



FICTION

From *The Pain of a Hollow Man* (Rikter Bedan)

KAZI NAZRUL ISLAM

Translated by Sohana Manzoor

Oh, Lord! Is this your way of freeing me from the possible entanglement of relationships? I pondered and wondered; my eyes filled with tears. The joy of such freedom is full of intense pain too. Nobody would understand the pain of a hollow man such as me unless of course, one has been through it. ... I must also add that I cannot help smiling ruefully at the irony of the situation. So at the dead of night I sing, "O cruel one, this is the best solution. Sear my heart with fire." I suppose I must tell you now what happened....

I received a letter from Shahida the other day. My beloved is now married and happy.... I felt that I've been freed from bondage. I won't lie to you, however, that at the same time, I've been consumed with pain and jealousy. I've run around in a fierce mood for the past few days, but have found no peace. We are so proud of our superior human mind and body; but how much can we really sustain? We talk to ourselves to restrain our mind and boast that we've become great hermits. And then in the twinkle of an eye an intense desire takes over our heart and soul and we howl in frustration. Isn't that all too human? Does freedom reside only in such bonds? Who knows!

Forget me, wretched Shahida, forget our past, all memories of us together, all concealed desires, everything! Imprisoned in the darkest confinement of society, how could you dream of the unattainable? Why did your foolish heart offer itself to someone who could never claim it? ... Only in some secret chamber of the earth does your love abide and you struggle every moment to keep the blind love contained there. The curtains of murderous society are bloodied with the crimson of your love, but have no place for pre-marital love. It is still guarding you like a stone effigy.

Forget all, Shahida; enjoy your new life and forget the old. You've no right to love an individual person; you have to love your husband.

Ah, the faint light of the waning moon seems so dismal. Memories from last night are killing my soul....

Last night, around this time, and as the commander of this battalion, I was going around, revolver in hand. I heard one of the guards calling out, "Halt, who goes there?" He called again, "I say, who is there? Don't move!—Ugh!—Mother of God!" All I could hear afterwards was someone groaning. I rushed forward and saw an Arab woman in a red dress running away, a rifle in her hand, and the still body of a sentry lying on the ground.

They are absolutely fearless—these Bedouin women. I realized instantly that they are the ones who had been stealing our rifles and killing our guards. Standing still, I took a shot at the woman, but failed to hit her. As I was preparing to shoot again, the woman turned around. Like a skilled gunman she raised the rifle to her shoulder and took aim at me. I then heard the sound the rifle being loaded, but surprisingly, she threw it away and I saw her crouching on the ground, trembling. I had already taken cover, but at this opportunity I sprang up. But the spectacle that I was confronted with made me drop my revolver too. The covering on her face was gone, and the light of the moon shone clearly on her fair face. I could recognize the Bedouin woman Gul in the light of the moon. Gul, who years ago, had

declared her love for me! She was surprised indeed, but I could also discern tears, brighter than moonlight, running down her cheeks. She was trembling in pain and pleasure. I could read her heart in her tears, "O cruel one, where did you appear from after all this time? And you made me cry so." Even my stony heart allowed itself a few teardrops.

O Lord, what kind of test is this? I came to my senses soon and wondered about what I should do now. Years of practiced restraint—will they be undone by a few teardrops of a love-struck girl? Then I remembered Shahida and a very similar tear-stained face.

I thought I heard a warning voice that echoed through the deserts and mountains of Kutol Amara, "Soldier, beware!"

In my mind's eyes I saw the whole of Bengal waiting for the likes of us with garlands and blessings. Between love and duty I'll always choose duty!

hands of one's lover should be cherished, right, my love?" I sat like a statue as she smiled a sad smile. A faint tremor ran through her body like an earthquake. My tears mingled with the blood on her breasts. She was still holding my hands; her facial expression expressed contentment. Was this what she wanted? ... Once again I kissed her lips that were going cold, and called out, "Gul, Gul, Gul!" The night air blew and mocked me, "Wrong, wrong, wrong!"

The moon reappeared through the thin clouds and I lay there with Gul in my arms. Suddenly, an elderly woman appeared from nowhere and snatched Gul away from my embrace.

As the woman howled over her daughter I fell at her feet like one enthralled and cried, "Ma, Ma!" She picked me up like a mother indeed; kissed my forehead and called out to me, "Farzand, Farzand." Her tears flew like the rushing waters of the river Kaberi and fell on my head.



I prayed, "O Lord, pour strength in my heart and arms. I have a duty to perform."

Induced by a surge of new-found vigor, I took up my revolver. I heard a command, "Fire." I did exactly that.

Right afterwards there was a sharp cry, "Mother!.. O ma.. ah!"

And then all was silent.

