

EDITOR'S
NOTE

"Recognize yourself in he and she who are not like you and me." — Carlos Fuentes

This week Shahpar Selim does a double take on a childhood favourite, reminding us that while we are 'LOLing' at the world around us (or in our computers), we must remember to laugh at ourselves too. We also have two poems on an issue that made the headlines all of last week. Though the latest chapter itself seems to have come to an end, the bigger story, unfortunately, will continue to unfold in other places, in other ways. The deduction minus the conclusion? Everyone seeks a better way of life – it's only a twist of fate that puts the 'he' and 'she' out to sea and 'you' and 'me' on solid ground.

MUNIZE MANZUR

LAUGHING LIKE
RAY'S CHILDREN

Shahpar Selim

People my age are one of the last few generations that grew up in Dhaka without twenty-four hour television or the Internet. We would read. A lot. One of our favourite authors growing up was, of course, Satyajit Ray. We would hide his Feluda books under our textbooks and read them in class because we each had an allotted time to finish the story and pass the book on to a classmate who was glowering impatiently at the back of our heads in class, willing us to hurry up and get to the end of the book before the Social Sciences period was over. Satyajit Ray, as beloved as he is to our childhood, wasn't my favourite Ray – that title belongs even now to his father, Sukumar Ray.

If Satyajit Ray was in my mind forever imagined with his brows thoughtfully furrowed, his father Sukumar is the one who taught me what should be laughed at and why.

We cannot understand Bengali satire without understanding Sukumar Ray. His most famous work is "Abol Tabol" which is a collection of wildly imaginative poems where the world is topsy-turvy and questions get asked that never seem to happen in a world where everything is in perfect order. His satire didn't leave anybody behind – the stuffy and pretentious connoisseur of classical music, the people with imaginary illnesses, those who are deeply menacing in their insistence of their benign intentions, those who are so proud of all the nonsense information that they know, the poseurs and the pompous, the self-impressed, the easily fooled and the easily

pleased. His poems were certainly meant for children of all ages who wanted to see society beyond the stereotypes of 'bhodroloker shomaj'.

Growing up, Sukumar Ray's works were like discovering a box of firecrackers. I knew the poems by heart.

My girlhood would have been incomplete without this strange and wonderful world where there is the democracy of satire.

Ray is also famous for his short stories placed in a rural *pathshala* in early 1900's Bengal. Less absurd than his "nonsense gibberish poems", his short stories played around the same kinds of themes. School teachers were benign and sometimes clueless, sometimes cruel and always comical. The real stars of his stories were the boys – the unnamed narrator, Ramapod, Jogobondhu, Bishu, Gonsha – and their boyhood scrapes became part of my growing up. The star of these stories is the unforgettable oddball, *Pagla Dashu* ("crazy Dashu"). Roy introduces him thus – "There wasn't anybody in our school who did not know Doshorothi, also known as Dashu. Even he who didn't know anybody, managed to figure out who Dashu was." His face, his mannerisms, his appearance, his "unnecessarily long ears", his outbursts, all indicated that he was slightly off in the head.

When he spoke, the author didn't know why it reminded him of a shrimp. But Dashu was in no means unintelligent, and by that Ray created just the perfect foil for his satire. He was odd but terribly intelligent, and executed elaborate revenge schemes when he thought life had dealt him an unfair card; but he was ultimately harmless and was mostly on the receiving end of fisticuffs. He was a



were snoring." The *mastar-moshai* was caught and tried to change the subject, "Snoring? I was snoring, they were playing noughts and crosses, and what might you have been doing?" Deadpan, Dashu replied, "Me, I was setting fire to the fire crackers."

Perhaps the best thing I liked about Dashu was his self-deprecating humour. His classmates would make fun of his looks, and he'd join in by telling the story of the protocol in his neighbourhood that whenever anybody dries *aamshotto* on the roof, they call on Dashu to make a few rounds of the roof – this scares off the crows you see. Another time Dashu shows up in school wearing pantaloons – what we now call trousers. This caused much mirth and ridicule in school, because all the kids wore dhotis. When somebody asked him why he was wearing pants, Dashu smirked and replied, "Because I want to learn English really well."

You don't get characters like these anymore who are unafraid and witty enough to take a joke about themselves. It was also never quite clear if Dashu was actually a bit nuts or deviously mischievous.

Our childhoods were so much better for having laughed out loud in the world of Dashu. We might not read Sukumar Ray much anymore, or even if we do, maybe our children won't fall in love with the rhythm of his prose, or understand some of the words – *hutopoti*, anyone? – and might find it terribly lame when a pompous babu is drenched with a *pichkari* of muddy water in the middle of a crowded street.

We are now of a different society and of a different time.

