

REMEMBRANCE: KHONDOKAR ASHRAF HOSSAIN

On Behula's Raft -- Allure of Myth and Metaphor

REBECCA HAQUE

In his volume of collected poems written in Bangla and translated into English by the poet himself, published under the title *On Behula's Raft*, Khondakar Ashraf Hossain has artistically blended the poetic traditions of English and Bangla literature. The title captures in lyric and symbolic imagery the myth of Behula's agonized quest in the Gangey flood plain and her long arduous riverine journey. Ashraf Hossain poetically inverts the fabled Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Orpheus goes to Hades to rescue his beloved Eurydice without whose presence Elysium would be bereft of music. Behula, on the other hand, as we all know, sang and wailed to the gods for the revival of the corpse of her mate.

There are thirty-three poems in the book. Some autobiographical, some feminist, some love songs, some about the human condition, and one paean (to Sheikh Hasina). Professor Khondakar Ashraf Hossain is not only a poet; he is a translator, translating from Bangla into English. He has also translated from German and English into Bangla. Among other books, Professor Hossain has translated *Selected Poems of Paul Celan*, *Terry Eagleton's Literary Theory: An Introduction*, David Abercrombie's *Elements of General Phonetics*, Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, and Euripides's *Medea* and *Alcestis*, and Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* into Bangla. Besides these, he has edited *Selected Poems of Nirmalendu Goon*. He was awarded the Alao Literary prize for poetry in 1987 and the West Bengal Little Magazine Award 1998 for editing the magazine for poetry and arts, *Ekobingsho*. His poems have been translated into English, German, French, Telegu and Hindi. His doctoral thesis, *Modernism and Beyond: Western Influences on Bangladeshi Poetry*, is currently under print.

The first poem of *On Behula's Raft* is "Man." In this poem, there is a complex blend of metaphor and metonymy, irony and paradox: man, God's finest creation, just below 'air and angels,' given a mind to reason with and a heart for emotion, nevertheless is bent on self-destruction. The concluding lines of the poem are, "I love Man because one day/ he will roast himself in his own fire."

"Estragon and the Camel," the second poem, alludes to Beckett's classic existentialist play *Waiting for Godot*. In this poem, Professor Khondakar Ashraf Hossain traces life's journey as a painful "oblique line along the Milky Way." However, his pen has been his succour, his exalber: "A hand in white samite rises from my bosom."

The scented tree, 'sandalwood' is a favourite metaphor for Professor Khondakar Ashraf Hossain. He uses it in two noteworthy poems, one titled "Sandalwood" and the other, titled "The Woodpecker." In the first poem, the poet laments the plight of the woodcutter, who is locked in an 'internecine duel' with life and death:

The woodcutter looks for sandalwood in the forest.
It gives out a sweet smell when burnt.
People yearn for it when they are cremated.

The woodcutter knows he too will die one day.
But now a fistful of rice entices him like a whore;
he's obliged still to preside over a pageantry of grief.

*The fire of hunger smoulders in his hut;
he looks for the wood that would chop the axe,
while his axe looks for the white hands of death.*

"The Woodpecker"

is an autobiographical poem. It is clearly celebratory: his family is a family of poets – an art handed down from grandfather to father to son with Hossain's own daughter now taking up the torch. Poets never die; they live on through their memorable lines. As Shelley said, in "Adonais", his classic elegy on the death of Keats, the souls of great poets are immortal inspiring stars twinkling in the firmament of time. Hossain, in his poem, expresses the same idea when he passionately declares, 'We'll never be buried in the sandalwood grove.'

