

TRIBUTE

# 'What should I say?'

SALAHUDDIN AKBAR

These days people ask me about him and I tell them, "What should I say?" I repeat his words, "What should I say?" Well, I find myself recalling the exact words he used often when we saw him first as our lecturer in first year honours. He was one of those promising lecturers during that period --- Syed Manzoorul Islam, Fakrul Alam, Kaiser Haq, Niaz Zaman, Nizamul Haque, Syed Anwarul Haque, Suraiya Khanum, Sadrul Amin...

While thinking of the right thing to say his common expression was - "What should I say?" And it slowed down the flow and tempo of his lecture and it used to distract our rapt attention somewhat.

In our first year honours class in the English Department of Dacca (the old spelling comes with nostalgia!) University, he enlightened us on the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century English poet William Blake, who was also famous as a painter and engraver. His Songs of Innocence and Experience was most familiar to us and its catchy expression was so handy that even during our honours final exam, while returning from the exam hall, we ( Rafique, former national cricketer and selector , Ilahi Dad Khan, in Food Directorate, Mamun in Canada and I ) used to greatly enjoy smoking cigarettes as a relief ( no less than tragic relief!) and chanting Blake -

Little Lamb I'll tell thee!  
He is called by thy name,  
For he calls himself a Lamb:  
He is meek & he is mild,  
He became a little child:  
I a child & thou a lamb,  
We are called by his name.  
Little Lamb God bless thee.

In second year honours, Ashraf sir was our tutorial teacher. In our group the other classmates were the talented television actress Mita Chowdhury, Yasmeen and June. I still remember vividly the remark he wrote - 'Cogently written' - as he gave me an A in one tutorial assignment. Since then I have fancied the word cogently very much and have used it aptly!

One day in his class he was drawing an analogy among some remarkable poets. While talking about Lorca, he asked if anyone in the class knew of him. There was silence. Then I raised my hand and gave the answer - "Yes, Federico García Lorca is the notable Spanish poet and dramatist of the twentieth century..." Sir was happy and wanted to know my name. Then the whole class turned to look at me!

Nearly ten years ago, Badrul Bhai (columnist Syed Badrul Ahsan), fiction writer Junaidul Haque --- both senior to me in the English Department --- and I took Ashraf sir to a sumptuous dinner at Pan Pacific Sonargaon. Dinner over, while departing Sir whispered to me, "Just for curiosity, how much did it cost...I mean the bill?" His innocence was remarkable.

After that I rarely had communication with Ashraf sir. But to my sheer surprise I suddenly received a phone call at midnight from him a few months ago. He had come across news reports that he was to be appointed Vice Chancellor of Jatiyo Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University, and people of his acquaintance had already begun asking him about his appointment. He was meek and shy as was his wont. He always used the term apni instead of the usual tumi when addressing his students. Even after thirty seven years he continued to address me



The writer, right, with his teacher

as tumi. I told him, "Sir, still you are addressing me as apni." His response was, "Okay, from now on I will address you by that ... kintu tumi additional secretary of the education ministry ebong amake VC-er post e appointment debar summary tomar through te hochche eta bhabtei abar 'apni' address chole aashe!" He broke into laughter over the phone.

When we see some of the appointed and aspiring VCs around us, any former university student will frown in amazement at their calibre and other essential traits an educator and administrator should be endowed with. Ashraf sir was different. He was ahead of many others quality-wise. JKNI University can truly feel proud of him. And it makes us feel good that we could rightly select a professor of our own choice without much interference.

He soon ran out of luck, unfortunately. He was appointed vice chancellor for four years. He was very happy, raring to get into his new work. Destiny allowed him to serve for a month and ten days only and yet he had won the hearts of faculty and staff there and become instantly popular. Indeed he was missed and will be remembered by them and

the next generation as they will look at his face among other photographs of past VCs that are famed on the wall.

