

## NON-FICTION

## Sahela

SOHANA MANZOOR

It was Ramadan. It was hot. Even though I was sitting inside an air-conditioned car, I could feel the heat. I was dozing and counting minutes and wondering how much time we Dhakites waste everyday in commuting. That reminded me of another time when I was living in a small town at the Southern point of Illinois. I would travel back home in Bangladesh; the surrealistic journeys would start in the middle of the night and end on a hot and humid morning of May at Hazrat Shahjalal Int'l Airport in Dhaka. I sighed and decided to watch the pedestrians to pass the time and my gaze fell on a young woman of small stature. She wore a floral printed kurta with jeans and dupatta and was crossing the street. She flashed a smile at no one in particular and suddenly I was reminded of another face—the face of Sahela.

I had met Sahela in Carbondale, the small town where I lived during the six years of my graduate studies. It was a nice enough town all right, one mile across at most. The population was mostly made up of the students, faculty and staff of the University. And during the breaks it felt like an abode fit for ghosts. No wonder I scrambled out of the place as soon as the summer began.

I still remember that particular year—spring 2011. I was getting ready for a long summer and waited eagerly for the semester to be over. "Ichchhe koray jai cholay jai ochinpur, jekhane dukkho nei, koshto nei....Wohuu wuhuu uhuu uhuu," I was humming at the bus stop oblivious to everything around me when someone said, "You seem so happy. Are you going somewhere?"

I turned around and saw Sahela, the Muslim girl from Hyderabad. Sahela had freaked me out the very first day we met: "I see you're wearing a kauri. You're not Hindu, are you?" I had gaped at her without comprehending. She pointed to the single shell I was wearing on a rope around my neck and continued, "Don't wear those. Hindus wear them because they consider those holy. You're Muslim, right? You should wear gold." The observation seemed so out of place and ridiculous that I could not even counter what she had said. Then I saw her again at the iftar party hosted by one of the three superb rich Pakistani doctors. Sahela had two large boxes with her and she was stuffing them with fried chickens and cheese cakes even before the actual iftar could begin. I stood not too far away and noticed the grumpy disapproving looks on more than one face. She flashed a smile at me as she noticed me staring at her. "Bring a box next time you come to the iftar party," she said. "You won't have to cook for the next few days."

I started avoiding Sahela.

But as a veteran in the US she liked to advise me on and off. So here she was at the bus stop again. I, however, was in no mood to chat with her; so I said curtly, "Yes."

"Where to?" she persisted.

"Home."

"Home? Not to Bangladesh?" She sounded dismayed.

"Hmm." I was monosyllabic and hoped that she would stop chattering.

"But that's a long way off? Why spend so much money?" She seemed to be thoughtful and suggested, "Hey listen, I'm going to Chicago with some friends. You wanna go with us?"

I was somewhat taken aback and touched that she considered me her friend. Then what she said put an end to all my amicable feelings for her. "We'll all work as janitors and earn some cash. What do you say?"

I was flabbergasted. I was a graduate assistant on student visa and in the US any kind of work beyond the school was forbidden territory. So I gasped, "You're a GA. What do you mean you'll work in Chicago?"

"It's no big deal," she waved her hands. "People do it all the time. Plus think of the

extra income."

"No, thanks," I replied glumly. "I save enough to get by." Besides, I had no wish to work as a janitor in an unknown city alongside a group of strangers.

I could sense from her gestures that she considered me a fool. But I was more interested in finishing my degree and going home. I had gathered from various sources that this was Sahela's fourth year as a graduate student. And she had changed three programs already. Apparently, she could not cope beyond the first year. In these small town universities, sometimes you could switch from one program to another if you only knew the methods. Those who wanted a permanent residence in the US are well-acquainted with all those loopholes in the system. It was obvious that Sahela was one of those perpetual students who just wanted papers to stay on at whatever cost. She was interested in the job of a custodian because it paid the most.

I came back to the reality at the sound of an approaching bus. As I got on the Mall bus I realized that Sahela had followed me. And to my chagrin, she sat right beside me. I looked out through the window, but she kept on chattering. Suddenly, someone poked me under the ribs and surprised I turned to look



at Sahela. She was staring at me reproachfully, "I'm asking you something."

"Oh, I didn't hear," I mumbled.

"Say, how much salary would you get when you get back home?"

This time I was really irritated. "I don't discuss salary with people," I replied coldly.

"Why not?" She was looking at me round-eyed.

"I just don't," I turned to the window.

"You're so strange," Sahela went on. "We discuss salary all the time. That's why I don't want to go back to India. They pay so little. I already have earned half of my dowry here."

This was my turn to get surprised. "Your what?"

"Dowry. In India brides have to pay dowry. Don't you?"

I was flabbergasted. "I am an educated woman. Why in the world would I give dowry?"

Sahela gave me a strange look as she said, "I have to pay my price when I sit on the wedding stage. Don't tell me it's not there in your country." She paused and then resumed, "My parents are not rich. My father is a school teacher and my mother is a housewife. I have two more sisters and in our community dowry is a must. My father cannot provide dowry for all three of us. So, here I am trying to earn

money along with a degree."

I spluttered, "B...but why don't you marry someone here? Surely, boys who are educated in the West won't take dowry. I know of quite a few Indian students who went back home to get married. Do they all take dowries? Besides, you're Muslim, not Hindu."

"Some do and some don't," replied Sahela. "But I am not pretty. I have to have dowry."

"But that's humiliating, Sahela," I observed, shocked.