The most powerful poems in this volume are about the women of Bengal, hence the iconic position of Behula in Ashraf Hossain's art. The most famous is the ringing "Noorjahan," the tragic tale of Noorjahan, a young girl from Sylhet, Bangladesh, who was stoned to death by religious fanatics. The crazed zealots buried half her body in a pit before ferociously pelting the living flesh with heavy rocks and stones. Hossain's wrath at this barbaric crime is fierce, but his consolation is that one day the girl will get her revenge in heaven:

That girl will one day be an 'ababeel'

and stone to death the king's hordes"

The allusion is to 'ababeel', a flock of small sparrow-like birds that threw stones on the army of King Abraha, who had attacked Mecca, killing all his elephants. The event is referred to in the Holy Quran. This potent solitary allusion signifies the poet's belief in the ultimate victory of good over evil, a belief fundamental to the strength of visionary optimism in times of chaos and anarchy. The poet, like a true seer, provides light to people struggling against the black fog of despair, against the "mind-forged manacles", as symbolically depicted in Blake's "London" in *The Songs of Experience*.

In the dirge "The Ballad of the Grave-digger's Daughter", Ashraf Hossain appropriates the vehicle and tenor of Coleridge's famous ballad "Christabel." The ballad, as we know, is primarily an oral folk-song, sung by minstrels or 'scop,' and has a refrain that reinforces the central motif of the poem. In this case, the unifying motif is the "wild shimul" flower which waves its leaves in the strong breeze. The grave-digger asks his daughter to name the person for whom he had dug the grave the night before. At first, 'silence is in the girl's two eyes.' As in "Christabel," where Geraldine, the evil enchantress comes in the garb of a snake to

destroy the innocent virgin princess to win the favour of her father, the king, the grave-digger's daughter's hallucinatory answer alludes to similar corruption in the Garden of Eden, the Serpent in Paradise, reinforcing thus the full symbolic implications of post-lapsarian Adamic intrusions into the lives of women.

*'A clever snake did creep into this
Fresh Eden-like bower of mine,
He showered on me a thousand kisses
And wrapped in soils serpentine.'*

Violated thus, the grave-digger's daughter 'hangs herself among the wild *shimul* trees.' Poetically, ironically, emphasis is given to the fact that the grave dug by the grave-digger is meant to be his own daughter's final resting place, his eternal judgement of condemnation and wrathful punishment for his offspring's supposed moral sin. In a different form, using new metaphors, Hossain is reiterating the theme of the earlier poem "Noorjahan"

