



FICTION

# From *Enchanted Delta*

RAZIA KHAN AMIN

Nadeem longed to join the crowds in the streets. When no one was around, he watched his own face in the mirror as he improvised a fiery speech directed against the Pakistani military junta. But his uncle kept a close watch on him. On the evening of the 25th, an old associate from Cornell, Frank Wilder had dined in their flat. Hussain's wife Sarah took out her lace tablecloth and rarely used cutlery to set the table. She had made Nadeem collect some pink wild flowers, which she arranged in a brass bowl. Nadeem had never seen anything like this before. Two olive-green candles were lit in the candelabra.

Sarah put on a Ravi Shankar on the recorder. Nadeem, captivated, lapped up the entire scene with eager eyes. He decided he would like to entertain like this when he grew up. Sarah herself in a Lady Hamilton sleeveless black blouse and light blue silk sari looked ravishing. Nadeem adored his aunt as she went about in a flurry, baking and cooking and constantly consulting her cookery book. She was trying out some European dishes. She had made a fish soufflé with cheese and tomatoes. She had gone to New Market herself to pick the freshest Bhetki. She also made a fabulous Russian salad with eggs and mayonnaise. For pudding she had baked a soft orange-cake to be taken with fragrant custard. These exotic dishes had opened a new world to Nadeem. The university flat, dusted, cleaned and decorated with fresh leaves and flowers looked out of the world.

Dr. Wilder smelled Sarah's sandalwood scent and the inviting flavour of the baked dishes from the kitchen and gave a broad smile. "I say Hussain, you don't live like a poor Bengalee!"

Nadeem was all ears, trying to understand the English spoken in a different twang. Looking at the boy Frank Wilder joked: "You devil! How did you produce a strapping twelve year-old out of the blue? You got married only last year."

"He is my nephew. A brilliant chap. He can give you each detail of American history if you care to question him. Hussain stated with immense pride."

Nadeem had eaten in the kitchen, afraid of the instruments, which he did not yet know how to handle. He helped his aunt to bring in the steaming dishes and then lay them symmetrically on the dining table, according to her instructions. He watched with fascination the skill and briskness with which the three handled the knives and forks. He made up his mind to be able to do the same, some day in the bright future, hardly anticipating that the very existence of his race would be in jeopardy, that fateful night of the 25th of March 1971. After the meal they sat in the veranda. Sarah said: "Frank, I am afraid you won't like my coffee. I don't have a percolator. I have made some Chinese green tea."

"With Jasmines," Nadeem ventured to put in these two English words.

"Excellent! Excellent! You Bengalees are marvellous people. No American could have served a Bengali dinner like this."

"Sarah has never been out of this country." Wilder was amazed by Hussain's words. The entire dinner had a French flavour, which he loved. Sipping the green tea he winked at Hussain: "Some style, old guy!"

Nadeem threw up the green tea, which he had taken stealthily in a glass. But the grown-ups seemed to relish it. Wilder asked for another cup, remarking: "The Chinese have a habit of filling your cup again and again."

"Sorry, that's what I should have done," Sarah said in her perfect convent English.

Hussain lit a cigarette and suddenly the entire horizon reverberated with violent sounds, the like of which they had never

He rushed out and Sarah closed the door behind him with trembling hands. Nadeem knew she was with child. He said to his aunt, "Why don't you lie down. I'll clear the table."

She embraced him impulsively and said: "No my darling - just be quiet - don't move!"

The day's hard work, and the shock of this unexpected violence must have made her nerves snap. She fainted; her husband picked her up and put her in bed. The two men and one boy sat up all night. Towards daybreak they heard footsteps. There was a third floor flat. On the ground floor lived Dr. Thakurta, a senior Professor of the English Department. The noise of shooting seemed to come from that direction. Someone knocked on their door. It was Hasan: "They've shot Dr. Thakurta. He is lying in pool of blood!"



heard before. Frank Wilder would have left in a minute or two. Red flames and smoke usurped the tranquil sky. They quickly closed the doors and windows and moved inside.

"These sound like machine guns and mortars," Wilder stated.

Hussain picked up the phone. It was dead. "I think I hear tanks," he said, the next-door neighbour, Mr. Hamid Hossain who worked in the English Department came in through a side-door, which had been left inadvertently open.

"Please shut all your doors," he said.

"This is an army crackdown, anything can happen."

"What? Has your Federal Government gone mad?" Wilder screamed in anger.

Hussain was about to rush downstairs. Nadeem gave out a wild cry: "Mama (Uncle), please don't go. They are going to kill us."

Hasan advised: "You mustn't move. They are still shooting, we must wait quietly."

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The whole day passed in unbearable anxiety and grief. Curfew had been announced through the radio. Wilder had borrowed a car from one of his diplomat friends. It was parked outside, but he could not leave. The

sound of shooting had merely subsided only for a while. It began again in full vigour almost destroying people's eardrums.

