

REMEMBERING SYED SHAMSUL HAQ

APURBA JAHANGIR and NAZIBA BASHER

On the 27th of this month, Bangladesh lost one of her most influential writers- Syed Shamsul Haq. The maestro's work has been lauded since his first publication. He was a journalist, a writer, a lover of words and sentences, and an overall elegant human being. There isn't a soul he hasn't touched on his own land, including many abroad. The *Star Weekend* pays tribute to this extraordinary soul, who will, much like Socrates, Homer and Shakespeare, forever live on through the work and the legacy he has left behind.

SYED SHAMSUL HAQ

(27 December 1935 – 27 September 2016)

Syed Shamsul Haq was one of the most prolific poets, lyricists and writers of our country.

Haq was born in Kurigram on 27 December 1935. His father, Syed Siddique Husain, was a homeopathic physician. His mother was Halima Khatun. His father came to Kurigram to pursue the practice of medicine.

He was awarded Bangla Academy Award in 1966, Ekushey Padak in 1984 and Independence Day Award in 2000 by the Government of Bangladesh.

Haq was married to Anwara Syed Haq. She is a member of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in London. Together they have one daughter, Bidita Sadiq, and one son, Ditio Syed Haq.

Haq wrote poetry, fiction, plays (mostly in verse), Music lyrics and essays. His literary works were included in the curriculum of school level, secondary, higher secondary and graduation level Bengali literature in Bangladesh.

On 27 September 2016, he died of lung cancer at the age of 81.

Awards:

- Bangla Academy Award (1966)
- Adamjee Literary Award (1969)
- Alakta Gold Medal (1982)
- Alaol Literary Award (1983)
- Kabitapal Award (1983)
- Literary Award of the Association of Women Writers
- Ekushey Padak (1984)
- TENAS Medal (1990)
- Jebunnessa-Mahbubullah Gold Medal (1985)
- Padabali Kabita Award (1987)
- Nasiruddin Gold Medal (1990)
- National Poetry Award (1997)
- Independence Day Award (2000)
- National Poetry Honour (2001)

A READER'S PERSPECTIVE

Through his life, Syed Samsul Haq has written 39 novels, 7 books of poetry, 5 stories, 12 plays and 4 translations. He has also written a lot of songs for cinemas such as *Achen Amar Moktar*, *Hayre Manush Rongin Fanush*, etc. It is safe to say that he was born with a golden pen. His equal grab on poetry, novel and essays earned him the title of Sabhyasachi—a writer who is incomparable in this day and age. His five verse plays such as 'Nuruldiner Sarajiban,' 'Ekhane Ekhon', 'Gana Nayak' and 'Eersha'; will forever be timeless. Following the great playwrights of Greek Golden Age, William Shakespeare and Rabindranath Tagore, Haq was unblemished in writing verse plays for which they were equally pleasurable for both reading and staging. To this day his remarkable use of metaphors, allegories, similes and symbolism are unmatched by any other writer.

