

**TRIBUTE**

# Of poetry and intellect

JUNAIDUL HAQUE

Khondakar Ashraf Hossain is a senior professor and former chairman of the Department of English, University of Dhaka. He is a well-known poet. He is a poet of the 1980s. In fact he is one of our finest poets, one of the best to have come out of Bangladesh since it became an independent nation in 1971. His admirers included Shamsur Rahman, one of the finest of all Bengali modernists and who had great faith in his talent.

Khondakar Ashraf Hossain was born in Joynagar of Jamalpur in 1950. He has published eight volumes of poetry and three volumes of essays. He has edited Ekobingsho, a little magazine, for more than twenty five years. It fetched him the West Bengal Little Magazine Award in 1998. He has also translated Sophocles, Euripides, Paul Celan and Terry Eagleton ('Literary Theory'). His poems have been translated into English, German, French, Telegu and Hindi. He is a popular poet in Bangladesh as well as West Bengal. He is certainly a star in the Bengali literary sky.

Khondakar Ashraf Hossain has been a popular teacher

at the Department of English, University of Dhaka. He has been teaching there for almost four decades. He was my teacher in the second half of the seventies and the very early eighties. I had good rapport with him. We were even neighbours for sometime. He had long hair, as Kazi Nazrul Islam had, when he was young. He was a friendly teacher, well-versed in English and Bangla. He was a Bengali nationalist and not a brown sahib. Both of us belong to greater Mymensingh.

An active poet for the last three decades or more,

Khondakar Ashraf Hossain is at the same time prolific and deep, serious and playful, exciting and thoughtful. He has written a lot and written well. He celebrates Bangladesh, its myths and metonymies, its political and social demands. But he also walks the grounds of existentialist philosophy and mysticism quite often, as he touches on such timeless themes as Life and Death, Time and Eternity. In his love poems he has mixed passion and intellect. In a number of poems he is concerned with the conditions of womanhood, particularly against the backdrop of religious bigotry and persecution. His insight into the human condition makes him a serious poet, worthy of the attention of the most thoughtful of readers.

Among his eight volumes of poetry, special mention must be made of Nirbachito Kabita (Selected Poems), Teen Ramanir Qasida, Partho Tomar Teebra Teer, Jiboner Soman Chumuk and Janma Baul. He was awarded the Alaol Literary Prize for poetry in 1987.

His doctoral thesis, Modernism and Beyond: Western Influence on Bangladeshi Poetry, has been published as a book. On Behula's Raft is his first collection of English poems written on a kaleidoscopic variety of themes. In the introduction he tells us that his 'fond

wish is that the reader' ...take these poems as 'English versions' rather than as translations of the originals in Bangla.

Khondakar Ashraf Hossain is a teacher, poet, translator, essayist and editor. Ekobingsho, his master little magazine, has reached its late twenties. He has also edited Selected Poems of Nirmalendu Goon. He is a brilliant essayist, both in Bangla and in English. He had his PhD from the University of Dhaka in 2006. He had earlier had an MA in Linguistics and ELT, University of Leeds, United Kingdom, in 1981. He also had a Postgraduate Diploma Teaching English Overseas from the same university earlier. His MA from Dhaka University was done in 1971 but the examination was taken a year later. He has been the Provost of Surya Sen Hall. While teaching for nearly four decades, he has been Director, Centre for Advanced Research in Humanities. He has taught English and American Literature, Linguistics and Phonetics. He loves to teach modern English poetry, American poetry, European poetry, fiction and drama and Literary Theory.

Khondakar Ashraf Hossain began with a bang. Teen Romonir Qasida, his seminal poetical work, announced the arrival of a brilliant poet a number of years back. Al Mahmood was very impressed with the book and wrote an essay to welcome the poet. Since then he has written very good poetry as well as meritorious literary criticism. He loves to write on the various facets of Bengali literature. His respectable position as a poet and critic was complemented by his academic pursuits as a very senior teacher in the Department of English. Both as a poet and a scholar, he has carved a significant niche for himself.

Despite his being a talented poet, despite his poetry being deep and beautiful, despite his being one of our best voices

since 1971, Khondakar Ashraf Hossain has not come by the fame he has deserved. Lesser poets were always after him, were negatively active against his talent and superior craftsmanship. He never went for sentimental poetry or political slogan-mongering. The media didn't initially give him the attention he deserved. As a result he withdrew himself and wrote poetry quietly. He went on editing Ekobingsho. People criticized his late entry into the world of Bangladeshi poetry too, after stepping into his thirties. He made good preparations and then started writing. He had to fight a greater battle than others for the recognition due his talent. He always had confidence and never gave up. It came late but today he has the fame and respect he has always deserved.

