

# Dad taught me to be informed, bold, unafraid

TRISHA AHMED

**E**XACTLY a year ago today, Avijit Roy was hacked to death in the most public of places: Coming out of a crowded book fair in Dhaka, Bangladesh. His crime? He was a blogger who wrote prominently about secular issues - works that his misguided attackers viewed as blasphemous. In the months that followed, fundamentalists carried out several other attacks on secular writers.

In the piece below, Roy's stepdaughter Trisha Ahmed, a second-year student at Johns Hopkins University, recounts the father she remembers and the attack she's trying to forget.

2008

For a while, it felt strange to call him "dad" because he had the aura and wit of a fun uncle. When we moved into a new house in the summer after my sixth grade, he picked up two long sticks in the backyard, and passed one to me.

"Sword fight?" he challenged. "It'll be my pleasure to beat you," I snarked back.

We waved our wooden swords at each other until it got dark outside. Every time I lost, I wanted a rematch. And I lost every time.

I asked him one day why he never let me win. "Don't you want me to treat you as my equal?" he asked.

2012

Though my dad worked as a computer programmer during the day, he was a writer when he came home. His books were about the science behind homosexuality and the "virus" of religious extremism. With the goal of incorporating more secular discussion into mainstream Bangladesh, he was also becoming a well-known activist.

One month before the national AP exam during my 11th grade, my calculus teacher quit. He told us he was sorry to leave, but that he had to because he wasn't making enough money as a high school teacher.

My dad and I struck a deal. He would help me with calculus and physics, if I would help him transition into writing in English.

"Dad, these sentences are horrible. How have you been getting by with this kind of grammar?"

"Trisha, please just make the edits. The content is good."

And it always was. We had a good thing going.

**February 13, 2015**

Every February, a national book fair is held in Dhaka, my parents' hometown in Bangladesh. Before flying there, my parents decided to visit me at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, where I was now a student.

They brought me a box full of presents: Candy, clothes, notebooks, pens. I felt guilty for not getting them anything, so I quickly pulled two scarves out of my backpack.

My dad wore the scarf all night long. "You give him a new thing, and he'll wear the hell out of it with pride," my mom joked.

**February 26 (morning)**

At 10:30 a.m., I took a seat in the back of my 300-person lecture class in cognitive neuroscience. At noon, I checked my phone and saw three unread messages from my cousins in Bangladesh.

Tears streamed down my face. My body shook. I dialled my roommate.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "Are you okay?"

"My dad's dead and my mom's in the ICU in Bangladesh."

**February 26 (afternoon)**

With swollen, dead eyes, ringed in red, I posted on Facebook:

My dad was a prominent Bengali writer, most famous for his books about science and atheism. He and my mom went to Bangladesh last week to publicise his books at Bangladesh's national book fair. 15 hours ago, Islamic fundamentalists stabbed my dad to death. My mom was severely wounded from the attack and is still in the hospital. His death is headline news in Bangladesh.

The reason I'm sharing this is less for me and more for my dad. He was a firm believer in voicing your opinion to better the world.

He and my mom started dating when I was six years old. In the twelve years that followed, he became my friend, my hero, my most trusted confidante, my dance partner (even though we're both terrible dancers), and my father. Not once did he tell me to simmer down or be more polite; he taught me to be informed, bold, and unafraid.

To say that I'm furious or heartbroken would be an understatement. But as [screwd] up as the world is, there's never a reason to stop fighting to make it better. I'll carry the lessons he taught me and the love

he gave me forever. I love you so much, Dad. Thank you for every single thing. <3

#WordsCannotBeKilled

Those are the words the public saw.

But what they didn't see was me downing sleep medicine every night, so I wouldn't dream of my dad lying in a pool of his own blood. What they didn't see was the worry that I wouldn't see my mom again, and that if I did, she would never be the same, and I would be an incompetent caretaker. What they didn't see was me watching Bangladeshi news networks at all hours of the day, watch-

ing footage of thousands of people marching in the streets with my dad's face painted on banners, demanding justice for his murder.

What they didn't see was a girl who had gone mute.

**March 3**  
I didn't recognise my mom at first when she returned to the States. Her head was shaved. I thought of when she was diagnosed with thyroid cancer -- how shrunken and slow she became during treatment, how my chest felt intensely hollow for days at a time.  
It was 10 pm, and I stood in the airport to greet her. She was surrounded by a doctor, an FBI agent and a handful of security guards. We



The writer with her father Avijit Roy.