I lost myself completely and ran towards her. Taking the fallen form and holding her close to my chest I pressed my thirsting lips on her dying ones. "Gul, Gul, Gul!" I sobbed. Her tears fell like sheuli flowers assailed by a strong wind.

She raised her hands slowly and clung to me. In the faint light of the moon her face appeared unearthly. That face will haunt me throughout my life. ... She opened her eyes slowly, took a look at me and closed them again. She said, "Death in the

Ah, the anguish of a mother who has lost her daughter!

I roused myself resolutely; stood up and whimpered, "Mother, O mother!" I thought I could hear a choking voice calling my name, "Farzand!"

Far away from the top of the mountains the sound of a mother wailing for her lost daughter resonated through the valley. Then was heard the sound of hoofs of a horse galloping.

Am I a beggar today, or a king? A convict or a free person? Am I complete or hollow?

I wait by the pensive and quiet Arab Sea with torrents of rain washing over me.

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PRESS RELEASE

LOGLIST ANNOUNCED FOR THE DSC PRIZE FOR SOUTH ASIAN LITERATURE 2017

The much anticipated longlist for the US \$25,000 DSC Prize for South Asian Literature 2017 was announced today by eminent feminist writer and publisher Ritu Menon, who is the chair of the jury panel for the distinguished prize. The longlist of 13 novels was unveiled at the Oxford Bookstore in New Delhi. It includes 7 Indian writers, 3 Pakistani writers, 2 Sri Lankan writers and 1 American writer based in India. Apart from authors based in the South Asian region there are authors in the list who are based outside the region and who have explored South Asian life and culture from an outside perspective. The five member international jury panel went through 60 eligible entries diligently to arrive at this year's longlist of 13 novels which they feel represent the best works of fiction related to the South Asian region.

The longlisted entries that will contend for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature 2017 are: Anjali Joseph's *The Living*, Anosh Irani's *The Parcel*, Anuk Arudpragasam's *The Story of a Brief Marriage*, Aravind Adiga's *Selection Day*, Ashok Ferrey's *The Ceaseless Chatter of Demons*, Hirsh Sawhney's *South Haven*, Karan Mahajan's *The Association of Small Bombs*, K.R. Meera's *The Poison of Love*, Omar Shahid Hamid's *The Party Worker*, Perumal Murugan's *Pyre* (Translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan, Hamish Hamilton), Sarvat Hasin's *This Wide Night*, Shahbano Bilgrami's *Those Children*, and Stephen Alter's *In the Jungles of the Night*.

The jury will now deliberate on the longlist over the next month and the shortlist of 5 or 6 books for the DSC Prize 2017 will be announced on 27th September, 2017 at the London School of Economics & Political Science (LSE) in London. Thereafter the jury will meet once again to arrive at the final winner that is to be announced at a special Award Ceremony at the Dhaka Literary Festival on November 18th, 2017.

The 5 member international jury panel of this year's DSC Literature Prize include beside Ritu Menon, Valentine Cunningham, Professor Emeritus of English language and Literature at Oxford University, UK who has authored several books on Victorian fiction and poetry, Steven Bernstein, the celebrated screenwriter, director, author, cinematographer and lecturer based out of Los Angeles, USA, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, respected journalist, pundit, radio and television broadcaster, based in London who has written extensively on society, culture and feminism, and Senath Walter Perera, Senior Professor in English, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka who has authored several publications on the diasporic and postcolonial literature of the region.

Now in its 7th year, the DSC Prize has been successful in bringing South Asian writing to a larger global audience through rewarding and showcasing the achievements of the authors writing about this region. Past winners of the DSC Prize have been H M Naqvi of Pakistan, Shehan Karunatilaka of Sri Lanka, Jeet Thayil and Cyrus Mistry from India, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Anuradha Roy, from India who won the prize last year.

Ocean of Sorrow

MIR MOSHARRAF HOSSAIN

Translation by Fakrul Alam

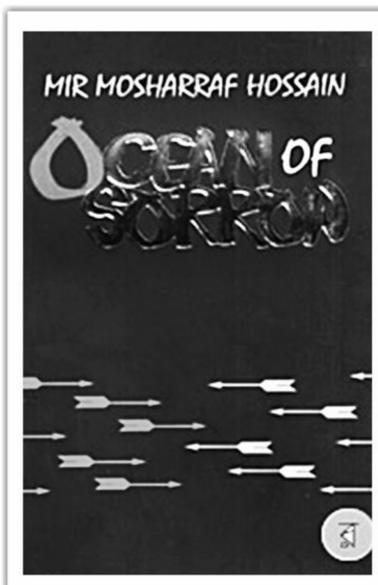
Dhaka: Bangla Academy 2016, ISBN 984-07-5586-2

Reviewed by Nazeef Hamid

When I picked up *Ocean of Sorrow*, I didn't know what to expect. My father had bought the book from Bangla Academy in our recent trip to Dhaka. I started reading it after my return to Brisbane. The title suggests a tragedy, and the book does circulate around tragedies, but apart from this titular hint I didn't know what was going to happen. Which is a good thing because I feel that titles should encapsulate the general theme, but should remain ambivalent enough to keep the reader wondering.