Khondakar Ashraf Hossain overcame the influence of Jibanananda Das, Shamsur Rahman and Al Mahmood long ago. His is a voice different from those of others. Today he is a truly successful poet. The wealth of his poetry, his deep utterances and his craftsmanship have many admirers now.

Junaaidul Haque writes fiction and essays.



**TRAVEL TALES**

# Homesick got the blues

SHAHTUB SIDDIQUE ANIK

"Happy Independence Day!"

We were five Bangladeshis, two Indonesians and one Singaporean on a single speedboat. The engine was shut. The Indian Ocean was calm, blue. Nearby, there was another boat full of divers. We were near Gili Trawangan, an island in Indonesia.

"Happy Independence Day!" said the Singaporean, Nelson. I had told him that it was March 26, one of the most important dates in the history of Bangladesh. Nelson is a nice chap who loves Aerosmith but has never heard of Jim Morrison!

It was our Independence Day. This was the first time in my life I was out of the country on a special day.

I thanked Nelson and forgave him for not knowing about Jim Morrison. Although I became a bit sad, missing my family and friends in Dhaka, at the same time it was an occasion that reminded me of Pete Seeger's Rainbow Race: *One blue sky above us / One ocean lapping all our shore / One earth so green and round / Who could ask for more?*

Diversity is something we need to celebrate. Indonesia knows how to do it.

With Javanese at 45%, Sundanese 14%, Madurese 7.5%, coastal Malays 7.5%, other 26%; with Muslims at 88%, Protestants 5%, Roman Catholics 3%, Hindus 2%, Buddhists 1%, others 1%; with 400 indigenous languages, the people of Indonesia live peacefully.

Each of Indonesia's provinces has its own language, ethnic make-up, religion and history. Most people will define themselves locally before they would do it nationally. In Bali, I was talking to an official of Nusa Dua Beach Hotel (partly owned by the Sultan of Brunei). The man is a dancer. He said he was a Balinese first and then a Hindu. And, importantly, they practice art as part of religion and never separate culture from religion. When asked whether he felt any problem living in a country with a Muslim majority, he firmly said, "No, not at all." (He gave me a look that seemed to say he was surprised at how one could ask that question. But he didn't know that from February 28 to March 23, more than 300 temples, houses and shops of Hindus had been vandalised or torched by Muslim fanatics in my country. I tried to hide my sigh.)

Veera, our guide on the tourist island of Bali, echoed the same. Being a Hindu, he never considered himself in a minority because his "Muslim brothers" never treated him badly. The 2002 Bali bombing carried out by an Islamist group has left a scar on the Balinese but they vow to prevent a recurrence of such incidents.

I was very fascinated to see that some women wore the hijab and some did not. But both freely ride bikes. Both fit well in society.

**RESPECT THE LOCALS**

Gili Trawangan is one of the three Gili islands in Indonesia. It is around thirty minutes' boat ride from the northwest mainland of Lombok.

Interestingly, there is no motorised vehicle here. The main means of transportation are bicycles (that you can rent from locals) and cidomo (a small horse-drawn carriage). I didn't see any policemen either.

At the beachside bazaar, I met a Swedish woman who runs a boutique shop there. She has been living on the island for several years after marrying an Indonesian. Her smiles tell me that she is really happy living on the island. Westerners are very fond of this island.

Gili Trawangan is a perfect 'Party Island'. I was lucky; it was full moon the night we stayed on the island. Walking down the road along the sea beach we stopped at a tiny bar. Fire skipping ropes, campfire and dances of kids with Bob Marley hair style were surely entertainment, but what gave me sheer delight was a notice hung on a tree.

"Respect the locals or f.....g go home. Thanks."

**TASTE MATTERS**

Marcel De Rijk is the vice president of the World Dance Council and spends part of the year travelling the world, attending dance competitions.

Born into a professional ballroom dance family in Holland, Marcel has been single-handedly responsible for introducing ballroom dance to Lombok, an island just to the east of Bali. Living part of the year in Lombok, Marcel opened the Lombok International Dance Studio around ten years ago and began teaching local and expat residents to dance.

Another landmark of Marcel is Puri Mas Resort.

He developed it more than twenty years ago as a tribute to his grandfather and mother who were descendants of the Keraton or Palace in Solo Indonesia. The resort was designed to represent a typical Indonesian village with strong Balinese influences, flavour of Lombok and

**FICTION**

# The fighter ...

ADNAN R. AMIN

Babu was wearing the floral, yellow shirt he so hated. He was also quite dead --- lying listless on a flattened, third-hand mattress in the top-bunk in a refurbished warehouse at this sleazy, Muscat district. And he hated being dead. It was just so inopportune a time! The stupid, yellow shirt as an everlasting association --- he could live with. But dying without any warning? Without having that mustard-drenched aloo bhorta and without having finally put a name or face to those sweet, rustic lyrics 'dhire cholo o nodi ...shonge niye cholo' that had streamed off a roommate's cellphone to stick permanently to the back of his mind. Now, the girl's sweet, clipped Sylheti pronunciation of the 'th' and 'dh' sounds in that song was going to be with him forever and he could never know her name.