As a poet Khondakar Ashraf Hossain was underrated. Ashraf sir was one of the very few in our country who was well acquainted with both English and Bengali literature, especially poetry, and had remarkable command over it. Being a professor of poetry he knew all about literary techniques and had vast knowledge of Bengali literature, besides his own area of English literature. We see people around us write poems profusely without requisite knowledge of it. If only they knew what poetry is, they would never dare to try it! We have seen Prof Kabir Chowdhury, Prof Serajul Islam Choudhury, Prof Syed Manzoorul Islam) and Prof Fakrul Alam standing out as foremost among writers who are equally outstanding in English and Bengali. Since the first publication of his collection of poems 'Tin Ramanir Qasida' in 1984, Khondakar Ashraf rose to prominence as a powerful and serious poet and assiduous prose writer in our literary circles.

His use of simple diction, his intellectual bent of mind, evocative imagery as well as integration of mythology and national legacy in his understanding and belief marked his approach to literature. Being a realist and philosophy-conscious, his observations represent a socio-political portrayal of Bangladesh that shows his soul is nourished by the alluvial soil and moisture of riverine Bangladesh. Thus he rightly chose his doctoral thesis, Modernism and Beyond: Western Influence on Bangladeshi Poetry. Along with his essays and poetry there came his translation works from Bengali to English, from German and English to Bengali as well. It is heartening to note that his poems also got translated into English, French, German, Hindi, Telegu. Being a selective writer he had eight books of poetry, seven collections of essays, one prose, ten translation works and three anthologies to his credit.

I wrote in The Daily Star in tribute to my teacher Razia Khan Amin last December as she was the last to join a number of professors of our English Department whom we have lost over the years and who were all my direct teachers - Prof Kabir Chowdhury, Prof Shamsuddoha, Prof Khondoker Rezaur Rahman, Prof Suraiya Khanam and Prof Nadera Begum. But who could guess that Prof Ashraf was already in the queue to join them so soon? In his early 60s he looked the same - with the same figure and expression even after thirty-seven years. It is hard to believe he will be seen no more!

Well, it was mostly due to my university teachers who surely played a formative influence in shaping my career and intrinsic worth that led me to where I stand at this stage of life. I know there are so many things I would have done. But clouds at times get in one's way, blocking the sun. They rain and snow on everyone. Yet isn't one like me lucky and rich enough to be taught by teachers like them?

Ashraf sir had many ideas and plans to do some genuine work for JKNI in order to justify his posting and making it a distinctive educational institution. Indeed it is our loss in the true sense, not in an exaggerated or hyperbolic expression commonly used for others, that he has gone to the great beyond.

SALAHUDDIN AKBAR IS A SENIOR CIVIL SERVANT

POETRY

## Life without Friends

SHAMIM ALAM

Life is a thirsty walk across a desert  
If you don't know anyone true to you.  
You have no idea which way to go,  
With no one to stand by and lead you.

Life is a post without likes and comments,  
If you don't have any friends.  
Life is like moving into a new flat  
Without any helping hands.

Life is a cell phone with a flat battery.  
So you can't make an important call  
At a time when you are outdoors,  
And people around you are strangers all.

Life is a corrupted file that won't open,  
And that you can't even delete.  
You don't know if you should leave it as it is,  
And you don't have friends who deem it fit.

Life is a missed call that you want to return,  
But the caller's number doesn't show.  
Life is like living all alone, all day long,  
Eating the same food for 12 months in a row.

Life is simply a journey to nowhere,  
A monotonous passing of minutes and hours,  
A niggling pain you don't want to get rid of,  
If you don't have a friendly soul that cares.

SHAMIM ALAM IS WITH THE DAILY STAR

## Morning Coffee

RUMMANA CHOWDHURY

As you pick up the terracotta coffee mug  
the frothing milk  
spills over your French manicured  
fingers in unknown revenge  
the cinnamon essence  
from the hot rim  
blasts its erotic flavour  
Invades your nostrils  
and arouses your entire being  
and you wish  
with an unknown passion  
that you had selected  
the milder essence  
of mundane chocolate.  
You sip your cappachino  
with an unending thirst  
wipe your scorched fingers  
with the handkerchief he had  
given you yesterday  
and gaze at the incessant  
raindrops outside your window  
you can almost see his shadow  
and hear the symphony  
of his beloved piano  
echoing in the distance  
this painful journey of magical colours  
and unimaginable bliss  
has a mysterious pattern.

RUMMANA CHOWDHURY WRITES FROM TORONTO, CANADA.