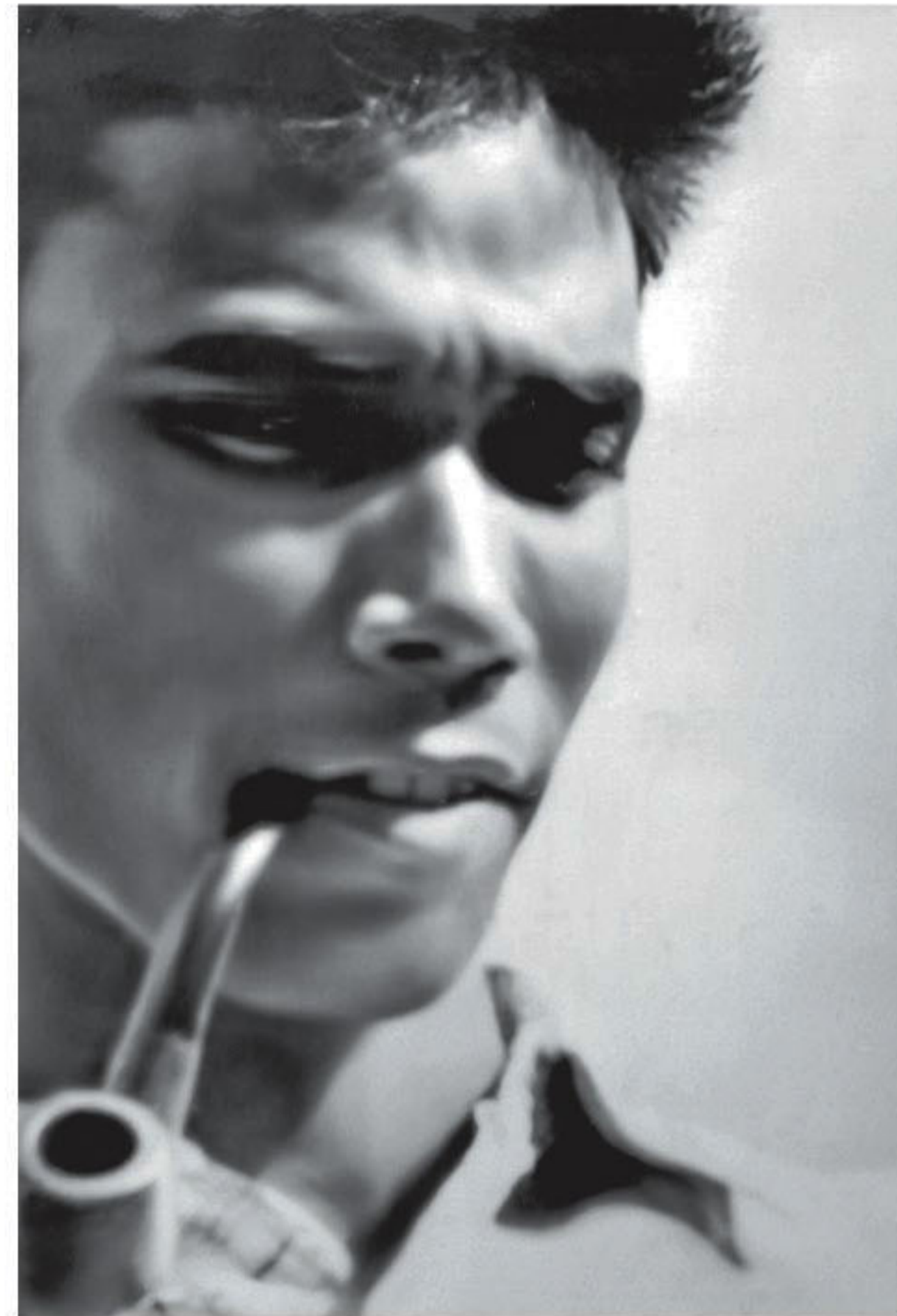
Another one of his incomparable talents were in translating plays of Shakespeare. Keeping the original text and the poetic value almost intact; Haq even made solidarity of phonetically sound of English language with Bangla. To this day, Haq's translation of Macbeth is praised by audiences all around. It's quite rare to find a writer who can translate Shakespeare like Shamsul Haq. The translation itself became a piece of exquisite work of literature, as if it was Haq who wrote the original play himself.

Though he wrote amazing songs and scripts, Haq was mostly a man of literature. His best works lied in his novels and poetry. Aspiring a whole generation, he wrote the epic *Pankhimala*. With a nom de plume, Haq wrote *Poraner Gohin Bhitore* using local dialect. The poetry which was an experiment from Haq's part was well received by the readers. In his book *Rajpothe Cholechi*, Haq described a critical time period of Dhaka which, while reading can give one a shiver down the spine.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez's Makondo, Syed Samsul Haq created Joleswari, the locality he created in his poems. The place was inspired by Kurigram, his hometown. Haq's Rangpur and Kurigram influence can be seen in many of his works. The most remarkable one is in Nuruldiner Sarajibon where he wrote the famous dialogue "*Jaago Bahe Konthe Shobai*". One of his first novels *Rokto Golap* which was based on a magic reality story also took place in Kurigram.

"One can write hundreds of books on Syed Samsul Haq and it will still not be enough", said Muhammad Jahangir, writer and media analyst. "You cannot put a label on Haq as his work is so vast. From scripts to even short stories, Haq has excelled in all of them." Shamsul Haq is considered one of the pioneers of Bangladesh's modern literature. "Academically his works can be analysed in various ways. It's hard to imagine a writer with so many layers in his work."

Comments from Muhammad Jahangir



"If I don't write, I don't feel well."
— Syed Shamsul Haq

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Syed Shamsul Haq will forever remain a North Star in our sky in the field of creativity and a true son of mother Bengal, especially Bangladesh. His soul was embedded in the soil of Bangladesh and he will always be remembered for his undaunted spirit of creative writings. I kneel down to this great man's immortal soul and pay my tribute by quoting from Rabindranath Tagore. "Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life".

Ataur Rahman
Cultural activist

E boro darun baaji, tare koi boro baajikor, je tar rumal naare, poraner gohin bhitore

What beautiful use of words- there really is none like him. Haq bhai was as fashionable with his outlook as his was with his literature. I remember him being a very disciplined human being throughout his life, so much so, that even when he knew he would not live much longer, he would still be disciplined. When we would go to visit him, no one would understand from his face that he was ill, he would look at us and greet us just as he did when he was healthy. I have many a fond memory with him, especially during the staging of our plays. He would always encourage us, when we were younger, to be a part of the theatre scene. He always loved to see it thrive.

