



Ms Bunny Sen

(with due apologies to the spirits of jibanananda das, e. e. lower case cummings & t. s. eliot)

BY KAISER HAQ

been bugging around this goddamn city
for godknowshowlong –
feels like a thousand bloody years,
no kidding;
from bongshal's rancid restaurants
to gulshan's toxic lake
I've trod every effing inch
& on pitch-dark nights
of power outages as well.
i've been in burra kuttra
in grey twilight
& in distant rayerbazar
in moonless dark,
& all for what
i ask you –
a few bloody takas
for which i have to shout
myself hoarse
tutoring the unteachable
scions of nouveau riche swine
swimming in champagne bubbles,
i feel absobloodylutely
knackered, i tell you,
just couldn't go on
if it weren't for a few moments
with ms bunny sen
of banglamotor.

o her hair is like the dark sky
above sangsad bhaban
& her face is just
like aishwairiya's.
imagine a sailor
adrift on a wreck
suddenly coming upon
a green island
smelling of rich spices –
that's how i felt when she came
and sat across the table
in a dimly-lit fast food joint,
spreading the musky scent
of allure (from chanel);
whatsup? she said
raising those gorgeously
made-up eyes
like exotic bird's nests –
i could just curl up
inside them
and happily
die.

when day goes kaput
the dark sneaks in
like silent dew;
buzzards wipe the smell
of sun off filthy wings;
colour seeps out of everything,
in faraway hamlets
glowing fireflies announce
it's storytelling hour;
time to take pen and paper
out of the jammed drawer
& do my daily
creative writing act –
tho' godaloneknows
to what bloody end.
the birds come home to roost,
the bleeding rivers end where they began,
life's wheeling & dealing
can't go on forever; it's all
dark, dark, dark
but for the tete-a-tete
with ms bunny sen of banglamotor.

Kaiser Haq has just retired as professor of English from the University of Dhaka; he is currently the Dean of Humanities at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh, and a poet and translator.

MUSINGS

LITERATURE AND THE CITY

HASAN AL ZAYED



PHOTO CREDIT: FROM THE WAQAR KHAN ARCHIVE

Urban spaces have deeply contradictory existences in our imagination. We love cities and the goodies they offer; we also hate them and often dream of escaping the ruthless, mechanical life they impose on us. Cities embody the human desire to master and manipulate nature more powerfully than does any other built environment. Cities are anthropocentric, for they grow by encroaching on the natural environment, eliminating in the process species and vegetations that are considered extraneous and threatening to human needs. Cities are also utopias; human desire—good or bad—gets expressed in them in various forms of political, economic and cultural activities. In the twenty-first century, the city has attained immense significance not simply because of its complex and contradictory existence but also because of new realities that gesture towards the city's preponderance in this stage of human civilization. For the first time in human history, more people now live in the cities than do in the non-urban areas.

As a student of literature, I have always found writers' representations of the city deeply fascinating. But far too many literary works have thematized cities as threatening and corrupting entities. In William Blake's poems one finds a London that is not only sick but also predatory and corrupting—a place in which child labor, prostitution and political oppression echo in the daily existences of people. Nineteenth century literature is replete with images of carceral cities ready to devour poor working class people. It is no coincidence that a majority of Charles Dickens's novels chronicle the dogged life of the urban underclass, especially orphans.

Although not a fictional work, Friedrich Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England* offers profound observations on not only the condition of the British working class who were forced to embrace the unhealthy, traumatic life of the city, but also the process that brought them into the cities in the first place. Written during Engels's visit to Manchester in 1942, this book carefully documents how modern industrial cities like Manchester forced upon its working class inhabitants an inhuman life. Engels notices that the glitzy appearance of cities such as London and Manchester concealed the gruesome reality of workers' exploitation, premature deaths, dingy and unhealthy cityscapes, orphaned children, destitute women and Irish migration. The main streets of big cities paraded to him shiny, well-lighted shops selling expensive commodities. The inner parts that remained hidden behind these stores and wealthy people's mansions, however, were dingy and slum-like, infested by disease and death. One of Engels's most important observations in this book is that like capital, population

also becomes centralized. After all, the centralization of capital draws people in from different parts of the country. Modern cities are thus spaces created by capital; here bodies are advanced for commodity production just as capital is also advanced.

The deep anxiety about the city persisted until the mid-twentieth century when England, as well as much of Western Europe, was able to externalize the problem of primitive accumulation and export them over to the Third World, most of which suffered the consequence of colonialism. The city as a location of positive experience began to emerge, it seems, at the beginning of the twentieth century. Although the French poet Charles Baudelaire anticipates the urban consciousness of many of the modernist poets and writers who succeeded him, in the great poet's work one notices not only the pleasures of the city but also its vices. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* carries on with a similar complex representation of urbanity. In the first scene of the novel, when Marlow reflects on river Thames and the city of London, he characterizes the latter as a place of both light and darkness. London, in Marlow's narration, emerges as a busy, opulent city threatening its environs with its "ominous" presence. James Joyce's Dublin, not dissimilarly, is simultaneously a space of freedom and a space of restriction and struggle. To read Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as A Youngman* and *Ulysses* is to understand how the Dublin at the turn of the century was an acutely political space gravitating between pro-colonialist and anti-colonialist impulses.