"Humiliating?" Sahela laughed. "It's more humiliating never getting to be married. Can you imagine the life of an old spinster and never have kids?" She looked at my horrified countenance and said, "I come from a poor region of Hyderabad. For the sake of my family and sisters, I have to get married. Otherwise, my parents will be condemned. My sisters won't be able to live with their husbands."

"Are your sisters married?" I asked in a hoarse whisper.

"One of them is. My father was able to pay her dowry. But now we have nothing except our tiny house. By the end of this year, I plan to send half of the money I have got so far, to my father. Hopefully, my youngest sister will be able to marry well. She likes a boy. But they, too, are poor. So, the sister who lives in America, must help, no?"

We were both quiet for some time. And then Sahela touched my hand and smiled, "But I guess, you have had no such problem. You're fair-skinned and pretty too." I sat tongue-tied as I could find nothing to say to this dark-skinned girl from Hyderabad.

As I walked through the aisles of the super shop, I followed Sahela with my eyes. Yes, the life of a graduate assistant was tough. There were always problems: time management, money constraints, library work, teaching, cooking and laundry, and all that came with it. And yet, I did not have to worry about younger siblings at home, dowry and stuff. I never had to think about others before making a decision. Sahela was right in some ways. I was of fair complexion and I could easily say that I do not care about skin colour because I never had to deal with the problem. But didn't my own grandmother always prefer her fair-skinned granddaughters over the darker ones? It's petty, silly, but also very real. Who was I to condemn Sahela?

My thoughts flew to some other students from Bangladesh and India who were walking embarrassments for us. They put up a show of saving money through free lunch and dinner here and there (not at all unusual among graduate students), but then spent it all in buying expensive clothes, riding swanky cars and carousing. Each of them had accumulated credit loans following the suits of their American friends. I wondered why we tend to follow the bad examples so religiously and not the good ones. But then, there was also Zaman, the pure son of the soil who was the only one of his family pursuing higher studies. None of his siblings had been to a university. The previous semester, he got the Best Graduate Student Award from the College of Social Sciences. Suddenly, my eyes stung and I realized there was much in this world that I did not even know or care about.

I wish I could say that after this Sahela and I became best of friends. We didn't. However, when some others laughed at her stingy ways, I thought of the girl waiting in Hyderabad for her sister to pay her dowry so that she could have a happy marriage. I thanked my stars that I could choose not to conform to a system that binds women into marriage and children through dowry. But now I also know that there are many who do not have the luxury of making that choice.

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## POETRY



## Two Poems of Al Mahmud

TRANSLATED BY MD. ELIAS UDDIN

## A Saga of Courage

(To Quazi Nazrul Islam)

The saga of courage is gradually coming to an end.  
O poet, once

clouds, black as your hair, while drifting on and on,  
by earnest entreaties, used to provoke us to cross the sea of blood.  
Breaking the prison-walls down, the convicts used to stand upright.

Saying, 'Come to the streets,' enormous ancient voices used to sing out the classics of destruction.  
O bewitching cuckoo of lies, having created ugly jingles in the cool blood of Bangla, with slogans calling for revolution,  
you disappeared as if you became a mole on nature's breast.

So take the punishment today, O poet! Take this heap of yellow dry flesh too! Cover your love with an ashen wrapper so that the secretion of contagious mercury does not spill over.  
Or be deaf so that no sweat of music, not even a drop thereof, gathers on the forehead any more! Now keep lying down straight, O furious hawk, pierced with fate's fierce arrows.

## Trembling

Isn't our give-and-take over?  
The wandering locality girl has still kept her hands raised.  
The last boat of valediction is still beckoning me, shouting...  
I am the last one.  
The lines have ended, and so have the end-rhymes.  
The deck of the boat is trembling as if it's ready to set sail.  
If I go away, nobody else will linger on this bank.  
All's been washed away; should I float the darkness then?  
With me thus terminated the game of light and dark.  
My body is trembling just as the whole Bangladesh is.

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## POETRY

## TWO POEMS

MASUD MAHMOOD

I

What's the point in counting years  
While the intensities are wasted  
In bickering, fame and money matters?  
Age fills our bones with dregs,  
The skin dwindles to crinkled rags;  
The gold nuggets of the best years  
Are melted for the freight of illness.  
While the body is wrecked and bent  
And the face resembles ribbed sea sand  
That solemnity is the name of wisdom  
We are contented to carry into the tomb.

II

It was breakfast time  
For the crow, or else  
Why'd he light gently  
On my balcony wall  
Where he perched

Without a caw at all?  
Unlike the fabled one  
To teach a moral,  
Unlike the huge one  
That exploded like a bomb  
Out of a charred black womb,  
Screaming and scorching  
earth with infernal fire,  
He sat as quiet and gentle  
As a shadow, wouldn't  
catch my eye but for  
His scratchy claws  
That he couldn't help  
Landing on my balcony wall.  
He eyeballed me  
And sized me up  
With a flipping eye,  
A blue tint from the sky.  
His beaked head  
Was tilted to one side  
Like a fine instrument

set with great precision,  
And steadied perfectly  
In lidless concentration.  
A doubting, untrustworthy creature  
He wouldn't trust human nature,  
But racked his high-tension nerves  
To see thoughts beneath the other's skull.  
His intense gaze got me fixed  
As you'd a difficult text,  
Impenetrable and dense,  
All the nerves and muscles  
Taut and tense in high alert.  
Then maybe he reached his limits  
And left my balcony for the world at large  
Without abiding a crumb from my breakfast.

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