

MUSINGS

A Writer's Writer - Akhtaruzzaman Elias

HASAN AL ZAYED

Seven or eight years ago, I went to a program dedicated to the memory of Akhtaruzzaman Elias, one of our finest writers. It was a neatly arranged program in which many aspects of Elias's life and works were discussed. Most of the presentations were informative, and only a few mundane, but the reason why I remember this program so vividly is because of a comment that was so grotesquely off limit that I almost choked in disbelief when I heard it. That day, a renowned professor who is an expert on French psychoanalytical theorist Jacques Lacan got on stage to claim that Elias is too difficult to read. My immediate reaction was a chuckle: no Lacanian, I feel, should complain about any author's stylistic difficulty, least of all about Elias's prose, which is rich and complex but dynamic as well. Elias has been labeled as difficult by many, and, sometimes, for appropriate reasons. But can stylistic difficulty be used as a normative category for measuring literary value?

Many of the world's greatest writers were not the best of entertainers. Accessibility certainly makes some literary works popular, but when people read Manik Bandyopadhyay, Syed Waliullah, Kamal Kumar Majumdar and/or Hegel, Marx, Freud, Joyce, Faulkner, and Fanon, do they read these writers for their crystal clear prose? Writing is organically related to the theme one is communicating and can vary in a number of discernible/indiscernible ways. Peasants, workers, vagabonds, and professors - many such have read Marx's most difficult work - *Capital*. The difficulty of this voluminous work's philosophical premises and, at times, long and opaque sentences did not deter such readers; rather, people of all spectrums of life read this book and found it both useful and inspiring. The October Revolution of 1917 owes a lot to the Russian translation of Marx's *Capital*. Before casually labeling something as "difficult", we need to carefully consider why certain people find certain things difficult. Black Panther members found Fanon difficult, but, that did not stop them from reading *Black Skin, White Masks*. Joyce, Faulkner, and Fanon appear difficult to a large number of my students, and a class even complained to me about Edward Said's prose, but does it mean that any of these writers become any less relevant because my students think of them as difficult?

When it comes to Elias, I feel, we have to pay less attention to this discussion about difficulty, and focus more on both his innovative language and radical thematic content. His style and content both grew organically out of the soil of the world he built in his works.

Dominican-American writer Junot Diaz once mentioned in a lecture that great writers build unique worlds in their writings. Anyone who has read Garcia Marquez knows how unique a world he has created in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*! Florentino Ariza, the passionate and almost miserable protagonist of *Love in the Time of Cholera*, makes sense only in the world in which unrequited love is ultimately answered for. Bizarre and fantastic though they may appear, these fictional worlds are as familiar as our own, so much so that the world inhabited by the Buendias and Florentino Ariza merge with our own, and become a part of our lives. When one speaks of fictional worlds, one must also note how magnificently James Joyce and William Faulkner have built unique worlds in their major works. Elias's power as a writer, among other things, lies in his capacity to create unique fictional universes full of remarkable characters that subsequently become parts of our existence. It is difficult to forget Haddi Khijir, one of the central characters of Elias's first novel *Chilekothar Shepai*, who loses his life when the Pakistani army opens fire on a procession demanding Ayub Khan's resignation. A character like Haddi Khijir is rare in Bengali literature; he is a subaltern who not only speaks but also resists. Very few commentators on Elias's works have noted that *Chilekothar Shepai* predates the theo-

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retical and/or historical works of the Subaltern Studies Group by almost a decade. Although fictions and historiography cannot be brought under the same roof without mediation, it is possible to make such claims about Elias's work because both of his novels are deeply historical. As Anu Muhammad has noted some-

where, history is the true protagonist of Elias's fictions.