Babu's death was made worse by the fact that his cellphone started to ring for the first time in eleven days and he could not turn to see who it was. Of course, he was not educated enough to contemplate rigor mortis and so he set his mind to the persistent caller. Only one man had his number in Muscat: Fahd Al-Rasheed, the fat-bellied, beard-stroking shift-manager at the petrol pump he worked at. Evil man, that Fahd: never cut him any slack --- not a day's sick-leave, not even a two-minute break for a cigarette! Strange that a man who lived at the heels of the Al Hajar had such a narrow mind. Perhaps it was indeed Fahd --- calling to torment him with the knowledge that Mr. Saifuddin Raja aka Babu had died in his sad, migrant bed, could no longer answer calls and hence, was eligible for a salary deduction.

The phone rang and shuddered a second time.

Definitely someone from home, Babu thought to himself. Shahana, his wife, knew well enough that this was the best time to call. Babu's eleven room-mates --- all of them dock-workers at the harbor --- did not get back before late night. With the makeshift room all to himself, he could unleash a litany of romantic declarations, sweet little nothings that approached hoarse obscenities with time and ended up as whimpering demands to return home.

But Shahana ...loving, plump, dark, acne-scarred Shahana, was no pushover. Babu was allowed to take a loan from her brother, but he could return to Bangladesh only once it had been repaid. How a middle-class, salt-of-the-earth Bangali girl, who refused to make love with the lights on, could nurture such quiet strength escaped him. No matter what he had to say --- he, who had moved worlds with his unrelenting tongue --- she would not waver. Perhaps it was a sign that keeping up appearances with an estranged brother was more important than having him in her bed every night. Perhaps it was a sign that she loved him too much to allow him to return with his tail between his legs, his head bowed in resignation.

The Nokia rang a third time.

This time he didn't feel the shudder all too well. Usually his flattened, third-hand mattress wasn't a bad conductor for the vibrating ring. And he had developed a light breed of sleep during his time in recovery. Fifteen years of dabbling in weed, then phensidyl and finally heroin, had rendered sleep heavily reliant on drugs. Without drugs, it felt as though his daily quota of sound sleep had been evenly distributed over 24 drowsy hours. In a state of neither wakefulness, nor sleep, he traversed the lands like the undead --- looking for scraps, scrounging for scoring-money, wearing thin all the relationships he still had intact. Babu would imagine himself invisible when using -

-- and a supreme celebrity just ten minutes later. Now, being dead and allowed some time to reflect, it bugged him that it all might have been the other way round; that people had only seen the fiend and turned a blind eye to his inebriated stunts. His mother, floating in the maternal paradise of denial, married him off, secretly thinking her son too good for the overweight, pimple-scarred Shahana. Seven months of round-the-clock highs and hurried love --- and Shahana shipped him off to drug rehab. She packed the floral, yellow shirt in his bag as a parting gift --- but never ended up leaving him. Two months into captivity, three opiate-fits and two fist-fights later, Babu surrendered. From there, it had been an uphill struggle --- fighting urges, fleeing from friends, confining his wild, boisterous self to a rented one-room mess. But oh! So much better was that room than this roach-dappled warehouse where he now lay dead!

There was a fourth ring.

If not dead, Babu would've smiled. The fourth is always special. It indicates a certain level of urgency or eagerness. Back in the day, when Mukul, from college, called --- he'd let the land-phone ring on for ages. Ah! Mukul! Always full of new adventures! Two movies for one ticket, new girl next door, ticketless train rides and the neighborhood hustles. Babu had long hair back then and could be passed off as a badass. It was his hair that got them called into the university campus one day. College students at the university! It was a great feeling. And then came the praise, the promises, the firepower and the leaders more intoxicating than any drug.

Years later: a week after he and Mukul had carried out a botched hit to regain control of residential halls, sinister elements caught up with him. They tackled him, pinned his limbs, one sat on his chest and cocked a grotesque shotgun against his throat. Babu cried and begged, he invoked the greatest stranger, greatest friend --- Allah. And then the weapon jammed and after the ninth try, the man sitting on his chest smashed in his collarbone with the butt and ran off. A month later, two of the elements had been shot up bad and Babu was on the run. Away from the politics, from the guns and hits --- he turned to his only remaining companion: the drugs. Only drugs could ease the pain and it was the only kind Babu knew. It would be another decade before that dark, quiet girl would change his life.

