

MUSINGS

POETRY

Freedom, You Are

Shamsur Rahman

TRANSLATED BY KAISER HAQ



One
1971 has been my greatest passion for the last forty-six years. It has been my pair of glasses with which to look at people and things. I recently wrote that three million martyrs have been telling me all these years, 'Never forgive them!' I never did. I never will!

Two
At two a.m. on March 26, my parents woke me up. My six-year-old younger brother was awake too. Our only sister, not yet two, was allowed to sleep. Mother was in an advanced stage of pregnancy.

There were mortar shelling and machine gun firing all around. We were in old Dhaka, a couple of hundred yards away from our famous missionary school. I was surprised and sad. Shocked, really. But not afraid. Father briefed me – talks between Bangabandhu and Yahya Khan had failed and there was going to be a military crackdown. This was treachery of the highest order. Only God knew how many of our people had lost their lives as a result! He and mother were awake from midnight that day. They didn't want to frighten me, though.

Fighters a highly motivated, very well informed sixteen-year-old! Impossible! Even my parents were not afraid. Such was the courage Bangabandhu had injected into his people. Father had seen it all – the birth of Pakistan, bloodshed in Kolkata and Delhi before that, the deprivation of Bangladesh over the years! Even mother showed no sign of discomfort and was sad but calm by then. My younger brother didn't cry either. Nor was he worried. For sure, our people would fight and snatch victory from the occupation army, we kept thinking. Our people were ready for Paki arms.

It dawned soon and people gathered in our lane. Students, political activists and neighbours. We learned about the Dhaka University massacre, the Peolikhana and Rajbarag attacks and the Shakti Nagar carnage. We never wept silently but our fists were clenched! The news of death of every DU teacher broke our heart!

I'll never forget the trembling cross sitting on the electric wires! I saw them through my room's window. They were shaking like human beings before a firing squad! I have never seen them trembling so vigorously. Scores of them, trembling endlessly. Perhaps they had never seen such cruelty before – human beings shot like birds and killed in thousands!

We would leave Dhaka on April 06, 1971. My

dada and nana were brothers; they and their wives lived in our huge ancestral home in Katiadi, Kishoreganj. Mother was Nani's only child. She had sent our brave Uncle Farid to take us back to Katiadi. Father was an exceptionally intelligent man but was not considered worldly wise. We usually rode trains or had a car ride. But in April, 1971 the journey had to be different. We travelled to Narsingdi by bus and on a boat. We saw signs of the effect of strafing in the bazaar. Bus up to Chalkal Char, then rickshaw for mother and walking for us! Two of my male cousins were with us too. We could manage only one rickshaw. For the first time in my life I walked ten miles at a stretch but I did so gladly! At times I thought I would faint. I had never walked a mile before! Nani didn't know our exact date of arrival. She had only also bhorta, begun bhaji and daal for us. I remember eating half a kilogram! Never did also bhorta and begun bhaji taste so like amrita, so heavenly, before!

Our April 06 journey taught me a few things. The first of these was the hospitality of ordinary people. I will never forget the smiling people who greeted us with great affection on the roads. Women we didn't know took my mother, brother and sister inside and fed them. They wanted to know about Dhaka. We learned that the army was yet to come to the villages here. Young men were already crossing the border to fight against the Paks. The villages were waiting with dharma, murli and garb to greet hundreds of Dhaka people!

Secondly, I learned that my dominating father loved me! A gifted man, he had failed in life and had survived a terrible accident at thirty-two; he had wanted me to be successful in life at any cost. But he was a strict disciplinarian and soft-hearted me disliked to be so dominated. That day every time we met the Paki soldiers in or around Dhaka, he would pat my cheeks, push me aside and say, 'I know Urdu. Let me talk to them. I was in Delhi, Karachi and Lahore.' A great crisis makes you very mature. I understood that he wanted to die first. He would not let us die in front of him. As for myself, whenever I met the Paki soldiers I was cool and not afraid at all. A teenage boy fighting for his country must be brave, right?

Four
At sixteen, I already knew the difference between armed seizure and a liberation war. I knew about the tragedy of Biafra. So I was happy as a king (a prince!) when the Bangladesh government in exile was formed in Mujibnagar on April

17. A government by the elected representatives of the people! The high jump I gave was the best of my life! I was listening to the Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra with others. Akashbani was very popular with us too. A shy introvert, I shouted at the top of my voice, 'Joy Bangla!' at the news. Father and my uncles came running. Why was our boy so happy! I had a train of twelve-year-olds and ten-year-olds shouting 'Joy Bangla' with an ear-to-ear grin as well.