COURTESY: CNN

She started to weep when she thought I was asleep. I slowly ran my fingers down her arms, down her back, until she was calm. It's an old trick my grandma's mom taught her, who taught my mom, who taught me.

**March 22**

I flew back to camp alone. I was told that the same group that killed my dad could still be targeting my mom and me. My mom instructed me not to go anywhere alone, no matter the time of day, and not to go anywhere at night, period. I met with an FBI representative. She assured me I was most likely safe. But that didn't stop the paranoia from seeping in.

**May 3**

The leader of Al Qaeda's branch in the Indian subcontinent published a video that claimed responsibility for murdering Avijit Roy in the name of Islam.

**May 26**

I was home in Georgia after a long and tired semester. It felt eerie. With every corner I turned, I expected to see my dad typing in his study or reading in my parents' bedroom.

It had been three months since the attack. I was on the floor, crying. Nothing seemed real. I got on the balcony, and readied myself to jump. My boyfriend found me before I did. He helped me back inside and put me to bed.

**September**

While my dad spent most of his life reading about science and secularism, my mom spent most of hers reading about politics and history and feminism and cultures of the world. After a few months at work, my mom decided to take a leave from her job as a senior director at a credit bureau.

"Are you sure this is what you want to do?" I asked her.

"Who knows?" she laughed. "I was thinking today that your dad died for his passion, so I should at least try living for mine."

Within a week, she was out of the country, meeting with humanist associations all over Europe. She began working to get other activists out of Bangladesh, before they could suffer the same fate as my dad. Although my mom hadn't sorted through all of her own issues yet, she wanted desperately to help others get to safety.

**Today**

As brutal as his death was, I don't think my dad would have wanted to live any differently. By dying for his cause, he gained worldwide attention to the oppression and murder of scientific thought in Bangladesh -- a country that claims to be governed by secular principles.

I know that Al Qaeda, ISIS, and other manifestations of religious extremism are alive and well. But by writing and sharing my story, I am making my impact. I -- and so many others -- am slowly, thoughtfully, and certainly chipping away at the ideologies that seek to destroy us.

The writer is a second-year student at Johns Hopkins University. Copyright: CNN

## A story of walls

SHAHER REAZ

*Physical walls matter less in a political economy that involve digital walls more often than those made of concrete. However, even these un-concrete but still valid walls of social media shares and posts are censured, so why do we even expect that physical walls will fare better, carry more meaningful messages, and more importantly be more effective?*

**T**O get to the Ekushey Boi Mela held on the hallowed grounds of Bangla Academy situated at the equally hallowed grounds of the Dhaka University campus, you can take any one of three routes. You can enter the premises through the road leading to Doyel Chatter from in front of High Court, or take the route of Nilkhet-Arts Building-TSC and finally, through Shahbag straight towards TSC.

Every year, the Ekushey Boi Mela is held commemorating the lives lost in the fight for our independence in the linguistic hegemony West Pakistan tried to impose on us, leading to the tragic deaths of Salam, Barkat, Rafique and others on that fateful day of 21st February, 1952, a movement largely orchestrated and executed by the students of the very university that houses the book fair and the monument erected in honour of our brave language martyrs. To say they broke through the wall of West Pakistani oppression and bureaucracy to reach their end goal is to undermine the sacrifice these people made in ensuring our ability to speak our native tongue, but since this is a story of walls put up and walls left standing, it is noteworthy to ask the readers to hold on to that thought.

Every year, our honourable Prime Minister makes a trip to the Dhaka University campus to lay flowers to the spiritual graves of our language martyrs and inaugurate the Ekushey Boi Mela for the general public. To mark the occasion, barricades are set up at every entry point to the university campus restricting access to the general public on the eve of 21st February, as a security measure and as a means of curbing the enthusiasm of the general public in catching a glimpse of their dear leader and the daughter of the nation. Here, you have your first wall.

