We always felt that he deserved both our Swadhinata Padak and our Ekushey Padak. He also received the Jahanara Imam Memorial Award in 2006 and the Kanthashilan Award in 2008.

Prof. Khan Sarwar Murshid fought for the autonomy of Dhaka University. He believed that you needed a free spirit to earn knowledge. He was a very successful VC of Rajshahi University. He brought Andre Malraux to Bangladesh. We may remember that the French

man of letters wanted to fight as a freedom fighter during our War of Liberation. Prof. Murshid was our erudite diplomat in Europe. He fought against Ershad's autocracy. He supported Jahanara Imam's movement for the trial of war criminals. He had a glorious role in the 1969 movement for democracy. He was the intellectual backbone of the Mujibnagar government in 1971. In fact all his life he was the symbol of the Bengali intellect.

We will remember him as a great academic, an honest intellectual, a brilliant writer and a patriot par excellence. Khan Sarwar Murshid served his country devotedly with the knowledge he earned all his life. In 1971 he was our intellectual face to the world. They don't make men like him these days.

JUNAIDUL HAQUE WRITES FICTION AND ESSAYS.