

# SYED MANZOORUL ISLAM: “A Veritable Man of Letters”

INTERVIEWED BY ARIFA GHANI RAHMAN

*Dr. Syed Manzoorul Islam – or SMI sir, as he is popularly known to us, his current and former students – is one of the most dynamic people I know. I first met him about twenty-five years ago in an undergraduate classroom where he taught us poetry by Herrick, Browning, and Eliot (I was so taken by his style – SMI's, not Eliot's - that I even memorized several lines from “Prufrock”!), and of course, Marlowe's Doctor Faustus. I knew him then as a teacher I could only admire, and later, as a writer of incredibly diverse genres. Witty, versatile, friendly, energetic, extremely talented, and not one to mince his words, he is a man I remain in awe of till this day. This interview was my chance to get up close and personal with the legendary SMI.*

*Congratulations, sir, on recently becoming president of PEN Bangladesh! Would you tell us why and how important it is for Bangladeshi writers to be associated with an international body such as this?*

**SMI:** Thank you! PEN International is truly a global body. It actively supports freedom of expression and firmly stands behind authors who are under threat from any quarter. It also facilitates exchanges of ideas and creative encounters among writers of different countries. Bangladeshi writers can benefit from PEN international's support in these areas.

*So how do you plan to use your position as PEN president to promote Bangladeshi writing in English?*

**SMI:** PEN's charter actively promotes translation, and this is where Bangladeshi writers stand to benefit. Besides, PEN International can support Bangladeshi writers writing in English by linking them up with writers and publishers worldwide. It may also provide them with a platform for their work.

*This is indeed a great opportunity for Bangladeshi writers, and with you at its helm, I'm sure PEN Bangladesh will provide the much-needed support for local writers. But now let's talk about you. You are a teacher and a writer. I believe those are your two predominant identities. Would you tell us then which came first – your teaching or your writing? How has one influenced the other or what impact has one had on the other?*

**SMI:** Well, I published my first short story in weekly *Bichitra* in October 1973, and took up teaching a year later. Technically then, writing came first, but teaching has always been my first priority, if you ask me. Unlike in most western countries, writing hasn't emerged here as a profession. And when I began teaching, the pressure of proving myself put writing on the backburner. It was not until the 1990s that I took it up with the zeal and intensity it deserved.

Teaching for me involves a great deal of reading; so, to answer your second question here, I'd say my journey through European and Latin American fiction helped me hone my skills and my style. I believe a fiction writer's creative thinking and imagination do help in understanding literary texts and theory in a more intuitive way.

*Did you consciously choose to write fiction or did fiction choose you?*

**SMI:** I guess fiction chose me. My first story, *Bishal Mrityu* (“The Magnificent Death”) came to me while I was sitting by the bed of a dying man, watching him struggle to hold his last breath. That is not an experience out of which a story should

emerge, but it did.

*I think I know what you mean. But wouldn't you say that it is intense experiences like these that make you think and feel enough to want to write about them?*

**SMI:** Certainly. The act of writing is like climbing a rock face. It's not simply the exertion or the pressure of bringing something out of nothing that you must feel; you've also got to know how and where to plant your feet and haul yourself up. But the reward is great when you reach the top!

*Let me turn to another aspect of your creative life. You are such a busy person – a teacher, “a veritable man of letters,” a celebrity, a media personality. How do you find the time to write? Do you have a favorite/preferred time to write?*

**SMI:** I squeeze in some time to write whenever I have the compulsion. I have no particular schedule – I choose my time and place to write. I write in airport lounges, on airlines flights, even in my dentist's chamber when there is a long wait! This helps me manage some zero-anxiety time while I get some work done.

*Interesting! So, have you ever turned to anyone for advice on writing? If not, what might you have done differently if you had such advice or known of some of the experiences you've had?*

**SMI:** No, I've never asked for advice from anyone because I believe that the act of writing – from imagining a story to putting it down on paper -- is such a unique and personal undertaking that no matter how worthwhile someone's advice may be, it has little effect on the way a story evolves. Advice from a master narrator may be helpful when the story is forming inside your skull, but once it assumes a life of its own, it takes its own course. Had I ever had advice from someone, I'd of course thank the person but I'd probably lose sight of it when I sat down to write my story!