The red glow in the sky and the heavy roar of mortars continued. Towards sunrise the furore seemed to subside.

Hussain was busy tending Sarah. Nadeem took her a cup of warm milk. Together they washed her head. They found Wilder in the kitchen trying to make tea. Hussain took over, asking his guest to leave it to him. Wilder went for a wash. A heartrending moaning sound rose from downstairs. Nadeem covered his ears and said: "It must be Dr. Thakurta's wife."

Hussain's face was red with anger. As he made tea he said: "You see Frank, we have allowed a pack of wolves to rule us. We Bengalis are too busy with poetry and music. What we need now is military training."

During a recent convocation of the university, when a leading scientist Dr. Kudrate Khuda had announced the need of martial lessons for the Bengalee youth, the audience was a bit taken aback. Now everyone understood the significance of that counsel. The curfew was lifted the following morning at about eleven. Wilder said to Hussain before driving off: "I'll come back with provisions. I have seen everything. I'll report all this to the Herald Tribune."

Hussain pleaded with him: "Frank, please don't come back here. We may not be here when you come. Don't take me amiss. I'll contact you if I can. These are very bad times; goodbye, my friend."

Nadeem had liked the blue-eyed physicist; they shook hands. As Wilder's car left, their eyes fell on the blood streaming from Dr. Thakurta's flat into the porch. Hasan was locking the front door. He whispered, "He has been taken to Medical College. We have hidden his wife and daughter as best as we could. Now we must buy some provisions before the curfew is imposed again."

Hasan's clothes were smeared with Thakurta's blood. Suddenly Hussain lost his nerve. He sat down on the steps and started howling and sobbing uncontrollably. Nadeem had never seen his uncle break down like this.

Hussain wailed: "Thakurta was such a wonderful man. He was Sarah's teacher. Sarah will never recover from this. Please don't tell her anything. She might have a miscarriage. As it is her condition is bad."

Tears streamed down his face. He had torn some of his hair-- Hasan and Nadeem held him from both sides and took him upstairs; the dishes lay on the table, the flowers had withered. The candles had lost their shape. The festive atmosphere of the previous evening had changed into a general appearance of hopelessness and disorder. When Hasan left, Nadeem, sitting between Hussain and Sarah, felt he had a lot of responsibility towards this couple, who had sheltered him with such loving care. He stroked his uncle's back, bent with grief and bewilderment and said firmly: "Mama, we cannot stay here. We

must not stay here, let us go to Muradpur, to my parents."

Sarah, who had recovered a little, said to her husband: "He is right, we must go."

"How can we? The army is everywhere."

"We'll dress like poor villagers," said Nadeem.

Briskly they poured mustard oil over their heads, to make their hair look sticky and rustic. They put on lungis. Sarah took out her cheapest sari and wound it around herself in the village manner. They made bundles of onions, potatoes and rice. It was now the evening of the 27th. Quickly locking the front door they stole out of Savage Road. Near Jagannath Hall the hostel for Hindu boys, there was heavy military patrol. When confronted by the army Hussain and his wards opened their bundles and offered the potatoes and rice. They wailed and kept pleading, "Sir, please take all we have and let us return to our village."

Mistaking them to be absconding house-servants who were too simple to be dangerous the soldiers let them off saying impatiently: "Go! go-get out of our sight, Bengalee buggars!"

Hussain got into a baby-taxi with his family. Their village, not far from Narayanganj was reached before mid-night. Muradpur village did not look the tranquil place it had been. They saw half-burnt homesteads and cornfields. Smoke had enveloped the entire horizon. Nadeem's parents were in bed. Hearing their son's voice they came out with a Hurricane lantern. The women broke into sobs. The men stood in stony speechlessness. No words could express their predicament.

Nadeem's mother awakened Golapi the housemaid and got about preparing a simple meal for the weary travellers. She had water drawn from the pond. They snatched a couple of hours' sleep towards dawn. After a fortnight Hussain had managed to sneak out to India with his wife. From there he flew to the United States where he settled down for good.

It was Nadeem who was now installed in a Savage Road University flat. Hussain came on vacation last year and stayed with Nadeem. Frank Wilder, a renowned name in Physics, shared the Nobel Prize with another countryman. Nadeem had seen the carnage caused by the Pakistan army in Dhaka and in his own village. He was then only twelve. Yet he had been able to force the Hussains to leave their Savage Road flat from where, just when victory was at the door, in December, Hamid Hossain and several other teachers were killed. Hussain Ahmed had escaped the butchers by going to Nadeem's village and then to Calcutta.

This is an excerpt from Chapter 4 of Razia Khan's unpublished novella *Enchanted Delta*. We would like to thank Asha Mehreen Amin for allowing us to print the excerpt and look forward to its publication in near future.