European modernist literature thus both fetishizes and demonizes the city. While cities remain the locus of modernist romance, one must not forget that modernist literature also thematizes some of the most painful experiences of urban life: poverty, alienation, death, war, policing,

betrayal, exploitation and repression

The celebration of urban life also abounds in Bangla literature, but here too one finds critical representation of urbanism. Two of my favorite writers—Akhtaruzzaman Elias and Shahidul Zahir—have immortalized old Dhaka by using it as the setting of some of their most remarkable works. Elias's powerful short story "Utsob" (*The Carnival*) explores the nexus between sexual desire and affluence by presenting parallels between Dhanmondi—the abode then of the *nouveau riche*—and Old Dhaka—where the story's protagonist lived among workers, decaying aristocrats, vagabonds, and animals. Anwar, the protagonist of the story is a university educated petty clerk struggling both materially and sexually. His friends keep flaunting their wealth and their success present him with the same jealousy and crisis as do their slim figured smart wives. This remarkable story not only captures the tension and unequal exchange between the two Dhakas, it also explores the grotesqueness of human desire by collapsing the boundary between human and animal desire.

Like Elias's, Shahidul Zahir's fictions also use old Dhaka as their preferred setting. What distinguished Zahir from Elias is the former's strategic use of collective narrative voice and defilement of formal rules of punctuation. Shahidul Zahir's most celebrated works such as "Amader Kutir Shilper Itihas" and *Abu Ibrahim Mrittu* (Abu Ibrahim's Death) employ collective narrators to pluralize and collectivize experience.

Elias and Zahir have creatively explored the poverty, the corruption, the struggle, and the sickness of Dhaka's life; they have also depicted, with much insight, the glory and triumph of this remarkable city which has stubbornly resisted oppressions of various kinds, perpetrated so often by the ruling nationalist bourgeoisie and

military dictators. Both have captured in their stories the trauma of our liberation war and the genocide carried out by the Pakistani military and their local collaborators in 1971. More importantly, Elias and Zahir have also narrated how Dhaka has ended up becoming an oppressive sprawl whose concentration of wealth has and facilities has been achieved by denying other parts of the country the same right to life and services.

I grew up in a colony located in the Motijheel area at the juncture between old Dhaka and new Dhaka. Growing up in the 1980s and the 1990s when Dhaka was still livable and not as densely populated as it is now, I have seen the city deteriorating into a massive slum, full of glitzy malls and dingy apartments. The mango and coconut trees we grew up with are gone now and the *sheuli* that brought so much joy in our lives every morning through fragrance and color has become almost extinct. The entire bird population is almost gone. Other animals, including monkeys, have either perished or found shelter in other parts of the country. The entire city now looks and smells like a massive dustbin, with no delicate scent to save us from the assault on our noses. Neoliberalization of the economy, capitalist greed, political corruption and systematic erosion of life in the rural areas has taken my city away from me. If I now look into the literary representations of the cities of recent decades, it is because inside me lingers a deep sense of loss—a trauma I bear because my city has been taken away from me. In order to survive in it we—you and I—must reclaim it and take it away from where it is now—not to its past since that was another realm but to a better and more livable, lovable city.

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THUMBNAIL REVIEW

City Beloved

BY T.S. MARIN

Tomader Ei Nagar-e, Humayun Ahmed, ISBN: 9844121175, Ananya Prakashani, February 2000.

Humayun Ahmed's *Tomader Ei Nagar-e* projects Dhaka—our beloved city!—with all her beauties, flaws, eccentricities, and mysteries delightfully. This novella is the tenth one in Ahmed's immensely popular Himu series and is set in Dhaka in monsoonal torrents. In his signature style, Humayun Ahmed treats his readers through this book with an ensemble of out-of-the-box characters—the "hermit" Himu, naïve, the hopelessly romantic teenage heroine Aasha, overbearing Mazedha khala, Himu's bunch of eccentric mess-mates, and of course the quintessential Bengali police officers. The plot begins with Aasha's arrival in Bangladesh in the hope of photographing it and chronicling her journey here in Bangladesh in a book called "Discovering Bangla"! In this

process, she travels around Dhaka with Himu, and the readers get glimpses of many of lovely little things e.g. Kadam phool and little parks which make Dhaka so very unique. The language is fluid and humorous; the plot line dreamy albeit a little predictable; and the ending with one of the Barsha songs by Tagore is a treat for all music connoisseurs. If it is a lazy rainy weekend at home, or you are stuck somewhere in one of those Dhaka downpours, this novella will surely prove to be the perfect companion for you.

T.S. Marin loves Dhaka (particularly on bright sunny days), reading, and music of almost any kind. She is also a Lecturer of Primeasia University and Sub Editor of *Lit and Review* pages of *The Daily Star*.

তোমাদের এই নগরে হুমায়ূন আহমেদ