*So, considering the recent growth in the number of Bangladeshi writers writing in English, would you have any advice for them? If so, what would that be?*

**SMI:** No. No advice – just a few words of encouragement to these young and upcoming writers. There is a readership for you out there which is ready to receive good writing. Anyone with new ideas should start writing.

*What then do you think of Bangladeshi writing in English as a whole in comparison to South Asian writing?*

**SMI:** South Asian literature in English mostly comes from India, some from Sri Lanka and Pakistan, but very little from Bangladesh. India has a long history of creative engagement with English and a long line of accomplished writers. There is also a

substantial market as well as publishers, and prizes for writers. We are still far behind. There is talent here, no doubt, but we have just begun. I'm sure, in the not so distant future, we'll be there too.

*That is indeed very encouraging to hear! You yourself are a prolific writer and have published in a variety of genres. Which is your favorite genre and why?*

**SMI:** I get the most pleasure from writing fiction, especially short stories. I do enjoy writing about art, literature, and society, but these need a great deal of preparation and an active engagement with ideas and theory. In writing stories though I can let my imagination run free. I am most myself when I enter the world of creative writing.

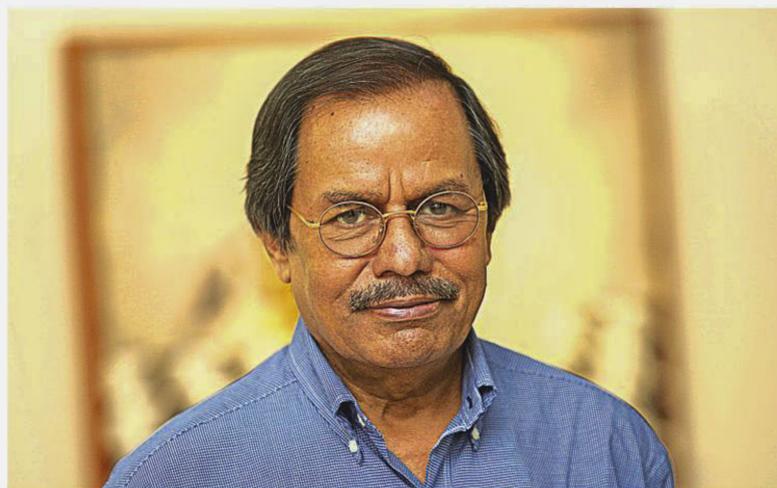


PHOTO: RUPAM CHOWDHURY

*I recently translated a short story of yours, “Meye.” In doing so, I was especially struck by how naturally you brought together a picture of the harsh reality of a lower middle class family and the surreal appearance of their unborn daughter. Would you consider this your signature style?*

**SMI:** I grew up at a time when poverty was endemic and women were the worst sufferers. But when I met them – my mother always helped poor women with food and money, so there were a few in our house every now and then – I was surprised by their resilience and their capacity to imagine things. “Meye” is my tribute to these women. The story is not quite a signature one – I am still searching for my signature – but it comes close.

*You have been compared with Gabriel Garcia*

*Marquez. Would you say you have been influenced by him in particular? Which other writers have influenced your style?*

**SMI:** I don't know who compared me with that Titan, but let me relish it before the generous person decides to go back on it! No, Gabriel Garcia Marquez is incomparable. While I admire him immensely, I don't think I've ever been influenced by him, or by any other writer. I have found some authors very inspirational – Milan Kundera, Kurt Vonnegut, Mario Vargas Llosa, for example – but I never thought of following them.

*Let's talk about translation. You have translated your own stories in The Merman's Prayer and Other Stories. Based on that experience, would you tell us what you see as the*

then, haven't translation theorists told us that every work of translation of a text produces a different text?!

*That's certainly true! Now, you've written five novels in Bengali – do tell us if you have any plans to translate these or write one in English. Any plans for a much larger work of fiction in either language?*

**SMI:** I myself don't see the prospect of self-translation of any of my novels but Dhaka Translation Centre (DTC) is bringing out the English translation of one of my novels, *Ajgubi Raat*, in February. I do, however, have plans to write a novel in Bengali this year or the next – I already feel its ghostly presence inside my skull. And, in another 3-4 years, if I am still alive and kicking, I might come up with a novel in English.

