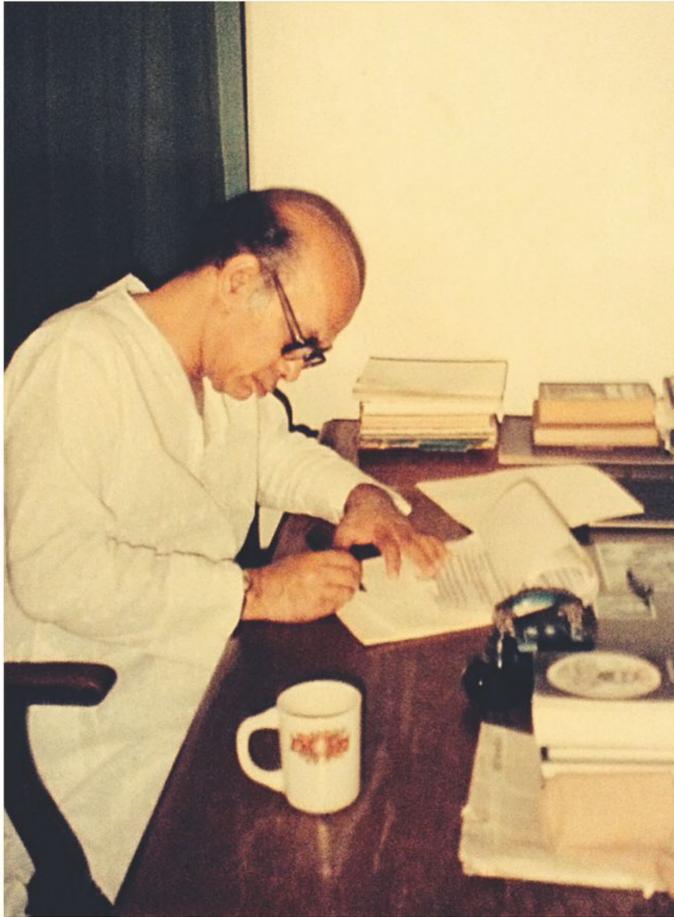


MUSINGS

## Silent but Near

NABILA MURSHED



It is true that Rashid Karim Gholam Murshed, aka Rashid Karim, surrendered his physical life to death. But it is not true that he gave the terminator everything he had accomplished in his lifetime. He was the winner of the Ekushey Padak, the Bangla Academy Award, the Adamjee Award and notably the Lekhika Sangha Award. He wrote “straight from the heart” about life, men and women, society, and the world as he knew it. He did not venture into anything beyond his realm. And that must be why his works continue to attract devoted readers and researchers of Bengali literature.

My father had a constant urge to write. He found time for it despite being a corporate executive. He read carefully, intently, critically. He underlined whatever he read, taking notes in the margins as he did so. He bought books from street book stalls, bookshops and book fairs. He liked giving books as gifts according to the reader's taste. He did not, however, like lending them as some would not return his prized possessions, something that was quite distressing to him. The rich family library from his childhood and the pulsating literary milieu his brother, Abu Rushd, along with many of his friends, Ekushey Padak winners like him, had created, indelibly shaped the author in him from a very young age.

When I revisit my father's days as a writer, I recall that he required complete silence when he wrote. He preferred his desk to be by the window. He used to dip his fountain pen into the ink pot, tap off the excess ink and then pour his thoughts into the fine writing tablets. His head tilted to the left and his left hand, keeping the paper in place while his right hand produced small, neat, legible words. He made numerous revisions. While creating, he would be in another world altogether.

At the time he was writing *Aamar Joto Glani*, he would arrange for readings in our flat at 773 Satmasjid Road in Dhanmandi. I remember him saying, “I have written twelve novels. Between Shamsur Rahman and I, we have read out loud six novels from manuscripts.” Occasionally, I would tiptoe into the dining-room to listen to those hypnotic reading sessions. I would see my bespectacled father, sitting upright on the tanned woollen carpet, clad in his favorite punjabi-pyjama, made either from cotton or *khaadi*, reading clearly, confidently and expressively. There used to be food, drink, and late night discussions. When it came to authors he

liked, he would praise them without reservation. He would take reviewing as a responsibility.