The second wall is a wall that is not just erected on a particular day or for a particular event, but is equally, if not more, relevant towards the analysis we're trying to construct here. It's a wall that is faced by lakhs of people from the remotest corners of the country every single year, a wall that

only 40,000 are allowed to cross through the thin gate, the gatekeeper of which is the system of education in place in Bangladesh -- if you have not yet guessed, it happens to be entry into the "highest echelon of education" in the country, University of Dhaka. They all sit for an exam that is biased towards a certain brand of education, a certain approach to it that eliminate the scope for others while playing a game of impossible averages that detract all manner of candidates, from the lanky English Medium graduate dreaming of studying in the same Physics department run by S.N. Bose to the Dakhil pass who dreams of entering the foray of public university graduates vying for a government job. There are special privileges, ways of getting around the wall via shortcuts, through various quotas including a teachers' quota, Muktiyoddha quota or through the Adivasi quota, although some feel these quotas are divisive and are detrimental to the overall system of entry to DU in the face of the challenges faced by a "regular" candidate in gaining entry. Lets, for now, banish these opinions to more figments of imagination in the hopes of gaining more concrete grounds for an analysis worthy of the praise of the esteemed civil society of Bangladesh.

Let us talk about physical walls, then, since barely anything is more concrete than bricks and mortar. Anyone bothered enough with such matters will have come across the countless walls surrounding various student halls, teachers' quarters, departments and libraries in DU, covered with messages from various student bodies and organisations, each with their own unique twist and flavour. Some ask for the immediate release of a certain "Pintu bhai" from jail, others decry the rising costs of education, and yet others ask passerby's to try and murder a stenciled portrait of Avijit Roy in the vain hopes of reaching out to a wholly illogical population regarding the illogical murder of a proponent of logic and free thought. Mostly though, the messages are in praise of the PM's valiant battles against the forces opposing democracy, the forces trying to take away our seas, and her commendable efforts in ensuring a just and fair trial against our war criminals in the road

map to progress that she has laid out for us.

We digress. After all, this is a story of walls, and walls have ears. What we forget quite often is that walls have mouths too, and the mouths they have speak loudly to those who care to listen. Back in 1952, those very walls spoke out against the attempts to contain our ability to speak our native tongues, and come 2016, our walls have somehow lost the ability to speak out against injustice and blindness persisting in our very own state.

Seems strange? In the magical reality of post-independence Bangladesh, even our walls seem censured, doomed to a lifetime of being left alone for precisely a year till the calendar turns over to the second week of February each year, when the walls of Dhaka University are "cleaned up", anticipating the arrival of our PM for the official inauguration of that feverish rise of Bangali nationalism that Ekushey represents. The cries for the removal of security forces from the Chittagong Hill Tracts, "posted" in a naively hopeful manner by the local student body of indigenous students, are painted over in blinding white, all before an army of party backed students paint pictures of blissful pleasantries directed at the government for the great job it is doing in ensuring human rights. So censured are the walls of DU today, that private university students took to the desperate measures of painting on the streets of Dhanmondi and on the sides of buses and luxury cars in Gulshan to have their cries of "No VAT on education" heard.

You might think, and rightly so, that the hallowed halls and walls of the University of Dhaka have fallen far behind the glory days of when we successfully exerted our will to speak whatever language we pleased and say whatever mattered to us in that language. You'd be right in imagining as a member of the upper middle class civil society bubble of Dhaka, having rarely visited the DU campus or not having paid much attention, that all the walls of Dhaka University are covered up in the span of time between the start of preparations and the arrival of the PM on the eve of February 21. You'd be wrong, because precisely three sections of the campus are censured every second month of every year. The road leading to TSC and