*That is great news! I, for one, will be looking forward to it. But, at the moment, what is the most significant thing you're working on?*

**SMI:** I am writing a series of 1971 stories based entirely on the lives and experience of grassroots people. I have been to many villages to talk to people who fought in the war or simply survived the war, and are still around. Their stories – fascinating narrations that are very local, very unassuming – are nothing short of magical.

*I can imagine! That's something else I will certainly watch out for. My final question, sir. What question do you wish someone would ask about your work, but never has? Tell us what it is and then answer it.*

**SMI:** One question no one has ever asked me is: “Who writes your stories?” If anyone were to ask me this question, I'd say in reply, “Many SMIs.” What I mean is, when I write a story, the truant school boy SMI in search of roadside *Phanthi*-readers (amazing story tellers, they!), Sharif Mia's canteen regular SMI of the Dhaka University days, too long in the west (5 years in Canada is indeed too long!) SMI, the all season *addabaz* SMI, the English Professor SMI – all come together. The story, as a result, becomes a mosaic of many micro-narratives, many encounters, and many shades of experience that collectively define its architecture.

*What an interesting way to describe yourself. Indeed, our collective experiences do shape our thought processes and express themselves through our work. On behalf of our readers and myself then, let me thank you very much for this edifying conversation, sir!*

*Syed Manzoorul Islam has just retired from D. U. and now teaches at ULAB. Arifa Ghani Rahman is Associate Professor in the Department of English and Humanities at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh.*

## From an untitled, unfinished, unpublished 1971 story

TRANSLATED BY SYED MANZOORUL ISLAM

I knew it was Tipu, without even looking at the blanket-wrapped body they were carrying on their shoulders. I knew it was Tipu, because as always, he had filled up every space with his presence. He was my only child, and I often acted like a mother would, over-protective, over-anxious; I never liked it when he was out of my sight. When Tipu returned from school, or from the playground as soon as the first bird returned to its nest in the evening, I could hear his eager footsteps all the way down. I could even smell him then; his hair would emit a sweaty but sweet scent when he had been a half hour in the sun.

On that particular day, when his father's men carried Tipu home, I could smell him from the moment they had set their feet in my direction. But from his hair then came not the usual scent of sweat, but something else. I was wracking my brain to locate that smell. In spite of myself, I was getting worried, and a sick feeling gripped me. I knew the pulse of anxiety, the panic that seizes one when the ground starts sinking. I've felt the dread of someone dangling over a precipice. Yet this anxiety, this fear, this panic, was nothing like anything I had known before. Tipu had been walking in the sun all morning, the smell of his hair should have overpowered the scent from the champa trees lining the road. The fields must have been dazed, too. But I could not smell the scent that I knew like my own breath.

I prayed to God to tell me what was wrong. Then, and as suddenly as an April storm rises and whirls away, the realization came to me. My mind flashed back to an Ashwin afternoon many years ago when Tipu had been walking around the courtyard in his uncertain, two year footsteps, investigating

everything, touching and feeling everything, when he fell on that fish cutter a maid servant had so carelessly placed near a pile of freshly captured fish. I smelled the blood from the kitchen as it flowed from his hand. No big injury, that; but blood was everywhere.

Blood! When they showed me Tipu's face and allowed me to plant one last kiss on his cheeks, I put my hands around his head, and felt the blood. It was still warm and sticky.

I must have fallen across Tipu's body, for a pair of strong hands pulled me back. I knew I was slipping into unconsciousness – I was fighting against it, and knew it was a losing battle. But I was afraid they would take him away while I lay there, unconscious, and the thought terrified me. So I held on, gritting my teeth, concentrating every bit of my energy on one last effort to keep myself awake. I had to see – I had to see what had played foul with my son's sweet smelling hair. As I held his head, and felt the blood, I had the sudden urge to bury my face in his hair. His face looked happy; he seemed to have died peacefully.

One of his father's men had accidentally shot him as he cleaned his gun. Tipu must've faced his death unafraid. And I was really puzzled. Tipu was never the child to stand up to pain or fear; his rage was great, but it came and went. He lacked the courage to face things calmly. He would break down, weep, or tear his hair –but he never ever threw a punch even at a shadow. Someone lifted the blanket and his face lighted up: it looked so contented!