Sara Zaker
Theatre Activist, Actor

From now on, the master of poets "Syed Shamsul Haq, who is one of the foremost creators of contemporary Bangla poems and multidimensional creativity, has stepped into immortality. His creations, his being are indestructible, his entity is indestructible and his light will forever shine in the minds of the Bengalis."

Muhammad Nurul Huda
Poet

Haq chacha and my father were great friends, so I've basically known him all my life. To say that he was a good writer is like holding up a candle in the face of the sun. He was a prolific writer of our times, but apart from that he was very smart and a man of modern times. One proof of that was when he wrote to Masum Reza after he was diagnosed with cancer, and in the letter, he wrote "we will meet again. Meanwhile, be cool and even more so, when we meet." He stood apart, Haq chacha, from everyone. One of my fondest memories with him is when I shared the stage with him at Anando Alo's 12 years anniversary event. The most interesting fact is that my first ever television appearance for *Ekti Mukhosh, Ekti Mombati* was on the screenplay written by him! Haq chacha, even though gone from the physical world, will always remain with us, no doubt, through his exceptional work and the legacy he left behind.

Suborna Mustafa
Actor

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AN UNDELIVERED LETTER

(A letter submission by Ashfia Alam)

Dear Uncle Haque, When I was a child, I discovered your poetry. Going through my father's bookshelf, I yawned at Bengali books that I didn't understand. Eventually, I found myself face to face with you, an odd looking man in glasses, thin with your cheeks sunken in and hardly a shadow of a smile across your face. I wondered why anyone would make this a cover of a book, if you could even really call it a book. Rather, it was thin and poorly assembled, containing a few of your English-translated poems and plays. But I guess that didn't matter to you, so I tried not to let it matter to me. I ran my fingers through the flimsy paper and started reading.

I couldn't stop. I lay on the dull, carpeted floor of my home, my skin itching and sweat rolling down my back from the heat of the summer, as I consumed every word. Maybe I didn't understand much as a child, not as much as an adult would, but your poetry kept me up at night. A new world had opened up to me. I didn't know you. I didn't know who you were and yet your face loomed in my

mind like an old memory, comforting me and saying yes, here I am— someone who understands you, someone who understands the feelings that you can't yet explain yourself. Years passed and life distracted me from you. I thought I could not forget you, but sometime between high school and college, I did. I wish I didn't. Perhaps we would have more time. Then again, I suppose time wasn't the issue. One day, when visiting home from college, you came up in conversation with my family. To my joy and astonishment, my parents knew you. Most importantly you knew me. I was two years old when you met me. I was two and new to the world, not knowing that one of the greatest of the greats was before me. Even in college, I did not realise how important you were until I googled your name, discovering that I had taken your existence too lightly. My father called you for me and shared your email with me. He claimed you were overjoyed in my interest and I was in disbelief. Who was I compared to you? You didn't have to care, but you did. I didn't know what to write or how to start. Weeks passed, maybe months. And yet, you spoke to my father again, asking about me. I should have been persistent, not you. Finally, around January 2nd, 2015 I wrote you a letter. The next day you responded.

"Dear Ashfia, New Year's greetings to you. I am so very happy and delighted to read your mail. As a matter of fact, I was expecting you to contact me at some point as indicated by your father for whom I have great affection. Also your mother was a great hostess to me when I padded into your old flat years before you were born! Several months ago your father on a long distance call told me you write poetry and he wanted me to have a look at it. Why not email me some of your writings so that I may know you better. Anyway, keep in touch, Ashfia. Good that you made a contact. May the New Year bring you all that is good for you. God bless. Affectionately yours, Uncle Syed Haq"

I wish I could say that this began a long exchange of emails between us. You and I both know it did not. We did not have a friendship over the internet or a mentor-mentee relationship that most writers long for. Instead, you and I exchanged a handful of emails spread over two years and it was my fault. Completely my fault, because I would save drafts of emails instead of sending them to you. I think I knew you better when I was two years old. I was fearless then, but then again, was there anything to fear in the first place? There was once, right before you were diagnosed that I spoke to you, wishing for you to get better. I hope you didn't think I was insincere. I apologise for being awkward; I was nervous and the shame from my poor Bangla overcame me. You were kind. You have always been kind. I did not know further than that but that was enough to know that the man behind the words was true. And now, that you are gone, I am only full of regrets. Affectionately yours, Ashfia



Syed Shamsul Haq and his wife Syed Anwara Haq.



His mother holding her new born granddaughter.

PHOTOS: COURTESY



PHOTO: SKENAMUL HAQ