FICTION

# A day in Panu's life

SAMIHA MATIN

No one knows his real name; it's always 'Panu this' and 'Panu that.' It's a pretty terrible name, but you will never hear anyone call him anything except that, well at least to his face. You shouldn't be surprised, though: Panu is a very ordinary and insignificant man.

He is tall, thin and balding, always wears a grim, mutinous expression and he hardly ever smiles. However, on the rare occasions when he smiles, it's a horrendous picture. His mouth is shriveled up and resembles that of a donkey's. Panu likes wearing long, black trench coats and black caps. He thinks they make him look like a *bideshi*, a foreigner. Panu, you see, tries very hard to be like them.

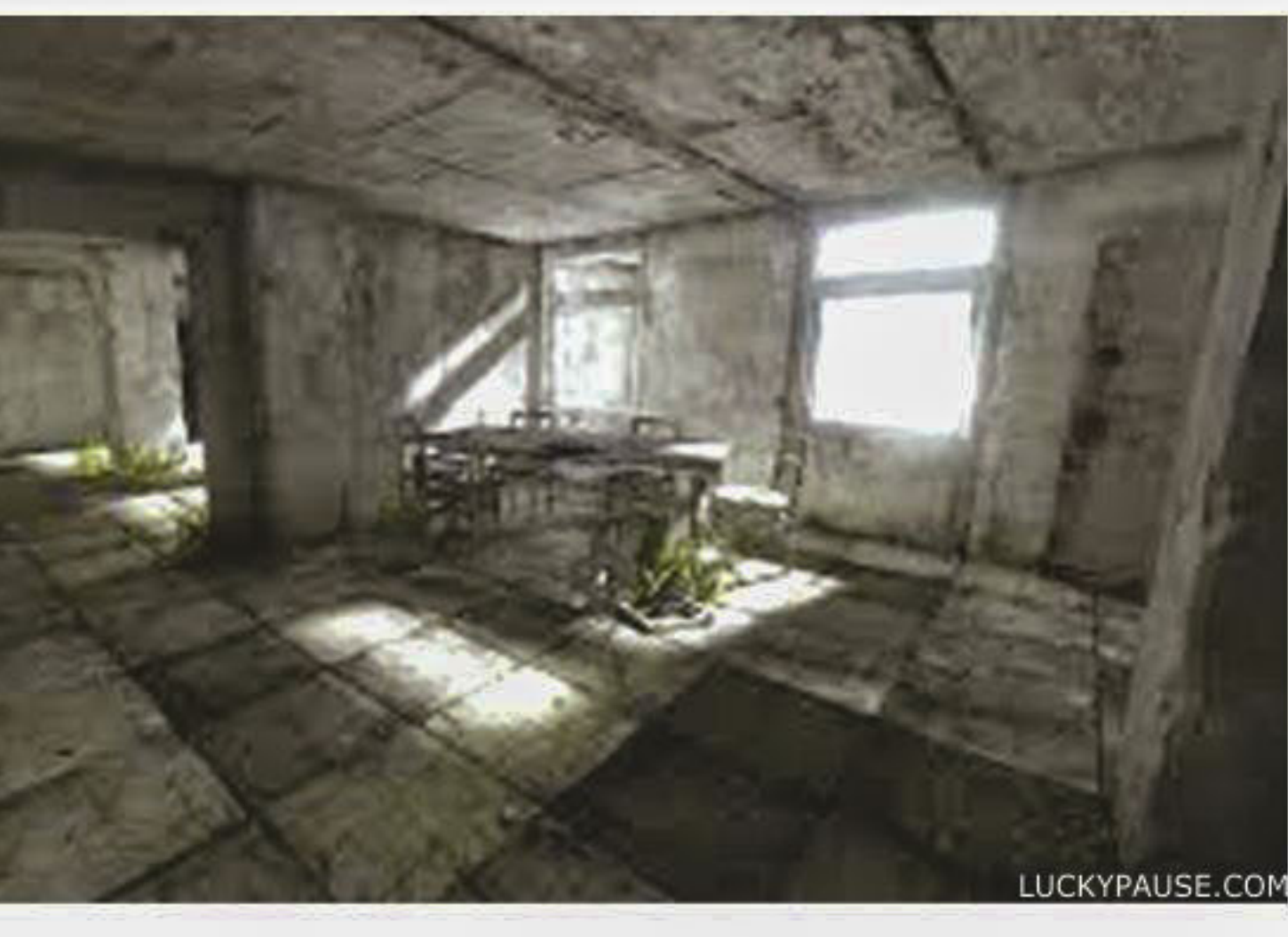
It's a foggy Monday morning and Panu wakes up early in his little flat. He groans, remembering the conversation he had with his aunt earlier. His aunt and her husband are coming and they are bringing three other people to his house today. Panu isn't pleased at all. They are from Bangladesh, and there's nothing in the world that displeases him more. His wife, dwarfish in size, is more excited and restless than him. But both are deeply worried about the calamity of the situation. After all, Bangladeshis do not know manners, they do not know how to be clean, Panu and his wife talk amongst themselves, so what would happen to their clean little home now? Panu could hardly dare to imagine.