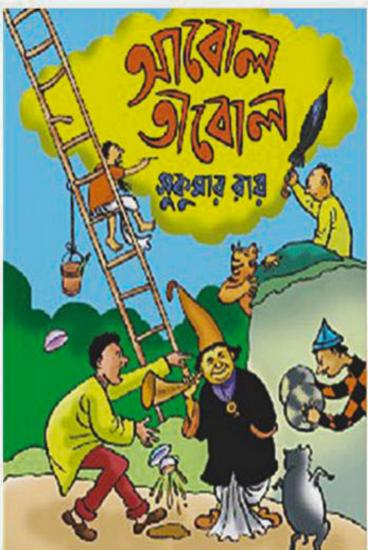
We need Buzzfeed to make a neat list of ten things that we must find funny.

We need Facebook like buttons to show appreciation and acceptance of mass-think. We share cat photos because they make us feel less anxious about the world. Satire is limited to supposedly edgy comments Tina Fey makes on prime time TV to a prerecorded laugh track.

Our satire is now blunt toothed and ineffective.

We will be left so much poorer if we stop knowing how to laugh at ourselves, by ourselves. We knew how to do it in our childhood. Why should we let that go?

Shahpar Selim has a Doctorate in environmental policy from the London School of Economics, and currently resides in Dhaka.



misunderstood dork with a deep sense of fairness. I was immediately in Dashu's corner. He was just my kind of shrimp.

The genius of Ray's Pagla Dashu stories is that he showed us a world where nothing is necessarily fair to the good hearted;

children are selfish and unkind; and having intelligence and a sense of humour is sometimes the better arsenal. Not that Dashu was particularly fair or measured while doling out justice according to his own rulebook. He was after all, just a misunderstood and often hurt kid in class IV, and perhaps there was some good reason why everybody was a little afraid of his eccentric ways.

In one of the Dashu stories, we meet Ramapod, who never quite liked Dashu. For his birthday, Ramapod brought a *haari* full of *mihidana* and everybody had their share. The boys urged Ramapod to give some *mihidana* to Dashu, to which Ramapod said, "Well,

Dashu? Want some, do you? If you do, say so and have some, but later on don't you come cross me." Dashu extended his hand and took the *mihidana*. Then he called the security guard's goat and fed it to him. After recess, no one remembered the *haari* anymore and everybody settled in for Bangla lessons. The *mastar-moshai* told the boys to conjugate the word "nodi" and promptly fell into a gentle post-lunch nap. The boys started playing noughts and crosses; whenever the *mastar-moshai's* snoring would go down, they would loudly yell river related words, "nod, nodi, nouddou". Then all of a sudden, there was a series of explosions. *Mastar-moshai* woke up with a fright and was, as they say, *kinghortobhyo-bimurho*. Other teachers from the nearby classrooms also came running. In the yard, Ramapod's *mihidana haari* was found full of burst firecrackers, almost earning him a slap from *mastar-moshai*. Dashu came running to the teacher to show him the slates with the noughts and crosses, and said, "When you were sleeping, this is what they were doing." The teacher said, "Sleeping, who said I was sleeping?" Dashu replied, "But you

The Migrants

S M Shahrukh

They had set sail in hope
in dinghies or rickety boats,
leaving their strife-torn shores
with a hope
for survival
for respite
for a new dawn that's not blood soaked.
They ended up in nondescript coffins
hopes dashed, lives lost
floating bodies in the blue Mediterranean
like flotsam that once lived.
A number on the coffin
no names, just a number,
not mourned by loved ones
only a handful of lucky survivors bawl,
they don't know the names of the dead
but a river of tears still flows
a saline taste reaching the tongues.

They were coming to the shores of prosperity,
They never gave a second thought
not the shaky boats on choppy seas.
Oh, to get away

from wars, from tribal blood thirst
from the poverty that strife creates.
The black, the brown, the mixed colours of Africa
on the move to the land of plenty
to the land that created all the trouble
created all the poverty
indigence is no way to live by

but for the greed of the white man has no limits.
Power games have made have-nots
of the people of North Africa.
They will keep coming
better to die in the hope of life
than commit hopeless suicide.



Dejection:

A Sonnet

Quamrul Hassan

I would love to be proven wrong that day,
My friend. If you laugh at me I will not
Utter a word. This me would rather say,
"Congrats on winning the war you have fought."

I would accept all the jeers you throw my
Way without cursing back. And if you want,
My dear friend, I would eat the humble pie
And put on a red *lungi* with a pant.

But until the day you can prove me wrong
And show me I have long long been a fool
I will keep singing this same sad old song
No matter if I am home or at school.

"Yours is no country for an honest man
Fly away, my friend, as soon as you can."