Who was the acting President in Bangabandhu's absence? Who else but our own fupa Syed Nazrul Islam, married to our fupu! He had escaped to Agartala from Dhaka via our home with the help of Uncle Asad, a tiger who had fought as a teenage member of Netaji Subhas Bose's army many years back. Who was the Prime Minister? Tajuddin Ahmad, my hero and my school-mate (thirty years older)! He was the first boy of his class. I simply loved this gentleman. I had followed very eagerly everything that Bangabandhu and he did from March 1 to 25! I was so excited and happy! I loved the elegant and sober voice of Eva Nag and listened to her in bliss when she was announcing the Mujibnagar government on the radio. Soon two of our cousins sons of the Acting President, came to live with us. We played cricket together and planned to join the war soon. One of them later became an internationally known novelist in London. He is Manzur Islam (he has shortened his name now in honour of our Syed Manzoor Sir. He is also the author of the 1971 novel, *The Song of Our Swampland*).

Five
Freedom came in due course but after a genocide so terrible that I would not be able to go into details the details here. But almost all the seasons of that year I had watched our freedom fighters fight bravely, India and the USSR helping us like true friends, and Tajuddin Ahmad's government displaying great political wisdom then. Bangabandhu returned from Pakistan after a memorable stoppage in London soon after. Teenage me thought that we would have endless happiness from then on!

I was an imaginative boy all right but did not have the imagination to foresee the tragedy of 1975 – the tragic killing of Bangabandhu and journey backward subsequent governments embarked on.

Junaidul Haque is passionate about 1971, literature, music, and Tagore songs. He writes regularly for The Daily Star.

FICTION

ZAHIR RAIHAN'S *ITCHHAR AGUN-E JOLCHHI*

Burning in a Yearning Fire

TRANSLATED BY FAYEZA HASANAT

Some day, I will make a film about a group of people. These people, who – living in their melting, rotting bodies, but still resist – are – continuing to shout with desperation: "No, no, NO! There's nothing wrong with us! We are alright."

Those people – with their rotten limbs falling off from their bodies, like fallen leaves – continuously speak in a voice of eager assurance: "Oh, it's nothing! Nothing's wrong with us!"

Their putrid bodies defiantly fill the air with the odor of oozing puss. And yet, they aren't perturbed. Soaking themselves in fragrant rose water, they say out loud joyfully: "Look at us! Look! Nothing's wrong with us! We're alright indeed!"

Dead inside – dead and rotten – but bursting in insolent rage, their undead spirits keep yelling and wailing in a passionate plea: "We are not dead! Not dead yet!"

Some day, I will make a film about the young woman living next door. It has been ten years since they arrested her husband. No one knows what crime he had committed. Who knows for what reason they barged in one day and took him by force, producing no arrest warrants, or giving no explanations? "The woman doesn't respond to any queries about her husband. She remains still and suffers quietly. Like a fish out of water, she has been gasping for breath for the last ten years. Day after day, and night after night, she has been tossing and turning and bleeding inside alone.

And still she won't cry.

Time indeed has changed since then. My friend now spends his time pinging young girls to influential friends, just so he could gain some business permits in return!

And oh, how I wish I could make a film about her – my younger sister! She would definitely have made a good subject for a film. But a strong-willed and ambitious woman she was! Doctors had repeatedly warned her not to overwork her fragile brain, but she wouldn't listen. She was a persistent woman with a single end in mind. All she wanted was to earn a Graduate degree. One day I found her sitting by the staircase of the university building, she was crying. "Why are you crying, my sister?" I asked. "They rejected my application," she said. "They came to know about my involvement in politics. Because I participated in processions and strikes, they have branded me ineligible. They don't want me here," she sobbed. With that rejection letter, her dreams got shattered, her mental strength crumbled, and her fragile brain failed to hold on to sanity. My sister went mad.

Sometimes I feel tempted to make a film about this bunch of philistines who fancy themselves to be the pillars of Culture.

All they do is talk nonstop. All they talk about is Culture.

And about language. And about tradition. And they keep talking. Reasonably.

And for no reason. And after being exhausted by their own relentless chatter, they sit under the shades of the beautiful palm and mottled ebony trees, where they feel asleep and dream.

And they dream of grey deserts. And of Timur Lang and Genghis Khan. And of Hitler and Mussolini.

Oh, what beautiful dreams they dream! Some day, I want to paint a picture of these human beings on my celluloid canvas – the humans, who have faces of pigs and tongues of snake's hoods. Their eyes are like a pair of hats and their hands are tiger's paws. Just like humans, their hearts are also tangled and entwined in muddles of intertwining knots of complexities.

