

**CELEBRATIONS**

# Our writers . . . our voices

*The Bengali New Year is only days away. As we prepare to welcome the year 1421, we celebrate some of the men and women who have, through their literary endeavours, enriched our cultural traditions over the decades. Enjoy!*



**Serajul Islam Choudhury**

**Humayun Ahmed**

**Muhammad Habibur Rahman**

**Badruddin Umar**

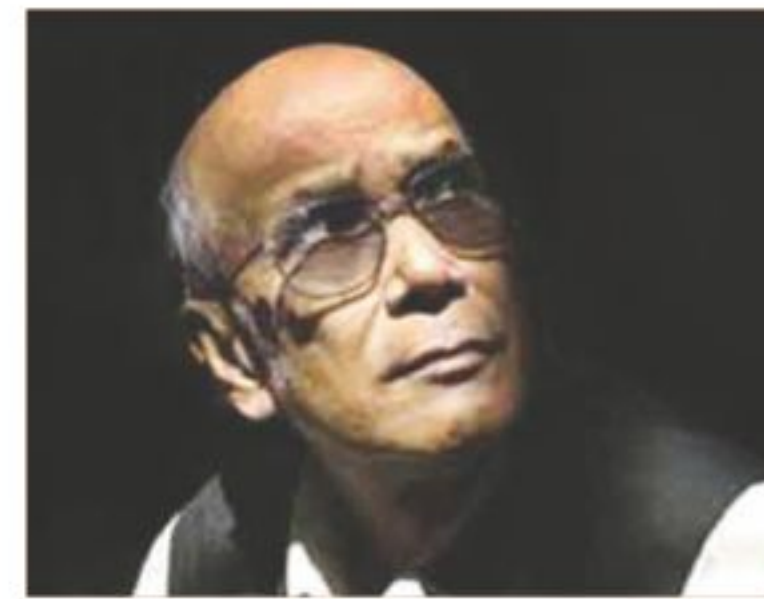


**Abul Mansur Ahmed**

**Taslima Nasreen**

**Selina Hossain**

**Muhammad Zafar Iqbal**



**Moinul Ahsan Saber**

**Imdadul Haq Milon**

**Rahat Khan**

**Syed Shamsul Haq**

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

**Serajul Islam Choudhury** (born in 1936) has had a distinguished career as an academic and critic. Educated at Dhaka University, Choudhury obtained a Ph.D from Leeds University, UK. As a teacher in the English Department of Dhaka University, he established a reputation for careful class preparation and inspiring his students into the various genres of English, indeed western literature. But while he taught literature, he also went into political writing, especially for such reputed Bengali language dailies as Sangbad, which carried his weekly column Gachpathor for many years.

Professor Choudhury, insistently a self-effacing individual, has scores of books to his credit, each one of which deals with issues he has felt closest to his heart. He has written on literature, focusing on such aspects of it as Shakespeare. His works on politics, particularly his analyses of conditions in South Asia, have been a hallmark of the intellectual tradition he has always upheld and passed on to others.

Left-wing in his view of politics, Choudhury has nevertheless brought into his intellectual observations the kind of objectivity which has regularly endeared him to readers. Serajul Islam Choudhury has, besides teaching and writing, been actively involved in the movement to preserve the environment in Bangladesh.

**Humayun Ahmed** (1948-2012) was in the last two decades of his life without question one of the most prolific writers of fiction in Bangladesh. His works, which have brought into play the lives and aspirations of common people in a language they identify with, have regularly been bestsellers. Once a teacher of chemistry at Dhaka University, Ahmed shot to fame with his first novel, Nondito Noroke. He did not have reason to look back after that.

The many-faceted nature of the writer has always been a pronounced affair. He has produced a number of drama serials for television and thus laid a credible claim as a leading playwright in the country. In his plays as in his novels, it is the urban middle class Bengalis who take centre stage. The extent of his appeal as a writer was demonstrated a few years ago when a poll showed him to be one of ten great living Bengalis.

**Muhammad Habibur Rahman** (1928-2014) had much of the protean about him. He served as chief justice of Bangladesh's Supreme Court and in that capacity presided over a general election in 1996 as chief advisor of a caretaker government. But if all that has been a significant phase in his life, there is too the man of letters that he has been. In recent years, before death overtook him, he wrote with passion and gusto on a wide range of subjects. Think here of law, language, literature, poetry and religion. His Bangla Bangla Bangladesh promises to remain a seminal work for a very long time.

Educated in Calcutta, Dhaka and Oxford, Muhammad Habibur Rahman remains noted for his wry wit, a trait he brought into his conversations in his private as well as public life. His articles and books, on the other hand, reveal a no-nonsense approach to contemporary issues. And he wrote poetry that emanated from somewhere deep within him.