All my fears went. I knew I could now rest without any worries, Tipu had taken care of himself, and I could now take care of myself

too. I felt grateful to God. I thanked him for that beautiful light in his face, that beautiful half-smile that made me so peaceful even as my world fell apart. He was my savior – as he liked to believe – my champion! He knew how unprotected he would leave me, so he wanted to fill every inch of my space with his presence, and so he let that half-smile play on his face for me! I wanted to kiss his hair, and had only put my lips into the tousled locks that no comb could control, when someone started to pull me back. And then the fit came, the moment when no amount of concentration could keep one's eyes open.

I fell on Tipu's limp body – the smell of his hair and the maddening smell of his blood in my whole being.

I couldn't cry because I was thinking of many things, and crying would only scatter those thoughts away. Tipu never wanted to leave the house, but I was afraid that the *Muktis* coming in search of his father would kill him too. Our home was no easy target for the *Joy Bangla* boys though, as Tipu's father had his men guard it day and night; but I had heard of the power of those boys. They were young; but they had a single-mindedness that I sometimes saw in Tipu, when, after his father had beaten me up, he would turn my defender, and go in search of him –to finish him up!

Tipu was otherwise a quiet boy, lost mostly in his own world of dreams and fantasies. His anger was his own to consume; it never spilled over into other people's lives. But his father, or anyone for that matter, shouting at me or treating me with unkindness, would feel the quickness of his rage. I often asked him, “Tipu, why do you feel that you have to defend me? Do I need defending?” He

answered with just a smile. That was in his last year in school.

Well, the *Muktis* felt the same way towards their country which they called “mother”. I tuned in to the *Swadhin Bangla Betar* which played patriotic songs that fired up the *Muktis*. My eyes became foggy when a man with a lilting voice sang about the Motherland.

I was not afraid of the boys though; I thought they were sweet. Many of them were of Tipu's age. I was only apprehensive: when two young boys meet, both high-strung on their mothers, anything could happen!

Translating metaphors into plain language was no easy task for the boys. If one of them pointed a gun at me, even accidentally, I knew what Tipu would do. I wouldn't have blamed the boys if they did that, for our household was the enemy household, and all those living within it were enemies, and enemies couldn't expect any mercy when a war was going on.

And so I had decided to send Tipu to my father's house. My brothers had not joined the war, but everyone knew which way their sympathies lay. Boys coming from across India had received money from them and food. My brothers' prominence protected them, I guess. My father was dead, however; my mother, too; but my elder sister, a widow, lived there. I was sending Tipu to her; she liked him, her children liked him as well. He would not be lonely and depressed and unhappy as he was here.

Tipu was not sure about joining the war; he was concerned that it would destroy me. I always felt that the Motherland had greater claims on her children; but I protected Tipu from the Motherland. I was selfish. After all,

she had millions of sons; but I had only one. I was wrong. In the end, the Motherland claimed him.

Sometimes Tipu would fantasize about the war. He told me we would both go; maybe I could help the boys like a Florence Nightingale while he fought. His idea of war was simple: he thought going to battle was like going to school, or the playground. He would leave early for the front, and come back to his mother in the evening, as soon as the first bird returned to nest.

I remember how tortured Tipu was by the decision to go to his uncles' home. He liked the idea of spending some time with his cousins and my sister: but he loathed the idea of leaving me behind. He asked me to go with him. I would like to do so, but how could I?

My household was my prison: after my father had placed me in the hands of Tipu's father – in those days of expectation, happiness and excitement – and told him to look after me kindly and well, he had lowered his voice and told me, “Daughter, this is where your life is now. This is your address. Your home. Your world.” I almost heard him say, your prison, your grave!

And I knew I couldn't get out of the house alive. Tipu's father would not mind too much if I wanted to go, but something in me rebelled against the very idea of leaving my house, my grave. I remember, for a while the image of my fathers' house with three ponds became so overpowering that I almost gave in, but the green fields of home were not mine to tread anymore. I was a creature of the four walls. Without my walls, I'd be exposed! I'd feel naked.

I couldn't leave.



This is a section of one of my stories that I translated into English in 1994. Unfortunately, I've lost the story itself and most of the translation. But the story was a first person narrative of a mother who had lost her only son to a defender of her collaborator husband's household in 1971. A friend of mine had heard the story from the mother herself and had narrated it to me some years later.