During his lifetime, Rashid Karim had witnessed sweeping, significant and gigantic historical transformations. He had left India on 15th March, 1950. But in 1971 we were in besieged Dhaka. I remember one afternoon an army jeep had pulled up at the gate of our house and had summoned all the men to congregate in the compound. Our elderly landlord, my father, and some other men had been assembled by the Pakistani soldiers in front of the gate. Before going down, he had briefly looked at Salima, his beautiful wife and companion through the joys and sorrows of life, and had said to her, “Going. If something happens, go to Apa's.” Apa was, Salima's eldest sister,

the lady in white, the Florence Nightingale in Nanibari. Thankfully, nothing tragic happened that day. December the 16<sup>th</sup> was a joyous day for all of us because it made us sovereign. Abbu believed that all writers and poets, successfully or unsuccessfully, should write about what Bangladesh stood for.

To me, my father was first and foremost a family man. He was always present in our lives. He was my confidant. He was my childhood dictionary. He had captured this scene of our interactions in one of his novels. The word he had chosen for me was ‘waif.’ One of my favorite memories was when he would return home with newly made music cassettes and sweets for the family. He would leave the house in the morning and come home in the afternoon before lunch with his well-

chosen musical discs. He would frequent stores all over Dhaka for them. Upon returning, he would ask me to listen to his chosen songs. In our Kalabagan flat, in his study, I would sit on the floor at the back of his chair and listen to his carefully chosen compilation. He did not like interruptions. Afterwards, we would discuss if we had liked the renditions or not. Another tender moment I remember with him is putting my head on his lap and just resting in silence while he patted me. I was his waif, he would say. All would be well for me afterwards.

It was a tradition for him to listen to music, singing, eating meals together, visiting family friends and members, sitting in silence together, and chatting in a familial environment with his only granddaughter Tishna and whenever possible with his son-in-law Khondaker Mushahed Mohiuddin. I believe he would have bonded with Andrew Fedetz, his grand son-in-law, whom he did not live to see, over paratha, kebab, samosas and books. I am sure he would have gone to the Dhaka Club to get the biriyani and kebab for Andy. I have little doubt that he would have taken him to the bookshops in New Market.

Were he alive this year, my father would have been ninety-two with the zest for life untouched. What would have made him happy? Perhaps, being remembered and read!

I imagine somewhere in a village in Bangladesh, the passer-by and the local villagers stop to quench their thirst at the tube well set up in his name. A scene from Rabindranath's *Chondalika*, one of his favorite plays, comes to my mind then.

For me, my father is silent but very near. His memory is etched in my heart. He is in the songs that we once heard together. He is in the lessons he has taught me on all occasions. When I face the vicissitudes of life, I think of him and do as he would have done. Like him, I try to uphold humanity in the work that I do. We carry on the traditions he set up for us.

Cheers and Happy Birthday, Abbu from all of us down below!

*Rashid Karim (14 August 1925-20 November 2011) was a major fiction writer of Bangladesh. Among his major works are Uttar Purush (1961), Amar Jato Glani (1975), Proshonno Pashan (1963) and Prakritir Lal Golap (1963). This anniversary tribute is by his daughter Nabila Murshed, who lives in the United States and works there as a psychotherapist.*

Six professors of the Department of English of Dhaka University retired recently and were given a farewell on the occasion. The following poems were penned for this occasion.

## On Retiring

FAKRUL ALAM

Though not really tired of D.U., I've retired! Definitely, there are things about the university I'll miss after 42 years—bright-eyed students, Like-minded colleagues and buzzing corridors, Kala Bhabhan's adda-filled Teachers Lounge And, Too many classes, where I felt most students' Minds would quite often mingle with mine. How could such things ever make one tired?

But as I retire I think too of things there tiring— Dirty corridors, stuffy, crowded classrooms, Fans and phones that hardly ever worked well, Too many processions led by self-serving “leaders” Too many colleagues courting administrative favors, Too many students in classes only for “marks”, An annoying dysfunctional semester system And endless appalling scripts were truly tiring!