Panu can't eat much of his bread, butter and jam today. He likes his uncle and his aunt well enough. They are the only relatives who ever kept contact with him and, bonus point, they have been living abroad for nearly fifty years. It's the thought of the three other dratted people coming that is making Panu nauseous. One thing that saves Panu from anxiety is the fact that he can show-off all these dairy products that he bought from a nearby department store to the Bangladeshi guests. He's sure they have never seen them. Panu becomes a little happy at this thought.

Panu goes to his job today. He can't concentrate much on his boring job of punching some files and copies. He is going to pick them up later that evening. Panu goes shopping then and decides to buy cheap Bangladeshi ingredients. Oh, how long it had been since he had eaten something Bangladeshi, Panu thinks to himself, as he reminisces about the country where he almost never goes now.

Panu picks up the five guests. He isn't pleased at all by what he sees. So much luggage. He doesn't like the look of the children either. They are overweight, which according to Panu equals ugliness. Panu doesn't have children of his own, he knows nothing how on to treat them, and now standing in front of him are two who are not only Bangladeshis but are also overweight. Panu hates fat people; his hatred for them, according to his timid wife, escalates to what Hitler felt for Jews. Panu immediately decides to teach them a lesson.

Panu enters into a conversation with his aunt. And of course in no time, starts jabbering about his hatred for fat people. A year back, Panu rants, this relative of his came and, gosh, she was so fat that Panu couldn't stand the sight of her. Now he can't believe his bad luck again. *Oh what would happen to all their food? Don't fat people have a tendency to steal,*



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Panu wonders to himself. His anxious thoughts however get interrupted when he hears about the compliment of his own thin figure. Panu's ego inflates and he brags relentlessly *I am a sportsman, if I don't run for a day, I feel like dying.*

Panu's temper takes a turn for the worst once the guests enter his house. The guests need to be fed and he needs to preach to the fat kids. Panu tackles the daughter first. But Panu can't be a gracious host, he is always nasty and ill-mannered. Why is she just standing there instead of helping his wife out in the kitchen? I bet you do nothing at home but only sit around, Panu says, almost as if he didn't just meet her meet her for the first time now. But Panu doesn't care that they had an eight-hour train journey, it's a new place, he could've just asked nicely and everyone is tired. He doesn't seem to know that people aren't blind to their faults and there is something

called a lack of space in Dhaka city. But Panu only sees what he chooses to. It's his house and the dictatorship belongs to him.

Panu doesn't stop there. He has to open his mouth at dinner as well. What? The son wants to study at America. Panu is incensed. He at once enters into a huge rant about how America is possibly the world's most dangerous and inhumane place. He himself would never go to that place even though he apparently can. Why would anyone ever want to go there, Panu says continuously. He doesn't let anyone else talk either, after all his opinions are the only things that matter, don't they? After some time the son replies that some of the world's finest research institutions belong to America. But Panu doesn't get that and defies it boldly.

Panu busies himself showing at how nicely he can eat with a knife and fork. He tries to steer the conversation to his advantage, and he doesn't like it when his poor knowledge gets tested. Well, not to worry, Panu has a game up his sleeve. He decides to jabber about his hatred of Bangladesh, about how all the people there are corrupted, uneducated, thieves, burglars and glad he is that he has he's left it. He vows proudly that he'll never come back again. Panu is a little taken aback when the guests shot back at him for being such a hater towards one's country and uttering such negative and vile things. The guests claim he's being hypocritical; after all he hasn't done anything good by abandoning the country that provided with education and made him into who he is today. If Panu had a conscience he might have listened. But he doesn't, so he merely shrugs and tries to laugh it away.