## Inspirational, Imaginative, Unconventional- Razia Khan Amin

FAKRUL ALAM

There is hardly anything anywhere in the net to indicate how good Razia Khan Amin (1936-2011) (aka Razia Khan, or Mrs. Amin to us students) truly was as a writer, but in her lifetime she was awarded, first the Bangla Academy Puroshkar for her literary works (1975) and then the Ekushey Padak (1997) for her overall contribution to Bangladesh's culture and letters. Novelist, poet, academic as well as an exceptional person, she deserves a lot more appreciation from us all in English, although we must be thankful for Junaidul Huq's characteristically heart-felt and generous tribute, "Razia Khan Amin: Teacher, Poet, Novelist" (*The Daily Star*, January 14, 2012).

Razia Khan was a truly colorful person. She was not only precocious but also ahead of her time in her ideas and ways. She was also always herself, which is to say lively, mercurial and fascinating--almost a diva.

If my memory (always unreliable about dates!) serves me right on this occasion, Razia Khan became my tutorial teacher towards the end of January 1971. The tutorial format in place in the University of Dhaka's English department then allowed for students to come close to their teachers but I can't remember her becoming intimate with any of us in our group initially. But it was probably the third time we met her that she came alive for me. I had written a tutorial essay on *Pride and Prejudice* and scanning it she had come across the word "articulate" that I used to emphasize how easily Jane

Austen communicated her insights into human relationships to her readers. "Articulate" she exclaimed excitedly; "What a good word to use!" And I felt, all of a sudden, that our class had come alive with her. I was grateful, too, for the attention she lavished on me afterwards—all because she felt that here was one student to use the English language originally.

But our tutorial classes came to an end unexpectedly because of the gathering political storm that would only clear up with the emergence of Bangladesh in December 1971. Teachers and students had dispersed after March 26, fleeing the Pakistanis and trying to stay alive frantically any which way they could.

Razia Khan probably left for England sometime in 1971; we were deprived of her teaching for a couple of years even after classes had resumed in early 1972. My second memorable encounter with her was in the classroom for she was assigned to teach a couple of Shakespeare's plays to us M. A. students. As a teacher too, she would teach in an uninterested sort of way in patches but would take fire every once in a while. One day in class, she told us how upsetting Shakespeare's Hamlet's predicament was to her. "Hamlet is like a rose," she exclaimed, waxing eloquent on his vulnerability and musings on death and love. Brash and over-confident at this time, I raised my hand and said, "M'am you are trying to romanticize Hamlet." "Romanticize?!" she exclaimed.

"Do you know what the word means?" "Yes" I said brashly once again. "Seeing him with rose-colored glasses." Visibly upset, she ignored me for the rest of the class, leaving me contrite and with the feeling that I had been a bit too impetuous and not a little unmanly.

My third encounter with Mrs. Amin was quite memorable and showed how unconventional and romantic she truly was. I was a Lecturer in the department of English by then and had the bright idea that we would stage Euripides's *Alcestis* in a departmental event. I floated the idea in a faculty meeting and volunteered to take charge of the production. Mrs. Amin's face lighted up and she said, "I'd like to play the role of Alcestis!" But the idea of me directing her, a senior teacher, gave me cold feet. I thought the best way to deal with the situation was to forget the idea of staging the play, leaving her no doubt baffled and unhappy by my withdrawal from the venture.

I can't tell whether she had been nursing the unhappiness I had caused her in the second and third encounters, but I did manage to rile her completely in the fourth encounter I had with her. This time though, I offended her unwittingly by declaring in a faculty meeting that departmental teachers shirking examination duty should be taken to task. I meant this as a general observation but she felt that it was directed specifically at her. Irritated by my stance, she left the meeting angrily and stopped talking to me for

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some time afterwards.

But I wouldn't be writing this piece if I didn't feel that these encounters were all that I had to say about her. Some years later, when my book of translation, *Jibanananda Das: Selected Poems* came out she seemed to

have forgotten whatever grudges she had borne against me over the years and given them up completely because of her delight in her student's work. The first thing she did now was scribble me a note where she expressed her delight at my translations. The second thing she did at this time was to gift me a complete set of her works, including the award winning ones.

From that time onwards, Mrs. Amin, always greeted me smilingly. Clearly, she had too much affection and love of literature in her to nurse a grudge unreasonably long. Clearly, she was every inch the writer and lover of literature who had the generosity to acknowledge and welcome others. All along, I realized, it was I who had been too conventional and too bound by tradition to respond to her actions. She was, indeed, affectionate and welcoming, albeit unconventional and whimsical at times.

Razia Khan, indeed, was way ahead of her time, a pioneering writer, a very good novelist and poet, truly bilingual and patriotic as well as enlightened as a person. In her writings as in her life she was inspirational, imaginative, unconventional—a path breaker. Her writings deserve study and reprinting, and I hope that she will come to be fully appreciated for her works and her presence in our literature by generations to come.

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