The phone rang a fifth time.

He felt no vibration anymore. So, Mr. Saifuddin Raja aka Babu was fading. Fading, as if he were a little boy, reluctantly drifting off to sleep on his mother's lap. Babu's body lay in a land in the bottom right corner of the Arabian Peninsula. How far he had been pushed out ...by the numbing drugs, the sweet-tongued politicians, the impersonal firefights, the loving wife and the merciless yoke of debt that wouldn't let him return. Here he was ...dead in bloody Muscat! Rocky, dusty, unforgiving Muscat! How long could a boy from a lush, riverine land have survived here? He should've known he was going to die here ...die at forty, unceremoniously after making aloo bhorta for a dozen people. He wished he could know if the last caller was going to call back. But he was also starting to feel guilty --- because without being told, he already knew it was rude of the Dead to think of the world in such vivid terms.

Apologetically, one last time, he thought of the yellow shirt and the humiliation of having to wear it in death.

Adnan R. Amin is a Dhaka-based brand and communications consultant. E-mail: adnanramin@gmail.com

**POETRY**

# Do you remember me?

ANIKA ADITI

Do you remember me?  
And the light we lit together  
In the darkness of the night?  
Do you see the mark?  
That your love has done?  
It has made a dent  
And when I think of it, I become bent  
I limp when I think of you  
I don't know if you can recall  
The memories of me  
And you  
Do you remember me?  
Can you make out the  
Time as to when you and me  
Might meet, one day again?  
Was I the one to have let you go?  
Or was your smile, not something  
that I wanted?  
Did I ever forget you?  
Forget what things we did?  
The songs I sang  
And the hugs you gave  
We loved through the clouds  
And when the rain came  
We bent over  
So that we could see the rainbows  
Of our imagination  
Take us someplace else  
So our love didn't have to soak in  
the rain  
And stay soggy till the evening  
I hope I don't bring shame for you  
I hope that I do not disturb you  
And I hope that you remember me  
For yes, I do remember you  
I hope you can forgive me please  
I'd love to have your company  
But, for my sake  
And for yours  
Please one day,  
To whoever it be,  
Give your love to them  
Or your love  
To me



other islands. It encompasses all that is unique to Indonesia; pathways meander through tropical gardens, rooms display ornate carved windows and doors, traditional thatched roofs and dainty terraces decorated with antique furniture, local fabrics and crafts.

In fact, the architecture of Puri Mas Resort is aimed at representing the Indonesian archipelago.

We, two journalists and some Bangladeshis related to tourism, had dinner at the hotel. It was hosted by hoteliers and other agencies of Lombok. They were united for the island. All they wanted was to promote Lombok as a tourist hotspot. And they were not doing it only with money. Their main tools are creativity, taste and love for a place. One can take Marcel's work as an example.

While we were eating and chatting, a musician was playing probably a jazz tune on a keyboard. On the walls, there were photos of Marcel's famous dance moments. I could not hide my sighs. While all the ladies and gentlemen were talking about Lombok tourism, I was thinking of Cox's Bazar, St Martin and Kuakata. I became homesick again.

**IMMIGRATION**

We were to fly on a Singapore Airlines flight. It would take us to Singapore, then another to Lombok. Standing in the immigration queue, almost all of us were too annoyed. I didn't understand why an immigration official would ask so many questions while we have machine readable passports. Some people say their

machines don't work. But how can an officer ask my fellow traveller, "Do you have a visa?" Was this some kind of joke?

When we were at Singapore airport, it was really fun. Free foot massage, sky train, free internet with computers or butterfly garden or chocolate shops will never let you get bored. Is it money? I don't think so. It's about taste.

**'ALL WE NEED IS LOVE'**

It was around midnight. We were walking along the road near the Hotel Santosa where we were staying. (Lombok night is different from Bali's, which is dominated by disco and night clubs. Lombok is actually for romantics.) All of a sudden I heard live music. It was from a bar. C major chord, "Where were you ..."

I entered. The bar was full of local and foreign hippies. The singer was an Indonesian. He was singing Pink Floyd's 'Coming Back to Life'. I went close to the stage. The singer gave me a smile. I smiled back. I listened to this number a thousand times back home and now I am listening to the same old tune away from Dhaka.

My homesickness was not gone yet. But I started to love Lombok --- not its luxury hotels but its people. Us or them --- all share one blue sky and it's beautiful.

Pete Seeger sang it really well: Go tell, go tell all the little children/Tell all the mothers and fathers too/Now's our last chance to learn to share/What's been given to me and you.

Shahtub Siddique Anik is sub-editor, The Daily Star.