But though some things did tire and I've retired This I must say—48 years of D. U. wasn't enough! Now that I am past a major bend of life's road; I know the path ahead of me won't be as rewarding Certainly, D.U. was good to me. And for now? Though what lies ahead of me I really don't know Surely my happy memories of D. U. will sustain me As I move into the next phase of my life's journey!

## A Plea!

NAFISA JAMAL

FAREWELL! a formal word of salutation and recognition has negative vibes attached. A fearful finality, imposed shackles and thoughts of impending doom!

Bid farewell to this year's Spring and showers of Monsoon with as much fervor as you can for they will surely return to delight your sight and sense of rhythm next year.

Spare humans given single cycles of life, full of natural ups and downs, traumas and unbearable circumstances at times.

If one has found some peace somewhere, somehow, let it remain with him or her. Do not awaken miseries with a shocking FAREWELL.

No clamour please of tolling bells just “Shantih, Shantih, Shantih.”

FICTION

## Orange Man from Netrakona

ANDREW EAGLE

Besides daily errands, Aklima Begum had barely been outside her Dhanmondi apartment in months. At first there seemed no plan to it. Various invitations for one reason or another hadn't eventuated. One afternoon they'd been due to meet her husband Akbar's distant cousin visiting from Brooklyn but at the last minute Akbar complained of seasonal fever. On another day an urgent business meeting kept him late at his trading house, making any sensible journey for iftaar at her younger sister Aneesa's flat in Banani impractical.

She began to expect the cancellation of plans. She started to wonder before the mirror: Was she looking older now that thirty-two had been and gone? Had she put on weight? It hardly seemed plausible that Akbar could mind. He'd never focussed on such things before.

Perhaps it wasn't worth thinking about. Coincidences have all the right in the world to cluster if they wish to. Still, whenever she glanced at the calendar on the bedside table, 21 July circled in bold black biro caught her eye. It was the date of her cousin Sufia's younger daughter's *gaye holud*: word was the young couple were too much in love to wait for a winter wedding. Naturally, the whole family would attend. It was an event that couldn't be avoided.

As July approached she began to mention the pending ceremony, in passing, as her husband readied himself for office or of an evening when they sat in front of TV chat shows after their three children were asleep. Akbar repeatedly shied away from discussing it. He'd suddenly change the topic. Aklima thought not to push the matter. Akbar worked long hours and preferred a quiet home. He had a habit of discussing only when he wished.

Still, there were preparations to make. Aklima found the time to select silk for new saris, imperial yellow for her daughter and a lemon shade for herself. She sent Panjabis for the three men in the house to the laundry. With thoughts of a gift, she visited an Old Dhaka jeweller's.

It was three days out from the ceremony when Akbar called his wife into the study, the room where the most serious conversations inevitably played out. He sat like a headmaster in his roomy leather swivel-chair behind the desk as she entered, his right hand clinched across his eyebrows. Aklima quietly sat opposite on one of the upholstered chairs.

“About this *gaye holud*,” he said, looking sharply into her eyes. “You have to promise one thing.” She didn't need to agree; silence sufficed. “There's to be strictly no talk of orange man!”

Aklima was dumfounded. Sure, she might've spoken about orange man once or twice, who wouldn't? Or maybe it was more than once or twice; perhaps she spoke about him often. But orange man was fantastical, after all, and beyond that were the innumerable cues: when Salma the maid peeled carrots, in front of a Friday's painted sunset sky, as her son dug into a plate of papaya... it was inevitable that orange man would come to mind.

There in the study, for the first time she understood: her heart sank. Akbar didn't believe her. He was worried.

The events in question had occurred the previous winter, and from start to finish there was barely an hour in it. Salma was on a village visit then. The car was in for servicing. So, with thoughts of meeting their youngest son Arif at the school gate in Green Road, and they'd tried for one of the more prestigious academies illegally situated in proper-Dhanmondi but Arif was no Einstein and lotteries never were kind to Aklima, she boarded a rickshaw. Indeed she left early since she thought to stop at the Sukrabad vegetable market on the way.