**Badruddin Umar** (born in 1931) has over the decades retained his pre-eminence as a left-wing progressive where writing is concerned. Son of Abul Hashim, a leading figure in Muslim League politics in the 1940s, Umar demonstrated a clear inclination toward leftist politics and to that end directed his intellectual energies in a systematic analyses of politics as he saw it or as he thought it ought to be. His energy as a writer has never flagged.

A particular aspect of Umar's work lies in his careful observation of facts and the record, a factor which has always been noticeable in the

nearly one hundred books he has written over the years. His Shampradayikota is truly a scholar's guide to an understanding of communalism in the Indian subcontinent. There is also Shonskritir Shonkot. Perhaps Badruddin Umar is at his best when he studies the history of the Language Movement of 1952, on which event he has produced some indisputably authoritative works.

**Abul Mansur Ahmed** (1898-1979) was both a writer and a politician. The difficulty is in trying to understand which calling appealed to him more. Or was it a combination of the two that brought to readers his perspective on life? Suffice it to say that Ahmed was that rare breed of politicians who brought, in a way few have, a strong element of humour in his department. He was witty in speech and equally humorous in the written word. Even in the rather serious Amar Dekha Rajnitar Ponchash Bochhor he cannot resist bringing in a bit of humour. There is then, of course, the oft-referred-to Food Conference, a work that demonstrated conclusively the fundamentally literary bent of mind in him.

A particular work of Abul Mansur Ahmed's has been his survey of Bengali politics in the pretty incisive work, Shere Bangla Hoite Bangabandhu. It is a sweeping account of why Pakistan needed to be replaced by Bangladesh twenty fours into the division of India.

**Taslima Nasreen** (born in 1962) has always been famous for courting controversy with her writings. A medical practitioner until she switched to writing, first columns for weekly magazines and then going for full works of fiction, Nasreen has felt comfortable in expressing radicalism in her writing. She has repeatedly attacked obscurantism, argued for women's emancipation in a fundamentally conservatism society and has been open about her belief that sexual freedom is a necessary component of life and literature.

Nasreen was driven into exile in 1994 as a result of an outcry against her views. She has lived in various countries in Europe and in India, delivering talks and lectures and seeing her works translated in foreign languages. At home in Bangladesh, she continues to arouse great admiration as well as great hate.

**Selina Hossain** (born in 1947) is a writer constantly on the move with new ideas. In recent years her output has been of a remarkable sort, placing her on a perch where she shares the glory which comes to writers of true merit and striving. In these past three decades her writing has been prolific. She began writing soon after the liberation of Bangladesh and then went on to develop new themes and ideas for her subsequent works. Hangor Nodi Grenade, a searing commentary on the armed struggle for Bangladesh in 1971, has been powerful, purposeful reading.

And those who have read her voluminous three-part novel Gaayatree Shondhya will have little reason to forget the exhaustive socio-political history she draws of Bangladesh all the way from the late 1940s to the mid 1970s.

**Muhammad Zafar Iqbal** (born in 1952) has established an enviable niche for himself among wide swaths of the reading public in Bangladesh. Besides being a teacher at Shahjalal University, he is a well-known and respect columnist because of the principled stand he has adopted against any move to undercut the essential secularism of Bengali society. His boldness has been a hallmark with him.

As a writer, Iqbal has been prolific in coming forth with works for children. That endeavour has been complemented by the excellence which shines through his many works of science fiction, a literary factor that has endeared him particularly to the younger range of readers.

Younger sibling of Humayun Ahmed, Zafar Iqbal's soul remains seared by tragedy. His

father was killed by the Pakistan army in 1971 beside a river. It was Iqbal's heart-rending task to bury him, all by himself, and then convince his disbelieving mother that her husband had indeed been murdered by the soldiers.

**Moinul Ahsan Saber** (born in 1958) is the son of Ahsan Habib, one of the foremost of modern Bengali poets in Bangladesh. And the young Saber, seemingly unwilling to be left behind or because family tradition demanded it, soon went into the making of literature on his own. It all began in 1982, when his novel Porasto Sohish hit the bookstores. It was only the first step in the building of a reputation.

In subsequent years, Saber was to come forth with such works as Adamer Jonno Opekha, Manush Jekhane Jaaye na, Tumi Amake Niye Jaabe, Shongshar Japon, Pathor Shomoye and Dharabahik Kahini. He has also tried his hand at film making. Proof of that is Liliputera Ber Hobe, based on the Jonathan Swifts' Gulliver's Travels.