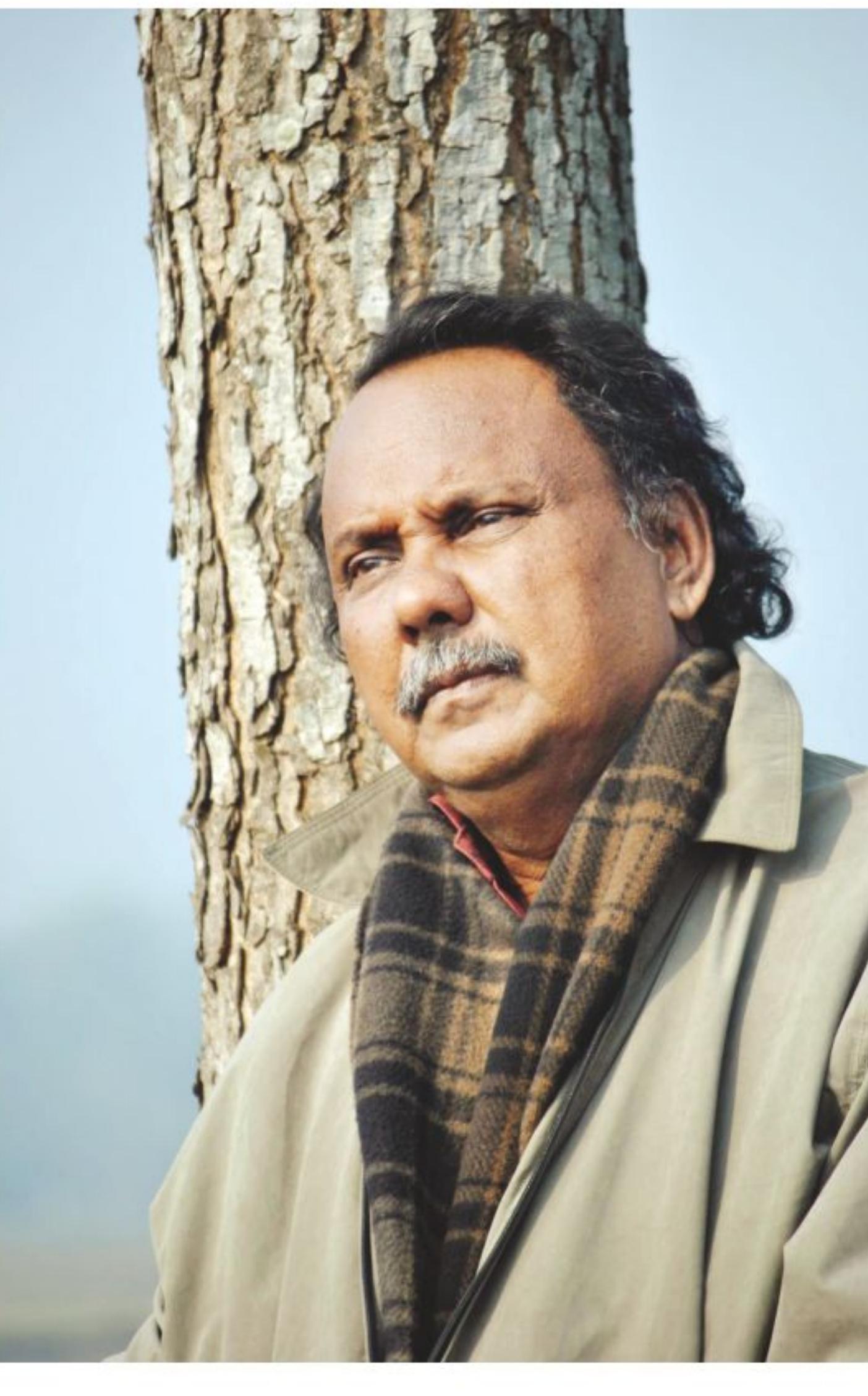
In "Woman and Witchdoctor," which is the final poem in this volume, a woman lies in the yard of a hut 'Snake bitten, dying or already dead,' lying like 'bereaved Behula,' as the 'charmer' chants his *muombo-jumbo*. But the venom spreads quickly through her veins and, as the 'charmer's hands play 'Tabla' rhythms on the woman's body, her 'vibrant youth turns purple and cold.' This poem is the poet's strong indictment of superstition, ignorance, and bigotry, which have for generations kept the women of rural Bengal physically bound in space and spiritually confined in imaginative sterility, without scope for expression of autonomous voice in work or pleasure.

As a Bangladeshi and as Witness to the gruesome genocide perpetrated by the occupying army during our Liberation War, poet Khondakar Ashraf Hossain has left us his legacy in the form of a record, a living document of the horror of the period. In "From the Mass-Graves", the camera of his eye cinematically films images of the slaughter, of the muddy bloody killing fields in East Bengal. He pays due homage to the "severed heads", to 'The Yoricks' (alluding to poor 'Yorick's skull' in *Hamlet*). The poem is his tribute to the *sheheed* who died so that we could be born. In this poem, like Buddhadev Bose before him, he chants an invocation to Kankabati—epitome of Bangla womanhood—to come and 'inspect' the 'Bones of humans' stored on 'endless shelves.'

The Bangali woman, in Ashraf's poetry, becomes the legendary Behula, carrying humanity on her raft through the currents of the winding river of life, weeping in sorrow, but never in surrender, seeking to revive, to sustain life forever.

In the Foreword to *On Behula's Raft*, Khondakar Ashraf Hossain writes with deep emotion, with great love for our nation. He says, "Bangladesh is my Behula, on whose raft I have been afloat for eons, forever dying and forever resurrecting into new life under a resplendent, tropical sun. The poems in this volume are representative of my work of nearly three decades."