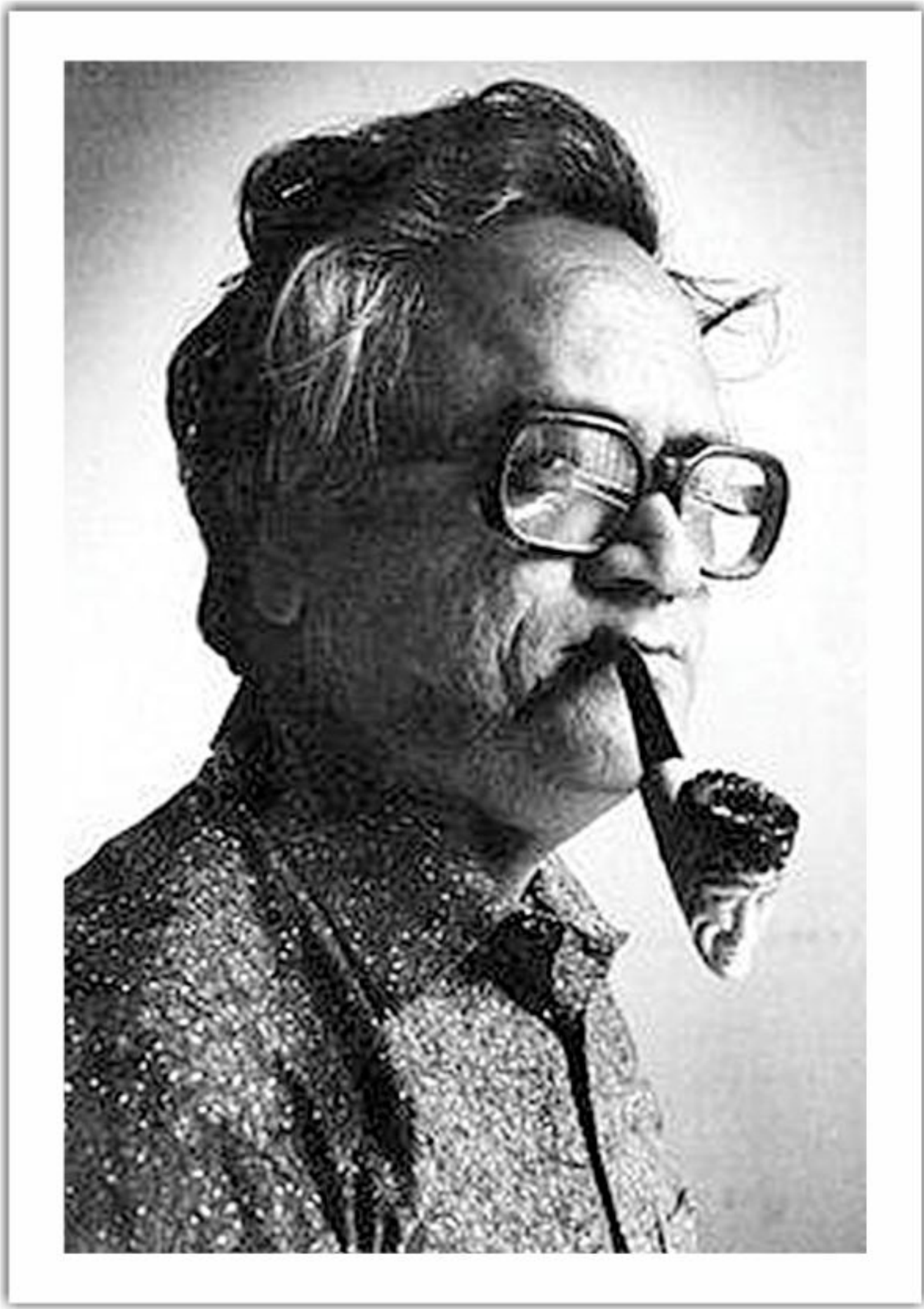
If one pays attention to Elias's two novels, one would perhaps understand how intricate this world-building process is. The two worlds of *Chilekothar Shepai* and *Khoabnama* seem similar because they both are created around mass uprisings. *Chilekothar Shepai*, Elias's first novel, is set at the backdrop of 'Unoshotturer Gono-abhyuththan,' while *Khoabnama*, his last novel, is located at the juncture between 'Tevaga Andolon' and the anticolonial national liberation movement. *Chilekothar Shepai* uses the vernacular inflections of Old Dhaka, and of rural north Bengal brilliantly to bring its story to life. *Khoabnama*'s narrative, on the other hand, emulates the mystical existence of the quasi-mythical people who exist in the oral history of sub-alterns - boatmen, landless farmers, and nomadic folk singers. The extensive use of *Puthi shlokas* in *Khoabnama* conveys through innuendo the material struggles of people who communicate their collective experiences through an organically grounded mysticism in which the material life mirrors itself in an alienated form.

