



# "Patheo"

AHMED SOFA

AHMED Sofa in his early years used to write short stories. One such story was: 'Patheo'. As far as I know, this one has never won any fame or accolades in the literary world. One reason for it could be because it was not included in Ahmed Sofa's only anthology of short stories 'Nihoto Nokkhotro'.

'Patheo' was first published in the stories section of anthology 'Hay Swadesh' on 21st February 1972. Two more pieces -- a poem and an essay -- sharing the same name were published simultaneously on the same date. All three were published by the Bangla Academy. Cover art for all three pieces in the anthology of 'Hay Swadesh' were drawn by Zaimul Abedin, and the plot surrounding all three publications were of the War for Independence in Bangladesh. Ahmed Sofa was behind the initiation of all these publications. He was at the time the most important leader of the revolutionary group called 'Bangladesh Lekhok Shibir'.

The story 'Patheo' is based on the eve of Bangladesh's War of Independence. Just a few days after the Pakistani armed forces started the genocide, the oppressed started fleeing the country with their lives in their hands. In the same manner, a plighted group were fleeing from the country's northern division to Agartala in India's Tripura state. Within the throng of terrified, weak and helpless people marching the whole way was present a pregnant woman in labour. She gave birth to a baby boy by the bank of the river Titas adjacent to Brahmanbaria. Ahmed Sofa drew this scene of the new-born stepping into this world with his expert hands. The march to salvation was halted for a brief period on the banks of Titas that day. It started moving only after the birth of the boy was complete.

We think Ahmed Sofa drew a parallel with the birth of Bangladesh while writing this short story and wrapped the historic event within fiction to materialise the thought. The author has riddled the story with allegories. I myself have introduced this short story and named it 'The Birth of a New Nation' in some other anthology.

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The wave of people weaved through the snaking paths, rolled over the paddy fields, penetrated through the growth of bushes and shrubs, leaving behind their ancestral homes uprooting themselves from all that belonged to them including the sense of love for their identities like wild frightened game on the run and hiding from a bloodthirsty hunter. Their

numbers kept increasing with every step. They would stop to rest for a while, but without peace -- the thoughts of the people they left behind, their fathers, mothers, children, all those relatives who could make it and those who couldn't haunted them with every thought. Fresh memories of the noise made from firing guns and blasting bombs that left their loved ones torn to pieces and bathed in blood kept chasing them. The people would start to walk again, but not through the straight roads out in the open; they would choose the hidden paths winding through the jungles. The love for life was their greatest love at that point. There was no use in sharing their grief, neither was there any solace in grieving anymore. What else could happen through shedding tears for their ancestral roots? All was lost! All they could do was save themselves. The people kept on going; nobody hurried them along; they knew not where they were going or even sure of which paths to take. They only knew they had to cross the border and enter Agartala. No one knew what would happen afterwards, or what would follow. Everything was unfathomable! All was an unseen peril!

The people came onto the rail tracks after roaming about quite a bit. Eight to ten of them just stood still after getting onto the tracks from the front. They wanted to know if it would be wise to walk on the tracks and so turned to those in the rear and asked with their heavy dialect, "What say you? Should we head on?"

A handful of them from the rear spoke up simultaneously in the same accent, "Yes! Fare forth. Bridges on both ends are wrecked."

The wave of half dead people then silently stepped onto the tracks. The sky was alight with the sun's rays. Freshly sown jute nodes into the vast field kept nodding along in the breeze. The sun's heat was merciless earlier during the day; it was much more bearable at that point of time. There was a soothing breeze flowing too.

It took them two days on foot to reach Pagachang Station from Nabinagar, whereas it would've taken just a fourth of a day if they followed the fox's route. Every one of them was half baked in the sun; most were parched from the heat. They had crossed countless villages, neighbourhoods, ponds; they could not even ask for a pail of water. Robbers were stationed undercover in all vicinities. People were ruthless; one band of them would kill, and other groups would steal -- even the clothes from the backs of women. Adolescent girls would be abducted. There was nothing but anarchy; every little thing in existence in the motherland seemed to have become one's enemy -- the long black river that took a turn in the far distance would deny even one cup of water to one holding it out with dying thirst.

The breeze brought a lot of relief. An old man while looking back

clutched onto the end of his dhoti and started to wipe away the welling tears and cried out, "I left back my son forever. God, you are a sea of mercy."