These human creatures quarrel constantly and lie habitually.

They always talk of rice. And of the gravy of curried beef.

They always talk of poverty and want.

And then they die. Like lizards and snakes and frogs and earthworms, they die.

And yet, they cannot die.

And yet, because they make themselves deathless – through the useless lives of the multitudes of progenies they leave behind – they fail to enter their right to a permanent death.

Oh, how I wish I could make a film about a young man imprisoned within the thousand walls of restraints!

He feels smothered and trapped behind the unbreakable walls:

The walls of laws and rules. And the walls of social oppression. And the walls of religion.

The walls of politics. And of poverty.

Banging his head against these walls, the hapless young man screams on and on, asking for his right to freedom. "Let me be free! Let me be free!" He yells at the top of his lungs. "Let my dreams and desires spread their wings, like birds that joyously fly in the endless sky. Let my dreams swim freely like a school of fish in the fathomless ocean!"

In his futile attempts to dismantle all barriers, the young man runs from one hurdle to another, pushing and ramming through those countless walls that stand between a man and his desire for freedom:

The walls of jealousy. Of hatred. Of falsehood. Of hollowness.

But how many barriers can he break in one mortal life?

And yet, the young man does not give up. The yearning fire that blazes inside his heart ignites in him a relentless urge to demolish all walls. He persistently pounds his head against the walls, demanding liberty.

"Break all these walls and let me be free!" He keeps saying. "GIVE ME LIBERTY!"

The young man doesn't lose hope, even though he knows that life is too short to cherish and to relish all joys that liberty can bring.

Fayeza Hasanat teaches at the University of Central Florida.

Freedom, you are
Rabindranath's evergreen verses
and timeless lyrics

You are Kazi Nazrul shaking his shaggy mane,
a great-souled man in the grip
of creative exaltation

You are the bright-eyed crowd
at the Shabed Minar
on International Mother Language Day

You are the militant
flag-waving demonstration
resounding with slogans

Freedom, you are
the peasant's smile
in a field of lush crops

You are the village girl's
carefree swim across a pond
under the midday sun

Freedom, you are
the sunburnt biceps
of a young worker

You are the freedom fighter's eyes
glinting in the dark
at the desolate frontier

You are the dazzling, sharply-worded
speech
of a bright young student
in the shade of a banyan tree

Freedom, you are
the stormy debates
in tea-stalls and on maidans

You are the drunken lashes

of summer thunderstorms
across the horizon

Freedom, you are
the broad chest of the shoreless
Meghna
at the monsoon's height

Freedom, you are
the inviting velvet texture
of father's prayer mat

Freedom, you are
the undulations on mother's spotless
sari
drying in the courtyard

Freedom, you are
the colour of henna
on my sister's soft palms

Freedom, you are
the colourful star-bright poster
in my friend's hand

Freedom, you are
the housewife's glossy black hair
hanging free

You are the wind's wild energy,
the little boy's colourful kurta,
sunlight on the little girl's soft cheek

Freedom, you are
the arbour in the garden, the koel's song,
glistening leaves of ancient banyan
trees,
the poetry notebook, to scribble as I please.

Kaiser Haq's Selected Poems of Shamsur Rahman is available from Pathak Shamabesh.

The Promise of 1971

RONNY NOOR



His ears attuned to the husky whisper
Of the Pindi prosecutor Aqlem Asharar,
the Queen General who had earned
more favor than his trusted advisors,
the inebriated Yahya gave the order
to batter the unwilling Bengali bones
with the fierce guns of his battle tanks.

So they let loose their fire, shredding
the peaceful spring night of March 25th,
burying mothers, fathers, and children
under the rubble of crumbling buildings
as the flames leapt to the distant stars
and the heavens cried out in agony.

The womb of those ashes bred us –
workers, farmers, and students;
rebel cops and soldiers as well –
men, women, Hindus, Muslims,
humanists, secularists, and more –
bound by a solemn promise to undo
the grievous wrongs of history.

Centuries of shameful subjection
by the marauding Mughals and

the perfidious British – who shamed
us for our heritage – and the rabid
Pakistanis – who spilled the blood
for our language – couldn't rob us
of our abiding lore and mores.

So heads held high we marched
forward and fought for nine restless
months against the tyrant's juggernaut –
for a land where knowledge would not
be a captive of platitudes and reason
wouldn't lose its way into blind belief,
where the mind would be free
and life's worth would rest on virtue –

till that afternoon of '16' December, when
Tiger Niazi's trembling hand signed the
surrender document and blood-red
sunlight up the leaden winter sky
from the green glang of my motherland.

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