Truly, there is no closure in Elias's novels. Time moves in circle in them

and the dead find an afterlife in the body and the consciousness of the living. Haddi Khijir, after his death, follows Osman to his freedom from alienation while Fuljan's daughter takes it on herself to continue her father's struggle. Since revolution is the aspired backdrop of Elias's novels, his novels do not force a closure on the narrative. The continuity of struggle gestures towards the continuity of oppression and people's resistance against such oppression.

The more I read Elias, the more conscious I become of his importance in world literature. Elias spearheaded a group of immensely powerful Bangladeshi writers who began writing in the 1960s. Mahasweta Devi considered Elias the finest novelist to have emerged out of Bangladesh. Hasan Azizul Huq has placed Elias in the milieu of great writers like Garcia Marquez, Carlos Fuentes, Chinua Achebe, Naguib Mahfouz, and Salman Rushdie. Elias was a writer's writer and the great Bengali writers of his time knew where exactly to place him. It barely matters when a few ungenerous critics fail to do the same!

Hasan Al-Zayed teaches at the University of Liberal Arts, Bangladesh while trying to complete his doctoral dissertation from SUNY, Buffalo.



Poetry

To a Gunman

in memory of the Dhaka terror attack

BY SOFIUL AZAM

Like the mysterious rise of your enemy's language,
I'm simply out there where love gets voted down,
where hate crimes are only other things on the rise,
where misfits like me either remain misfits all their life
or make headlines only as upturned cockroaches.
If I ever trembled before your gun-barrel, I'd say:
Before you are done with me, stay with me a bit longer.
Do me a favor – wait a little with me to watch squirrels

climb up a tree over there by the lake. Look, how smart
and death-defying they are, hoarding nuts into that
tree's gnarled twigs hollowed by termites and swept
clean by the south wind. The music of ripples on the lake
soothes their minds like rain. By the way, did you know
rain is the buzzing of bees vertically landing on flowers?
The moment I think of flowers I see the redness of roses
immaculate as the blood you will spill today. It's as

if you'd by mistake pour coffee onto my writing.
Once I reined in the leash of my unrest by looking
at those smart squirrels bringing nuts to their babies.
I often come here to detox my evils. Shower me,
if you like, with bullets as if to water dying roses of my blood –
ink for your death script. Take this blood as my offering.
Even though no holy verse is ever written in blood,
only love gets bloodstains out as sunlight does darkness.

Soful Azam's poems have appeared in various poetry journals at home and abroad. He teaches English at Victoria University of Bangladesh.

How Poets Sleep

HASAN MARUF

Our minds don't stop,
They tread a perpetual treadmill
Un-ordinary tragedies crowd out
Other emotions
Like hope or light fading
In bitter interaction...mutual attraction
Conversations that will never cease
Stories unwind
While we lie between sheets
Anxious, prostrate
Because we aren't what we want
To be
And we will never be.
What we want to be
Tragedies in brooding nights.
Hovering...a figure
Stands stoically in the doorway
Staring, standing
He's not real...
But we must keep our eyes closed
And fool ourselves
Because we fear fatigue
And tomorrow

Hasan Maruf teaches language and literature in Baridhara Scholars Institute and writes poems and fiction.