Crying is contagious. There was this girl who hadn't uttered a single word till then. Her stern and stiff face resembling that of a mango's pit broke down into ripples of sadness. At first she tried to hold back her sobs, but then let them blare out, "Oh my brother Pranhari, how will I survive without you?"

Another middle aged woman, devoted to Radha and Krishna, filled her voice with concern and care while saying, "Be still child. This is all of god's will."

But the whole group was swelling up with the sounds of crying by then. Every one of them had lost someone dear -- father, brother, husband, wife, son, relative, friend or a loved one. There was no one left in this world related to Ramanikinkor's mother from Acharjapara. The crone had been complaining the whole while; asked around everyone that she could summon close to her, "How will I even eat a fist full of rice now? I left everything behind -- even the plate I used to eat from. Oh my burnt luck. I came out with everyone as fire started to gut Tapan Babu's hut."

Nobody paid heed to her words. The crone had even fallen silent after a while. Then she started again, "Who knows how good the food there will be?"

It didn't matter Ramani's mother was widowed; she was always greedy for food. A young boy in his teens scolded her, "People are dying here and you can't stop going on about food. One more word and I will push you off these tracks."

The old crone had then just kept murmuring to herself all the while cursing the god of the skies. She was perplexed having seen everyone breaking down to tears on the tracks in the afternoon. She could not fathom the whole scene at first. She then rubbed both of her cataract infused eyes, shifted the staff from her right hand to the left and construed her face as if in agony wailing out in prayers for the long departed, "Oh Ramani."

A mother had lost her first born son two days prior. Her bosom had swelled up with pain -- she was the only one who remained as silent and as hard as stone.

The people kept pushing forward. They had erased all memories of their homes from their hearts, from the picture and vision of the motherland. Death had laid traps for them at every falling step. They still kept walking through it all. They could hear blasting cannons whenever they lent their ears to nature; see only fires reaching up to the sky and the blood soaked bodies of their relatives. Still, they walked on in hopes of living another day. Tormenting death resembled to confine them into a spherical iron cage from all sides; death had taken the form of a wholesale dealership and engulfed them all. And that was exactly why

they were fleeing their roots, homes, the caring veil of the motherland, disowning their umbilical ties with the land. Life is very beautiful; it's very sweet to be alive. Where does the shadow of the beautiful and peaceful shelter that protects life fall?

A girl within a group whispered something to another. They turned to look behind them. The gossip spread like wildfire. All the women turned around to look at the man one at a time. The men followed suit in observing the dark tall man. There was no sense of hatred, malice or even one complaint uttered against him. 'The man from last night', was the only thing on everyone's lips being muttered like a prayer. Mankind never fails to get over the feeling of astonishment. Even with death hovering above their heads, they all gazed upon the man astonished and with curiosity. It was as if the tall dark man had no right to flee the country.

The group had spent a night together in a school house. The man was there with them. He, in the very dark of the night, had crawled up like a cat and hugged tightly Haricharan Kumar's daughter. It could have been panic, or fear, but the extremely dark and unmarried girl since long had screamed out very loud. He had very gently left the premise for the night as everyone awoke from their sleep. Nobody knew a single fact about the man -- who he was, whose son, whose grandson, where he was from; nothing. He was following them with his long shadow trailing behind him on the tracks. This was the reason for all their astonishment.

The wave of people reached Bhatshala Station. The station Master's cabin was barred. There was not even a trace of anyone there. The whole of Bangladesh that lay in front of them was taciturn and motionless right up to the horizon lit up by the sun's light. The air was being sucked in only to be expelled as long sighs. There was only one sight to be seen: people were escaping keeping to the rail tracks, like scattering wild animals fleeing to find shelter from fire spreading in the jungle and destroying their habitat -- unaware of where they were going, only to be able to save their lives.

Sound resembling the mating call of beetles came floating in. a very faint sound. The sense of hearing of the travellers had been heightened in those past four or five days. A couple of them stood fast, listening to the sound. It grew into an unending mechanical hum followed by a continuous spitting noise. A middle aged man cocked his head and tried very hard to listen and make sure what it was. He then, in the heavy accent, said, "I think planes are firing at the grounds near Brahmanbaria in Bhairab."