The first part of the journey was uneventful. It was when, burdened with bags of bottle gourd, bitter gourd, cauliflower and brinjals, she hailed a second vehicle that the adventure began. A spotless, shiny rickshaw pulled in front of her. It had as-new streamers from the handlebars and a bell she could've used to apply lipstick. The driver was neat and clean: in a distinctive plain orange shirt with orange-



checked lungi, though the check pattern amounted only to a thin black stripe such that the block of orange was all but undisturbed. Clean-shaven, he hardly looked like a *sadhu*; given his standard haircut, neither was he a Krishna devotee. He probably wasn't even Hindu. No, all that could be said of the gentleman for sure was this: he clearly held no aversion to bright clothes.

The fare he quoted was reasonable. As they set off on the short hop to the Panthapath corner, she quizzed him about his family and where he was from. Aklima liked to chat with anybody who crossed her path. To her, it was basic politeness.

“I have two sons. I'm from Netrakona,” said the man in half-swallowed Mymensingh village dialect. His legs were as pins, so thin that Aklima wondered how they could pedal at all.

Panthapath was jammed with cars that day, at least on their side of the road. There was

barely a gap for a bicycle between vehicles. After twenty minutes they hadn't even reached Square Hospital, and Aklima was worried she'd be late for Arif.

And then it happened: Whoooooosh! It was a split second. There was no time to think, much less to take it in. Aklima suddenly found herself on the far side of the road some fifty metres ahead and the rickshaw driver was scooping his hand down to the roadside to collect some sort of white bundle. Directly in front of them was a speeding CNG taxi. The whole manoeuvre avoided serious collision by a muslim-thin margin. Then the rickshaw slowed.

The next thing Aklima knew the driver was delivering the white bundle, when she looked she saw it was a kitten, to the footpath out of harm's way. “In Netrakona we respect all living things,” the rickshaw driver grinned.

Aklima was in shock. She couldn't speak. Had she blacked out? How had what had just happened, happened? It certainly wasn't humanly possible, what he'd done. Aklima couldn't even decide if they'd stayed attached to the road surface the whole while or somehow flown through the air!

Surely enough, orange man pedalled on to the Green Road corner as any rickshaw driver would. She paid him in a precisely usual manner. Yet as he pedalled away at unremarkable human speed she watched, entirely stunned.

That evening Akbar heard about orange man in lengthy detail for the first several times. He tried to catch Aklima out when in one telling she forgot to mention she'd bought cauliflower. But as much as he couldn't countenance such an experience, she stood firm. Ultimately he decided to wait it out and see what she said on the following day.

Since then orange man had become a regular talking point, much more than Aklima realised.

For her part, over time she came to terms with the fact that there just might be some kind of superhero among the millions of people on Dhaka's streets, and that if there

was such a superhero, she saw no reason why he wouldn't be from Netrakona and specialise in saving kittens; or for that matter, why he wouldn't wear orange. It is after all a cheerful tone.

And with so many things happening all the time on the streets of the mega-city, nobody could surely know all of it. In Dhaka without a doubt even the impossible is possible, surely.

For his part, Akbar made a few discrete enquiries with psychologist friends who tended to agree that if everything else was normal he should let it be, and wait and see. Perhaps Aklima had been a little over-stressed that day? Maybe she needed to lead a quiet life for a while?

On the way to the party centre six months later, Aklima sat in the front of the car with Arif wriggling on her knee. She'd thought a lot about how often she talked of orange man since the meeting in the study. Perhaps Akbar was right. Maybe there were some life experiences that were best left unsaid. As they drove she was telling herself repeatedly, “Don't mention orange man. No talk of orange man. There is no orange man.”

It wasn't easy. When they entered the hall it was decked out in a myriad of shades of yellow, some bordering on orange. The flowers were orangish. So were the tablecloths. And, as directed on the invitation, guests wore anything-in-yellow which could be close enough to orange on occasion. In the midst of such distraction, Aklima steeled herself to follow her husband's instruction, and she did well. It was only after greeting her sister Aneesa that the real challenge came.

“I've got something important to tell you,” Aneesa said to Aklima, pulling her a little aside and lowering her voice to a whisper. “The strangest thing happened. I was coming home from my reading group yesterday and I hailed a rickshaw. The driver was quite odd. He was dressed, head-to-toe, all in orange...”

Andrew Eagle is an English Instructor and feature writer of The Daily Star.