THE WRITER IS PROFESSOR AND FORMER CHAIRPERSON (2009-2012), DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, UNIVERSITY OF DHAKA. THIS ESSAY IS A REVISED VERSION OF AN EARLIER REVIEW.



Poet, Professor, Translator, Editor

MANMAY ZAFAR

Dr. Khondakar Ashraf Hossain (1950-2013) was an accomplished poet. Anyone who has read his books of poetry such as *Partha Tomar Tibra Teer*, *Teen Ramnir Qasida* and *Jibander Saman Chumuk* would agree with me. Since 1985, he also edited a little magazine called *Ekabingsha* or the Twenty-First. Through *Ekabingsha*, he worked as a patron to many young and aspiring writers who were desperately looking for a platform to launch their careers into the world. Under Ashraf Hossain's astute stewardship, *Ekabingsha* soon became a little magazine to reckon with, winning prestigious prizes both from Bangladesh and the other side of Bengal. And he accomplished all these in addition to his teaching responsibilities in the Department of English at Dhaka University. In this regard, Ashraf Hossain could be compared to the great Bengali poet, professor, and editor of the famous Kavita magazine, Buddhadev Bose (1908-74). Although Ashraf Hossain was not as brilliant a poet as Buddhadev was, their busy worlds of action bear close resemblances. They were also alike in the way they courted their untimely death. It looked like both of them were on the same train, but before they could reach the final destination, some irresponsible passengers pulled the chain and brought the train to a sudden halt. Buddhadev died at the age of 66 and Ashraf at 63.

However, my encounter with Ashraf Hossain was not on the pages of *Ekabingsha*, but in the classrooms of Dhaka University. He had already made his name as a poet by that time, and soon that fame was matched by his performance as a teacher of poetry. I remember Professor Ashraf teaching us the English Romantic poet S.T. Coleridge (1778-81). That agonized, tormented, opium addict poet, who nonetheless managed to write such masterpieces as 'Kubla Khan', 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and 'Dejection: An Ode', came alive through Professor Ashraf's lectures. I don't know

whether I'd call it a coincidence that at present I'm also teaching Coleridge to my bright-eyed undergraduate students of English at Jahangirnagar University. I can hope to impart to them, with considerable success, what I learnt from Professor Ashraf and what I myself learnt through reading recent Coleridge scholarship. Through my lectures on Coleridge, I can also hope that a good teacher like Professor Ashraf and the knowledge he handed over to his students would live on.

That Professor Ashraf was a poet became evident as he taught us poetry. There were many other teachers who taught us poetry as well, but they were not poets themselves. Professor Ashraf had a unique teaching style of his own. His analysis was illuminating and entertaining and he had the capacity to plunge deep into the body of a poem, as if it were an ocean, and come back surfacing with some hidden gems to reveal to his students. Being a poet, Professor Ashraf would also at times fly, true to a poet's nature perhaps, but his roots like that of a banyan tree were deeply embedded in the soil. He would come to his class on time and was generous with office hours. That he took only three years to write his PhD thesis (2006-2008) at Dhaka University on Western influences on Bangladeshi poetry might surprise many, but I know that he had been writing his thesis in his head all his life. His dedication to the craft of poetry and his editorship of a grand old poetry magazine prepared him well to complete his thesis in such a short span of time. His thesis was, after all, an accumulation of his thinking that developed over decades.

Professor Ashraf loved to talk about religion, but he was not much of a believer himself. Like the great Victorian poet Matthew Arnold (1822-88), he also heard the Sea of Faith retreating and retreating fast, leaving naked shingles on the shore. I note with dismay that people like Professor Ashraf are fast becoming a rarity in the faith and belief stricken present-day Bangladesh. For those who believe in religion, the state and the opposition roll out the red carpet; and