It didn't take long enough for the opinion to spread through the group. Everyone by then was staring at the North-Western sky. They even stood up on the tracks to try and see what was happening. They did see four airplanes. At first they appeared to resemble four white dots, and their true form was only visible when they descended towards the ground. They were making the same distinct drone like mechanical hum while circling the area like buzzards. The spitting noise was louder, and did originate from on board machine guns firing bullets. The planes were ascending into the sky one moment, and swooping down like hawks on targeted prey the other. There were other infrequent sounds of something heavy hitting the ground and resounding off like thunder, sending waves of vibration creeping along the ground -- those were bombs.

The astonished people started to walk again. The Pakistani armed forces unleashed death from the skies. They did not have to go far. More people who were not responsible for their own births or politics -- that is those who had not even given a second thought to Muslims and the country's state for decades after decades -- were advancing the rail tracks, like a tsunami about to break on the stony walls of a ragged cliff. They had left behind the soil, the soft water soaked loam of Bangladesh they had so dearly held onto like the roots of a thousand year old tree penetrating as deep as deep would go. Even they uprooted themselves from the surrounding villages dragging along with them their cattle, as much as rice and paddy they could carry, beddings, quilts, pillows, anything and everything they could get their hands on, like birds from freshly destroyed nests huddling their hatchlings close, as they crossed over the marshes. It was only near Bhatshala that these people were introduced to the prior ones travelling from Nabinagar. One from the previous group, those who had already laid claim on the tracks, asked out loud, "Hey there! What news do you bear?"

A man, while tugging on a rope with a black goat on its end, said, "Not good at all, my friend. There is no more peace left in the world. The Punjab forces have stationed themselves on the other side of the Ujanishar Bridge already. Only if it was not broken, then you would have seen them run across it to reach Brahmanbaria in no time. It is going to be a ruthless war! The Freedom Fighters have stationed themselves on this side of the bridge since yesterday."

Not ten minutes had passed by and the atmosphere was veiled in a canopy of immense noise, smoke and fire from terrifying cannon blasts. Gunfire from rifles could be heard distinctly in all the commotion. The war had commenced in Ujanishar. Both sides exchanged fire nonstop. The noise from each of the Pakistani 36 pounder cannons were enough to make one's ears bleed. The whole group of vagabonds just stood still. Planes were dropping bombs in Brahmanbaria; bullets from the on board machine guns were felling corpses of innocent people all over the place. A battle was on going. Death surrounded them

from all sides of the compass. People were fleeing towards the tracks through the marsh lands like ants on attack of a dying corpse to scavenge for food. It was a time for reckoning, a very destitute time for Bangladesh. Whoever is out there -- wherever you may be -- flee! No matter how, however you can, save yourselves!

The life of a man was worthless then. The Pakistani soldiers were hungry to take lives. They would shoot down anything that showed signs of remotest movements.

Standing on the tracks, they saw a thread of red fire rising up into the clouds in the South-West corner of the sky, twisting and writhing as if in embrace with a tornado. The atmosphere took a turn as the air seemed to be sucked out of it by a gaping mouth -- with a lolling tongue protruded outwards -- to be replaced by black billowing smoke dancing and swirling around like hateful witches and wrath filled unsullied fire. Men, women, children and the elderly -- no one would be allowed to survive. Everything would be burned to ashes. They would be shot dead. The cannons would blow their heads off their shoulders. The cattle would be left behind as charcoal fossils in the marshes. All fruit bearing trees would embrace the flames and contain them within in silent tolerance and stand still as monuments to the carnage. There could not exist any animal named human in Bangladesh; only the military. The soft sedimentary soil beneath their boots would echo them patrolling the lands repeatedly. The air would only be laced by the vile petrol fumes exhumed by their vehicles, void of any aroma. The cuckoos would never call again. Sparrows would not at dawn fly on top of the tin roofs to scratch at the metal or chirp away merrily. They all stood there and witnessed the cremation of thousands of years of traditions shaped through a deep love only a mother could bestow onto this stage called life. The whole group just walked on glancing and gazing into the fires burning on the funeral pyre of their ancestry, only because the price of life was far, far more valuable than any memory, love, or weakness. And no one was ready to give that up in that moment.

The will to live pushed forward the sea of people forward in their march. It was as if the whole of Bangladesh was on an aimless journey having been rendered hollow and destitute. There was no time to cry; no leisure to procrastinate; only to conserve the energy to be expended in one's death and use it to live. Oh! The will for men to live on!

They stopped in front of the river Titas. The banks were overrun with countless encampments; thousands and thousands of inflicted, terrified and lost people, yet none was without a load on their back. Many had children, many more burdened and crippled with age, some carrying their

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