Ocean of Sorrow was originally written in Bangla as *Bishad-Sindhu* by Mir Mosharraf Hossain in 1885. It is translated by Fakrul Alam, Professor of English, at the University of Dhaka. His work must be an important milestone in the field of literary translation in Bangladesh. The plot of *Ocean of Sorrow* is heavily centred on Islam, meaning that having knowledge of Islam and Islamic history will make the story easier to understand. However, this knowledge is not absolutely necessary.

Professor Alam mentions in the preface that there were certain limitations to translating such a text written in 19th century Bengali into English. However, I have not read the Bengali version, and thus cannot comment on the accuracy of the translation. What I can say though is that it is more than enjoyable when read in English. Surely some credit must thus go to the translator. As I read



the work, I didn't feel the need to check with the original in Bangla, although I must admit I couldn't have done this anyway given my limited literacy in Bangla.

Ocean of Sorrow is a historical narrative

based on the events of the Battle of Karbala. The story focuses on the conflict between the Muslims of Medina and the King of Damascus, Yazid. Yazid is a young king, only having recently succeeded his father Mu'awiyah, and when he sees a woman named Zayneb, and he is instantly love struck because of her beauty. He devises a strategy to separate Zayneb from her current husband, Abdul Jabbar, and succeeds in executing it. However, all does not go according to his plan. Yazid sends a proposal to Zayneb via a messenger, but this same messenger meets Hasan along the way. Hasan is one of the grandchildren of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and is the King of Medina, and as such, was very respected by the Muslim population of the world, and even by Mu'awiyah, before he passed away. Hasan also sends his proposal to Zayneb through this same messenger. Zayneb, being a very devoted Muslim, accepts Hasan's proposal over Yazid. This does not please Yazid, and he declares war on Medina.

I mentioned tragedy at the beginning, and I would like to talk about this issue a bit more now. Tragedy, I believe, is at the core of the whole story. Throughout the text, many terrible things occur to the protagonists. As I mentioned previously, the historical context of this book is the Battle of Karbala, and that is depicted vividly in this story. Husayn is travelling to Kufa, and his followers join him,

but they are stranded without water in Karbala. Yazid's men have blocked off the only nearby water source, the River Furat, and the Muslims are left to die of thirst. It is a huge massacre. One by one, the champions of the Muslims go into battle, in an attempt to break through the blockade of enemy soldiers. One by one they perish, until finally Husayn is defeated. It is a terrible tragedy. The cries of "Alas! Alas!" are frequent, and eventually all are killed, or imprisoned. That is but one tragic event that takes place in the narrative; many more unfold as the tale unfolds.

A good book will make you think about it long after you have finished reading. *Ocean of Sorrow* meets this criterion. There are many parts in the book that I will remember because they are so unique or exciting. One aspect of the story that I particularly enjoyed is Mir Mosharraf Hossain's breaking the fourth wall several times. The term "breaking the fourth wall" means addressing the audience directly. It is not found often, especially in books, but I have encountered it in movies such as *Deadpool*. Typically, a character of the story will be found to break the fourth wall, but this was not the case with Hossain. He himself often provides his point of view on the events happening in the text. On some occasions he condemns the actions of characters such as Marwan, one of Yazid's generals; on others, he expresses his own grief

for the death of the characters that he has orchestrated. This strategy creates a very memorable effect, something that is different and unusual that stays with the reader.

Another memorable aspect of *Ocean of Sorrow* is the language used. As someone growing up in Australia, I found the language at times sounding foreign, despite it being in English. Words such as 'Alas' are just not used in the English that I come across here. Mir Mosharraf Hossain wrote the story in 1885, 132 years ago, and since then the way people speak has changed. On top of that, there is the challenge of translation. Perhaps reading it in Bangla would have sounded less foreign. But, as I noted before, the language did not affect my enjoyment of the reading.

Mir Mosharraf Hossain created quite a masterpiece in *Ocean of Sorrow*; it makes for a gripping read and is on a topic rarely encountered in the Western world. Thanks to the translated work of Professor Alam, people from all around the world can now enjoy it. I believe it will be accessible to many people, even if they are not well versed in Islam. I recommend this book to both young people as well as adults; it will surely be a good read for both groups of readers.

Nazeef Hamid is a Year 9 Student at Brisbane State High School, Australia. The DS Literary Editor would like to stress that this review was an unsolicited one!