**Imdadul Haq Milon** (born in 1958) exercises a powerful hold on the young. His fiction ranges across a rather wide field, for if he at one point dealing with historical facts in an enumeration of his stories, at another he is bringing pure, clear romance into the telling of the tale. He goes back to the classics in literature, the better to present an unambiguous expression of the sensibilities which create passion and sometimes tumult in the modern soul. Love between man and woman is a recurrent theme in his works and keeps him on the pedestal he has created for himself over a long period of time.

A glimpse into his literary output will perhaps be a hint of his significance in these times. Read Jabojjibon, Nodi Upakhyam, Bhumiputro, Poradhinota and Rupnagar. And don't forget that eloquent instance of a work he calls Rajakartontro.

**Rahat Khan** (born in 1940) has been active both in the world of Bangladesh's literature and journalism. His journalistic association has for long years now been with the Ittefaq, a leading Bengali language newspaper. While his columns have regularly given fresh food for thought to readers, it is his literary peregrinations that have strengthened his hold on the public imagination. Rahat Khan took his first tentative steps in fiction at a tender age, when he was in class three.

Khan's output has been eclectic. In recent years he has achieved wide renown for such works as Moddho Maather Khelowarh. Other works of fiction from him include Ek Priyodorshini and Akangkha. His contribution to the genre of short stories has also been considerable.

**Syed Shamsul Haq** (born in 1935) has had a highly productive literary career. His writing has been prodigious, for it has brought within its ambience a lot of poetry, a high range of plays and an incredible arena of novels. Haq has never seemed to want for a theme and even now brims over with ideas and themes he quickly puts into fresh new creativity. Few writers have lived by literature. Haq has been one of those fortunate individuals. His poetry has been the stuff of new legend. His plays, such as Paayer Awaaj Paowa Jaaye, Juddho Ebong Juddho and Nuruldiner Shara Jibon, have broken new ground in Bangladesh's theatre.

Where Haq's novels are concerned, there is a whole mass of them that has come to readers from the late 1950s. Make note of only a few, if not more. There are Ek Mohilar Chhobi, Shimana Periyee, Ek Juboker Chhayapoth, Nishiddho Loban and Khelaram Khele Ja. Tradition and modernity are in Syed Shamsul Haq most deftly combined.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN IS WITH THE DAILY STAR.

**NON-FICTION**

# An Ode to My Love

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

I met you many years ago, and while my memory some days plays tricks with me now, I still can see, even on a very dark night, you standing there demurely when I first said Hello. I saw an old photo of you the other day, clad in a red saree, standing with your eyes cast down and a very sweet mysterious smile on an angelic face. The date on the back told me you were but a teenager then. My heart broke loose, and my whole body and soul yearned to be with you then.

You have been with me--on some days literally, on others only in my thoughts, and always on a moonlight night--as I breathe, walk, sing, close my eyes, or even doze off. You give me love, inspiration, music, words, and the joyousness to keep writing when my pen can go no further. When I hear a new song, I try to imagine how to sing it to you. A new flower blooms and I conspire to capture it for you. My flight of imagination gets hold of me and I am with you.

I remember on a moonlit night, as I embraced you before I said "Good bye" after an evening of love, songs, talk, on the same rooftop, you held me tight, and I don't know whether you heard my heart beating fast. When I finally released you from the embrace, I know you also felt sad to let me go. Then you looked up, since you could only reach to my shoulder, touched my chin with the back of your palm and said may be in a fit of sorrow, "I can only reach up to here". I held your beautiful loving eyes, and said, "You are always here, right in my heart."

On some days, I travel, or work long hours, and don't get to see you. But I don't fret about it, or let my heart cry out. I know you are there in my heart, in my soul, my motion, my vision, my words, or sitting next to me in the car as I go about my daily business. When I read a nice story, I know you will enjoy it, and have to hold back the urge to run to you to show it to you. When I sing, I feel like singing aloud for you. Alas, you are so far away. You say, "send me an email or text me". You work at a faraway place and I cannot make a plan to stop by unannounced. Actually, I don't call you or meet you at your work. Will your colleagues speak behind your back, I wonder? Will your students smile or even whisper if they see you with a man they haven't seen before? I don't know.

Some days, I wake up and you are sleeping next to me. I can hear you breathe and smell your fragrance. I wonder whether you also have me in your dreams. But, even you didn't I don't mind at all. You are all mine in my dreams. But now as I lie awake next you, suddenly a song comes to me, "Amar raat pohalo sharod pratey, bashi tomay diye jabo kahar hatey?" (English: My night comes to an end, fading into the soft daylight of a gleeful autumn morning. Who would take this flute of mine?) You are often a flute in my dreams, and I wonder whom should I leave thee with?