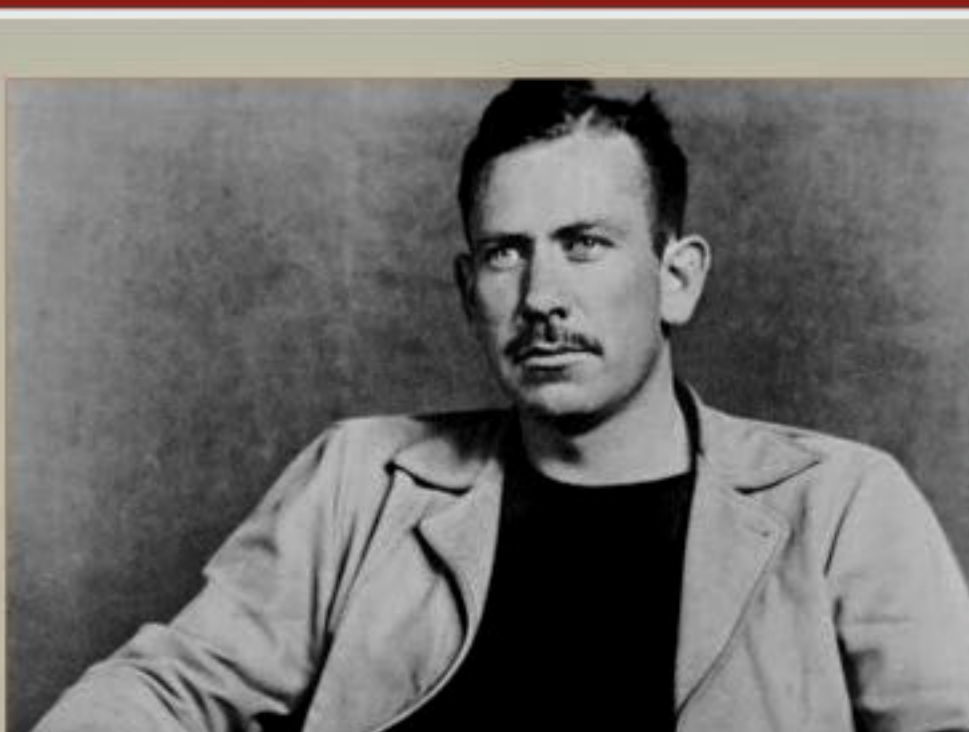
Bangla Academy from Shahbag, the road leading to Shaheed Minar from Bangla Academy and TSC, and the road leading to grounds that house the Vice Chancellor of Dhaka University, opposite the Arts building. Every other wall adjacent to every other road, are left untouched, the moss left to reclaiming the bits of wall used to expel useless messages of equality, equality and everything in between. Surprisingly, this extends to the walls of houses of the Pro-Vice Chancellor and the Treasurer, who apparently do not matter enough in the larger discourse of things to have their walls covered up and repainted every year. It's surprising to see a string of words that amount to "a revolutionary sheds blood in the course of a revolution, yet he sheds blood even if he is not a revolutionary" on the walls lining Fuller Road, which house the largely bourgeois, largely upper middle class and sadly uncaring persons that make up the large body of faculty members of this once great university.

Physical walls matter less in a political economy that involve digital walls more often than those made of concrete. However, even these un-concrete but still valid walls of social media shares and posts are censured, so why do we even expect that physical walls will fare better, carry more meaningful messages, and more importantly be more effective? Why, in our immense naivety that permeates our very existence as Bangladeshis, do we hope that a paint brush and a can of red and black paint will have any effect on the stone cold hearts of ordinary citizens commuting to and from through the largest open-for-public-commute-university in the world?

It might have something to do with the mentality that forced us to fight for our independence and our right to speak our language in the first place, a mentality that is more tangible and more coherent than this fiery brand of largely phony Bangali nationalism we're being taught to practice. Will it amount to anything, ever? Only time will tell.

The writer is sub-editor, The Daily Star.

**QUOTABLE Quote**



**JOHN STEINBECK**  
American writer

**Power does not corrupt. Fear corrupts... perhaps the fear of a loss of power.**

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- Poll numbers
- Bar assn. members
- Make law
- Use the gym
- Lockup
- Comball
- Pindar poem
- Mentor's charge
- Perfume counter bottles
- Filming site
- Indian gowns
- Architect Gilbert
- Outlaw
- Zodiac animal
- One of Donald's nephews
- Cherbourg cap
- glance
- Breakfast fish
- Capitol feature
- Letter after sigma
- Chapel topper
- Pizza portion
- Door part
- In shape
- Senior

**DOWN**

- Train stop
- Battery ends
- Loses a lot of cash
- Super serve
- Friend of Aramis
- Easy gait
- Gets together, in Hollywood
- Long attacks
- Enter
- Russian refusals
- Reading and others: Abbr.
- Serving aid
- Complain
- Meal
- Severe
- Perfect place
- Auction action
- Shipping inquiry
- Kicked, in a way
- Soft leather
- Spur on
- Old card game

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

P	E	C	K	S	P	A	P	A	S
T	V	O	K	E	A	V	A	N	T
E	A	N	Y	A	C	O	N	G	O
I	D	A	S	P	E	N	D	E	R
T	E	N	D	E	R	O	R	E	
			I	D	O	L	R	E	D
B	E	A	U	A	T	A	D		
M	S	P	A	T	E				
A	S	S	G	E	N	D	E	R	
S	L	E	N	D	E	R	O	N	E
C	A	N	O	E	A	B	O	D	E
O	N	C	O	E	L	I	N	E	D
T	E	E	N	S	B	E	D	S	

**BEETLE BAILEY** by Mort Walker



**BABY BLUES** by Kirkman & Scott