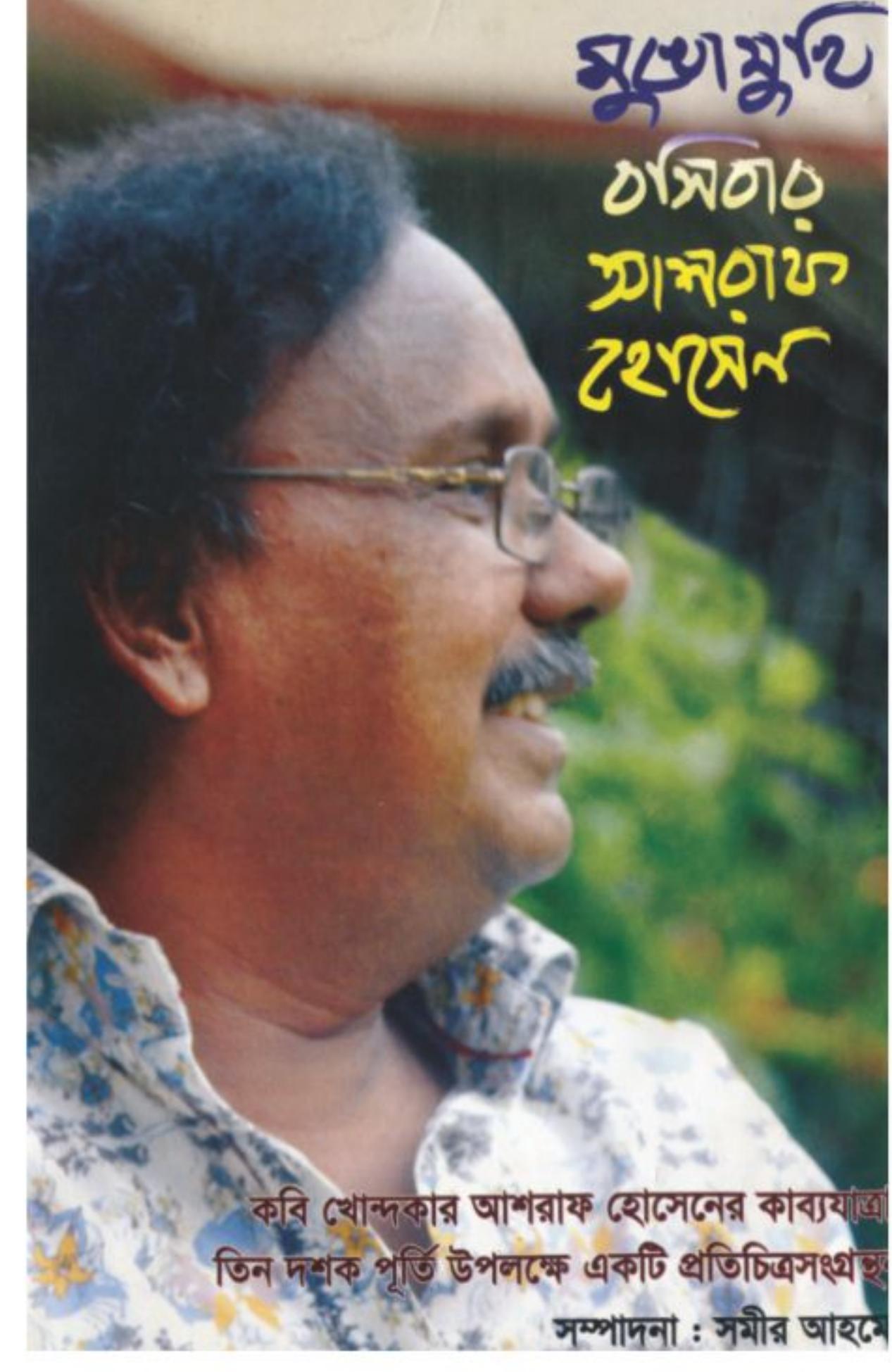
those who choose NOT to believe -- arrest, remand, hate campaign and fatwa await them just around the corner.

Professor Ashraf translated the great Greek tragedy *Oedipus* by Sophocles for the Bishwa Sahitya Kendra (i.e. World Literature Centre) in Dhaka. It was a translation that would have a long shelf life. I remember giving him my copy of the Irish Nobel Laureate WB Yeats' (1865-1939) translation of *Oedipus* that I bought from London.