Yes, I often dream of you (and not always at night, let me confide.) In my dreamland, we can go places, play games, and say things that we can't do when we are together. You might ask, "Why only in your dreams?" "Well", I would say, "How

do I play soccer with you when we meet?" And if I were to sing aloud when I am with you, might not the onlookers think I am harassing you and come to your rescue, since I sing so passionately with gestures when I sing for you? Or, you might feel embarrassed if I take you to a soccer field and start kicking around a soccer ball.

Plus, there wouldn't be enough time to sing all the songs, recite all the poems, and narrate all the wonderful stories I want to share with you! There are only twenty four hours in a day, and sometimes I despair that I will carry with me to the other world many of the poems, songs, and sweet nothings that I gather during my waking hours. I have sometimes considered writing them all down and send them to you, but held back because I wonder whether you will read them. Then I also worry that cold words, hand-written or printed, will not be able to convey to you what I really want to tell you, with the passion and tone, and the fondness that I can muster when I am with you. If I leave a song on your voice mail, will you hear the same tune that you hear I sing to you in person?

I was at work when I called you this morning at home, and I told you, "I love you" and you said in reply, "I know". I feel that was what made my day. I do not mind that you did not say "I love you too" in return. Love is not only about to be loved and to love. But also to let her know how you feel, and then have the acknowledgement that you just gave. When you say "I know", to me it means she understands!

As my day progresses, today I just want to hold you, say sweet nothings in your ears, hear you giggle at these silly words. I like the way you crack up at my jokes. I want to feel you, touch you, tickle you, and always to kiss you. I can still taste the first kiss when I kiss you now and I feel the same rush. Sometimes during my silliness you ask, "Are you still a teenager?" I feel like saying to the world I am! Your love keeps me ever green. Do you remember the day when we went to a Meenabazaar at Ladies Club and, for the first time, you were not afraid to be seen with me? And I felt so happy to be standing side by side when Amina, one of the beauty queens of the city, came and said to you, "You have the most beautiful eyes". I was dying to tell you the same thing for some days but could not, and she stole it away from me. Even now, after all these years, I want to tell you how I feel before the words have been said by others. I still feel jealous when you spend a minute away from me. Why can't I say at the top of my voice, "She has my heart?" But, alas I will never be able to. My friend, Nibaron Chakrobarty, from Tagore's Shesher Kobita, might have put it better when he said, "Jey kotha roy praner bhitor ogochorey, gaaney gaaney niye chhiley churi korey". (Translation: All those melody, all those intimate songs of mine, those, you stole secretly from my heart.) Alas, I have no way but to quote from Tagore to show you my feelings in its entire panorama. I will copy all his love poems and songs and send them to you by next Valentine's Day.

DR. ABDULLAH SHIBLI LIVES AND WORKS IN BOSTON, USA.

**FICTION**

# The last night



AURITRO MAHBUB

Time brought forward the moment that seized a night's promise of quietness, peace and rest. A common soul, sleepless, experiences the inability to describe the flow of thought and feelings, which affects even from skin to bone.

A window beside this soul offers a view which all mankind has dreaded to witness. It is the kind of view that forces any human eye to beg forgiveness of its soul to see. It is the kind of view that makes any human heart beat faster, and slower, at the same time. It is the view that has been compared to the most horrifying nightmares ever cursed in man's imagination. A view, all caused by a moment when all mankind discovered the oncoming death of their existence. It is the moment when they learnt that the powerful and intelligent species that they are shall now be terminated in an instant, as an asteroid the size of the moon comes mercilessly plunging down towards the globe.

The soul beside the window, sleepless, witnesses the last night of mankind --- unimaginably depressed, yet surprised to see a strong species, with millions of years of survival behind it, about to be wiped out in

a minute's length. Outside the window are souls that have lost all sense of hope and control and are now bound to depart from life as they have known it.

Opportunities, aims, goals, hope, justice, assets, history, heritage, respect, love, indeed each and every human quality that exists or has ever existed, has lost all meaning for every human heart. Time has replaced and transferred importance and meaning to fear and despair.

All souls yet alive now await their death. A night that was looked forward to for a satisfying sleep has turned into the night that shall bring no dawn.

As the seconds and minutes slip away, never to return, the Earth shifts closer to the ultimate hour when a superior species shall face extinction. There is no hope left. Nothing will ever be the same again. Mankind lost life before the present moment, when mankind discovered that no tear would bring forth a new dawn.

For one soul, a sleepless night is not enough to describe such a spell-binding phenomenon.

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