Confession

MONIRUL ISLAM TAMAL

I never carried a rose
Or wrote a letter.
All I have
Is an empty heart,
A blank canvas to paint my dreams.
And a box of color to add illusion.

All I have
Is a spotless mind
And tinted dreams
For people around me
In love with rose petals.

Monirul Islam Tamal is an alumnus of East West University and a creative writer.

FICTION

A Vampire in Gulshan

N. N. TALUKDAR

Imran lay in bed.

It was 3 AM. He couldn't sleep (he took sleeping pills but they didn't work). He was thinking of Fatin. Thursday night they had parted together. Tonight she was buried in Banani graveyard. It wasn't fair. She was so young. So beautiful. She had had her whole life ahead of her.

Imran hated himself for all the times he had been an asshole to her. She had wanted to get married. He said later as he wasn't sure (he thought maybe he could find someone better than her). He shouted at her. He threatened to break up with her. He cheated on her with other girls, even though she loved him with all her heart.

Imran wished he could go back in time. He wished he could take back all the hurt he had caused her. He wished he could have given her more love. But she was g--

"Imran," a voice spoke. It was young woman's voice, hollow but sweet.

Imran sat up.

"Imran," the voice called again. It was

coming from outside.

Imran got out of bed. He stepped out of his room, walked down the flat, opened the door, and stepped onto his roof. He saw a thick mist swirling beyond the railing – the side that looked over Gulshan Lake. Imran stepped toward the railing. Something began to emerge from the mist. A dark shape.

It was Fatin.

She was floating beyond the railings. Her arms and legs were wading the air like it was water. Her white burial shroud was wrapped around her nude body like a saree, its achol blowing in the wind. She had never looked more beautiful. Her lips were full and red. Her skin was as white as a Rajanigandha flower and as smooth as marble. Her eyes glowed silver. Imran couldn't look away.

"Oh Imran," Fatin said. "How I've missed you. My darling."

Her voice sounded musical. There was a pull to it. Imran shambled toward her.

"Let me in," Fatin said. "Let me in. And we'll be together. Forever." She opened her

arms wide.

"Come in," Imran said. His voice was flat and monotonous, like someone under hypnosis.

Fatin grinned, revealing needle-sharp fangs. She flew over the railing and landed in front of Imran. She reached for him with her long, sharp nails. She turned his head to the right to expose his jugular vein.

Then she saw the gold oval pendant hanging from a chain around his neck.

The pendant was inscribed in tiny Arabic script. It was Surah Ayatul Kursi (the Verse of the Throne) from the Quran. Imran's mother had given it to him when he was seventeen. It was supposed to protect against evil. Imran wasn't religious. He didn't pray five times a day. He didn't fast during Ramadan. He drank alcohol and had sex with women before marriage. But he did believe in Allah and that the Ayatul Kursi pendant would protect him.

And it did.

Fatin hissed and leaped back. Imran came back to his senses. Fatin glared at him with

her silver eyes, fangs bared, claws splayed.

Imran was terrified. He suddenly felt a pressure in his bladder and tried not to pee in his pajamas. He had never felt such fear in his entire life. He knew he was going to die.

Then Imran remembered his Ayatul Kursi pendant. Fatin had flinched at the sight of it!

He removed the chain and brandished the pendant. Fatin gave an unearthly shriek and stepped back. She turned and jumped over the railing. Imran ran into his apartment and locked the door. His eyes were wide and bulging. His face was covered in sweat. His heart thumped so loudly he could hear it in his ears. He struggled to breathe.

He turned on all the lights. He rushed to his bedroom and opened his wardrobe. He took out his licensed Beretta and sat on the bed with the gun in his hand.

He didn't sleep.

An excerpt from N.N. Talukdar's second novel A Vampire in Gulshan has been accepted for publication by Caliburn Press, USA.