When dinner is over, everyone is tired and wanting to go to bed. But not Panu, he wants to rant more. Finally he gets outvoted by majority who are dying to get away from him.

Panu shows the kids where they are going to sleep and He talks about how all Bangladeshi kids are spoon-fed and they grow up becoming nothing. Except himself, of course. He then leaves and sinks to his bed. He can't sleep for some time. After the guests are gone, he decides, he'll clean the whole house from scratch. That would get rid of any unwanted dust. It's nearly after midnight that Panu manages to fall asleep.

Tomorrow, he knows, would be a hard day.

SAMIHA MATIN WRITES FICTION.

# The life of a scholar

M. SEKANDAR KHAN

It is a rare opportunity to be acquainted with a scholar of the stature of Professor Jahangir Tareque in the prime of his career. It was the mid-1960s. Chittagong College had been selected for offering Honours level teaching in a few subjects, among which were Bangla. As it was a degree pass teaching government college, the number of teachers for the department was raised to eleven from the previously sanctioned strength of five as a degree pass teaching college. A number of freshly recruited teachers were inducted into the college to equip the department for the new course. Jahangir Tareque was one of those joining the department. Among the others, Professor Mamtajuuddin Ahmed, Maniruzzaman and a few others became famous as teachers and later on made their mark in research and creative writing. I am speaking of a time when Abu Rushd Matinuddin was the principal of Chittagong College and Professors Abdur Rashid, Alauddin al Azad and Hasna Begum were heads of the Bangla Department in close succession.

The department of Bangla was already humming with literary and cultural activities. Jahangir Tareque's joining the department infused fresh energy into an already vibrant environment. The department used to arrange seminars, symposiums and cultural soirees under the banner of its Bangla Samity. Such activities were in fact extended programs of the department. Teachers were directly responsible for organizing these activities with the participation of teachers and students of the department. Students and teachers of other departments were welcome as audience and sometimes as active participants. Thus, these cultural activities and literary competitions were all college events open to all.

As mentioned above, this was a time when literary figures like Abu Rushd and Alauddin al Azad were on the staff of Chittagong College. Jahangir Tareque, on the one hand, drew inspiration from their presence and, on the other hand, made his own contributions through active participation in the college as well as the department. He wrote a few dance plays and musical sketches which were received with warm applause in those days by his peers in his discipline. Radio Pakistan broadcast some of these from their Chittagong station and Jahangir became a regular contributor.

In the late 1960s, Jahangir Tareque left Chittagong College for higher studies abroad. Literature was his subject and he attempted to achieve mastery over a wide range of European languages. To fulfill his endeavours, he chose France and went to Paris. He obtained an MA in English from the University de Paris in 1973. Earlier, in 1971, he obtained an MA in French from the University de la Sorbonne-nouvelle, Paris, from where he completed his Doctor de Troisieme cycle in 1976.

On his return from Paris in 1977, he became associate professor in the Department of Bangla, Chittagong University, where I had the opportunity to enjoy his close companionship a second time. Jahangir by now was a much accomplished scholar and teacher. While in Paris he acquired command over a wide range of European languages viz., English, French, Dutch, Latin, German Italian, Spanish and Portuguese. He already had good grounding in Hindi, Urdu, Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit. His new position at Chittagong could not provide him with sufficient scope for the use of his newly acquired knowledge in comparative language and literature. Thus, when the opportunity came, he joined the Modern Languages Institute of Dacca University in 1980. The new position opened up a world of opportunities for him.

Jahangir Tareque published a number of valuable works on literature and also translated some important works on semantics, literature and philosophy from French, German, Latin and English. At a later stage in life he was selected as a member on the dictionary project committees of Bangla Academy in recognition of his versatility and command over many European and Oriental languages. He was known for his interest in mathematics, philosophy, history and theology. He spent the closing years of his life in deep inquiries in these fields.

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