For the sake of objective assessment, I must mention that when I became his colleague, I did not get from Professor Ashraf the kind of support that I legitimately expected. Maybe there were obstacles that he did not want to overcome. Despite this, I remember him today, with much respect, as a good poet and teacher whose classes were often a delight to his pupils. He had many years to give, both to poetry and to his profession, had his life not been cut short by death.

My last meeting with Professor Ashraf was at the Bangla Academy book fair. I was surprised to find that he was yet to be awarded the Bangla Academy Literary Prize for his contribution to literature. There are examples of writers of less calibre being awarded this prestigious prize, and that such a renowned poet like Ashraf was still waiting his turn seemed to me unacceptable. In reply, he wryly observed that he might even die before the Academy opened its doors. Did thoughts of death hover over his head? "Call no man happy", Sophocles would say, "unless he carries his happiness into his grave". I end this piece hoping that the Bangla Academy will finally wake up to atone for their mistake and bestow on Professor Ashraf the honour of a posthumous literary prize. If needed, the Academy must amend its Act that at present prevents such honour from being conferred, posthumously, on a truly deserving poet like Professor Ashraf.

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A Student Reminiscences

JUNAIDUL HAQUE

I just couldn't believe it when a reputed columnist called me to say that Professor Khondakar Ashraf Hossain, who taught both of us in the late seventies and in the very early eighties at Dhaka University's Department of English, was dead! I was speechless for a long time. It was Sunday, June 16, 2013.

Ashraf Sir never looked more than forty. In fact we used to tease him that he looked younger than us. How could he die at only sixty three? He was so young and energetic, so full of ideas, so witty and lively! He loved to be called a loner though. And the recent death of his mother and wife completely shattered him. The government appointed him the vice-chancellor of Trishal's Jatiyo Kobi Kazi Nazrul Islam University on May 06, 2013. He was working hard there and keeping in touch with us too. But little did we know that he was planning to leave us so early for 'the undiscovered land from whose bourne' no traveller returns.

A modest man, Khondakar Ashraf Hossain was a valiant freedom fighter. A poet-freedom fighter like Rafiq Azad and Abid Anwar. Abid Bhai called me twice to express his sorrow at this untimely death of a remarkable poet and scholar, essayist and teacher. A secular poet, a brilliant essayist and a popular teacher for nearly forty years. Fellow poets and his



students and colleagues will miss him for a long time. His three daughters and son will remember him forever.

Khondakar Ashraf Hossain was a senior Professor and former Chairman of the Department of English, University of Dhaka. He was a well-known poet. He was a poet of the 1980s. In fact he was 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, the finest of all East Bengal modernists, who had great faith in his talent. How I hate using past tense while writing about him!

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

Khondakar Ashraf Hossain was a popular teacher at the Department of English, University of Dhaka. He was teaching there for almost four decades. He was my teacher.

POETRY
Mourning
for K. Ashraf

--- ABU TAHER MOJUMDER

Oh God! It can't be! It shouldn't be! But it is. The river of his life trapped in eternal sand bank Dried and lost forever... Only the other day his genial smile Had lit the committee room Travelled across the window grills The green trees, the current of hot air, To a far horizon following his poetic haven The wings of his imagination lie clipped now On the pages of his ever throbbing verses Critical works and appreciations How unkind! Oh God!

An unfolding soul so cruelly throttled The possibilities of expansions Sky-touching flights of imagination curtailed Mourning smiles shattered the illusion of presence Time's the final arbiter But our love shields you from oblivion.

Ah Rose! all petals and fragrance Transcending the thorns of life All fragrance enlivening drooping hearts Sending tremors of breaths Coalescing resonance of sound and sense A generous hand inspiring cordiality You are forever in our heart and soul With the wind with the water and the stars.

PROFESSOR ABU TAHER MOJUMDER --- POET AND LITERARY CRITIC --- IS A REKNOWNED ACADEMIC

