



A LIFE LESS ORDINARY
BY ALY ZAKER

Agartala, and travel thru THE 'PAHAR' LINE!

Agartala's population had doubled by March 1971. Therefore, when we arrived in that town it did not seem like an Indian town. Almost everyone was speaking in our language, nay our dialect. As it is, most people of Agartala spoke in a dialect that resembled that of Comilla. The most interesting thing that we encountered in this small town was almost routinely meeting people that we knew in Dhaka. We stayed in the first floor of a two-storied building in an innocuous road at Agartala. A mat was spread wall to wall for us to sleep. If I remember correctly, about twenty of us slept in that bed on the floor that night. I remember a few political stalwarts of the student and youth wings of the Awami League also spent the night with us. Messrs Tofael Ahmed, Sheikh Fazlul Huq Moni and Abdul Quddus Makhan were some of them. I distinctly remember that we spent a sleepless night thinking about what we would do now that we could be officially termed refugees. We could not obviously find a sense of direction that night but reached at a unanimous decision that perhaps we

should move to Calcutta to be near the Mujibnagar government.

After a couple of days, we embarked on the journey in a truck. The travel was far from being smooth as to we sat on top of the cargo that the truck was transporting from Agartala to Dharmanagar, the nearest railway station in Tripura. Nevertheless, the route was picturesque winding through hills and a lush green landscape. We arrived at the Dharmanagar station in the evening. No one had a clue about where we would stay overnight. Therefore, we laid a couple of mats at the far end of the platform that provided us some space to sleep at night. At Dharmanagar the arrangements were far less than the minimum comfort we were accustomed to. We ate some half baked loaves of bread with tea for our dinner that night and went to sleep on the platform full of destitute refugees. I have discovered during those calamitous days that people can adjust to conditions that would otherwise seem impossible to cope with. It was not possible to sleep long in that crowd of people with activities galore. It was five

when I left our make shift bed. I decided to take a walk after attending the morning rituals. Dharmanagar, then a tiny market-centric town, was abuzz with Bangladeshis waiting to catch the one and only refugee train to come the following day. I thought how much can residents of a small place like this or even Agartala can take! I can't still imagine any group of people, however magnanimous they are, for bearing such onslaught on them for days on end. When I returned to the platform, our group of nine was wide awake. Signs of discomfort were rife in their appearance. We sat to discuss how we were going to confront the next 24 hours in a situation like this. Just then we saw an Indian army officer of the rank of Brigadier with his escorts approaching us. They asked my brother-in-law if he was a member of the parliament. The answer, obviously, was in the affirmative and the Brigadier saluted him. We were then invited to his tent for lunch that day. We were happy at the prospect of a decent meal that we were deprived of for many days. Little did we know that the lunch would com-

prise Chapatis, mixed vegetable curry and Daal. The kids were looking for meat and were clearly unhappy. We told them that they could happily eat as much meat as possible on reaching Calcutta.

When the train rolled in the following morning a colossal chaos ensued. We hardly expected it. The Brigadier was there with his men advising us what to do. He told me to enter a compartment through the window and make room for the women and kids which, with the help of a friend, I did. Once we were settled in, the Brigadier came near the window. He wore an apologetic expression and explained that in India a military officer could not be seen helping a select group of civilians where the others were helpless. This could have been considered a transgression. Later we talked about how in a similar situation in Pakistan the men in uniform would just block the entry to the compartment for others and settle their friends in. But that was another story of a different country that we had not merely left but had now embarked upon to undo.

Michael Madhushudan Dutta Award for Sharmini Abbasi



LIFE'S LYRICS
NASHID KAMAL

When you are born to a family of luminaries, it is difficult to exude your own light out of the shadows of the giants who have been your predecessors. Sharmini Abbasi is one of those figures who has toiled hard to be her own successful person, in spite of the heavy load of cultural and literary inheritance that she carries and which often poses as a burden. Sharmini's balance has been steady. She has stood first class first in Honours & Masters in Law from Dhaka University and earned another Masters in Law from School of Law, University of Georgia, USA. She joined multinational organisations and rose to be the head of legal services at BRAC Bank, Grameenphone, Robi, and then shifted to private consultancy in law.

This is because, in between her corporate career, she has been a successful writer. Her first book was titled *Amar Meyeke Boli* (2003), which is essentially what a mother feels about the values captured during her times and those that are now in vogue in the materialistic, corporate culture of elitist neighbourhoods of a developing nation. It has received immense appreciation by critics ranking amongst the first ten books by Prothom Alo of Ekushey Book Fair of 2003. Whereas, her childhood was spent making dolls with shredded clothes from the

tailor, her daughter (meaning the next generation) is too conscious of Pocahontas/Barbie and all the latest names which only affluent people can buy and hence their friendship with only one segment of the society develops their persona as a one-eyed sailor from *Treasure Island*, the other eye is completely closed as it has not seen the beauty from the simple



pleasures of plying paper boats on a rainy afternoon. Perhaps it is a part of the transition that a developing country faces when it goes from 80 percent employment in the agricultural sector to a more non agrarian job-oriented middle income country. For her son Alvi, she wrote another book titled *Amritar Putro*. Other books include *Poitrisher Jeebon*, *Babar Desher Kurua*, *Neelpodder Khoje* and *Ami*

Shunini Tomar Dak. My favourite is her novel through letters, two people, earlier in love, find each other through the digital media and cruise through their memories and wonder why their union did not occur. Each has his/her own interpretation of why they parted in *Adritar Chithi* (Mowla Brothers, 2004). This book has been enlisted as among the 100 bestsellers in Bangladesh.

This year, she is receiving the prestigious award in literature: Michael Madhushudan Dutta Award, from Kolkata. This is indeed a feather in her cap as her name will be listed with literary giants such as Sunil Gongopadhyay, Narayan Sannyal, artists like Hemanta Kumar, Shyamal Mitra and many others. The book for which she is being awarded is titled *Babar Desherkurua*, an excerpt from a song written by Abdul Karim (the younger brother of Abbasuddin Ahmed). The book is on the reflections of a middle aged woman who leaves her cushioned and privileged natal home to become a wife, mother, societal lady, join the corporate job ladder and yet the spouse does not take up the roles that needs to support such kind of a multi-tasker. She is constantly reminded of the Kurua bird, in the same tune as a young rural girl offers the empty heart to the Padma River and asks it to take it back to her old home (Poddar Dheu Re), the age

old longing and tears of a woman for her parental home and days gone by. The theme is not new, but the book is. The analogies are unique, the parallels are solely hers, and just as an old song sung by a new artist offers a sudden twist which makes you love the new rendition the book finds its novelty in the writing style. Not to mention that her thoughts are progressive, and deals with issues of mental health and inequality of women's roles in raising children. Sharmini's knowledge of Jeebonando, Tagore, Nazrul, Islamic and folk songs from her childhood keeps recurring like a breath of fresh air. It seems that she is craving to open the windows of her mind "khola hawa lagiye pale, tukro kore kachi, ami dubte raji achi" that is in Tagore's words go with the wind and rediscover oneself again and again, which is so missing in society. We are only thinking from the boxes and our thoughts are never aired, not even during the lovely winter sun, it airs our clothes but not our mentality. Being accorded an honour for airing true feelings is genuinely laudable. May this be the beginning and through the pen of Sharmini let all doors be wide open for the future generations to enjoy the beauty inherent in literature!

Nashid Kamal is an Academic, Nazrul exponent and translator.