

EDITOR'S NOTE: ON THE OCCASION OF MIR MOSHARRAF HOSSAIN'S 171ST BIRTHDAY ON NOVEMBER 13

From Mir Mosharraf Hossain's *Bishad Shindhu* (Ocean of Sorrow)

ZAYNEB'S LAMENT (CHAPTER III)
TRANSLATED BY FAKRUL ALAM

Why is there no one around? Why is no human being in view? But there are still those in the rooms set aside for them. No changes were visible thus in the quarter where Lord Husayn's kinsmen and women had been kept. From here a cry could be heard, the wailing of a woman, a tragic-sounding tone, laced with pain at what had happened, but the perspective unique as was the voice and the thought being articulated.

"Alas! Where am I, where is Zayneb? The loyal wife of a small businessmen, a man from a poor and impoverished but respectable family? The spouse of an ordinary man who once used to earn a

happened to me, he would find evidence that would lead him to conclude that this unfortunate woman was the prime cause of the ocean of sorrow. It would seem that it was Zayneb who was the chief cause of all these cataclysmic events. Alas! Alas! It was for me that the family of the Prophet of Light, Muhammad, had to suffer such torture! Oh, woe is me! Where will I find a place to be in now? I am a sinner! I am an ogre who had devoured everything! For me the doors of hell are wide open! How agonizing! It was I that induced hatred in Zaada, who had hitherto been so soft a person! It was this unfortunate wretch's beauty that intensified the flame in Zaada's mind till it burnt with double, triple and even five-fold intensity! How much more will this unfortunate and weak heart have to endure! How much will this woman who was so loyal to her husband have to go through? Can the flame that burns in one's mind be doused without one's own spouse? Ultimately, it leaves the spouse and scalds the husband. When one wants something, and if fate has willed that it shall be so, how long does one have to wait for the desire to be fulfilled? To seek is to find then. To satiate Maimuna's wishes, Zaada was necessary. To fulfill what Zaada coveted Maimuna was necessary. In time the two met and both felt that they had struck gold. To find a woman apply poison – oh unbearable deed that one cannot even talk about – poison – poison of the most virulent kind!" (Silence)

She could hear clearly commotion in the city, the clamor of innumerable voices, the frightful din created by the roll of drums being beaten by martial bands. From time to time could be heard slogans that raised the name of Zainul Abedin to the skies. She said to herself softly again, "What is that I hear now? Why such commotion

everywhere?" For a long while she strained to hear what was going on and to make sense of events but could not do so. When she looked the other way at the quarters that had been previously been under guard she could not see the sentries posted there any longer. The doors were all wide open. She looked back and saw Bibi Salma, Shaher Banu and Husne Banu sitting down silently, all with pale faces. Only from time to time could she hear Shaher Banu agonizing in a voice full of grief, "My son Zainul; my dear child; where could you be my dearest? Come to my lap again my child!" Zayneb was dumbfounded and stood where she was for a while and then resumed her musings thus:

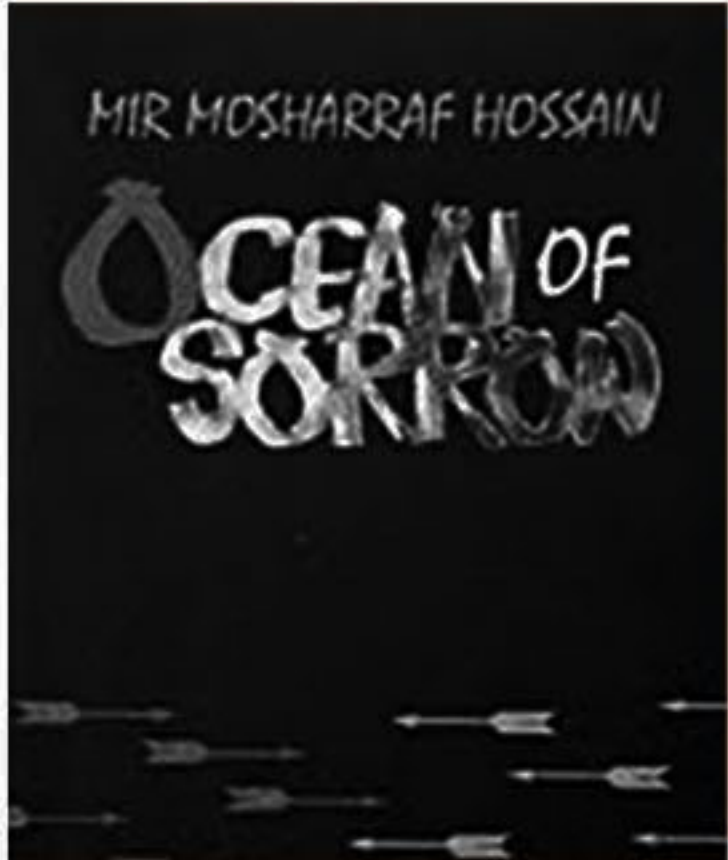
"Oh – the poison – the poison that was in Zaada's hands! If – unfortunate wretch that I am – I had not been reckoned as belonging to the class of slaves, if she had my beauty, if the husband had been more caring, Zaada would not have administered the poison. She would have then not listened to Maimuna. It is for this unfortunate wretch that the poison came into the scene. I have heard Yazid say that he was out on a deer hunt with his entourage and soldiers when he cast his eyes on me as I stood by the window. So many eyes were eagerly looking at Yazid for favors and yet mine were the eyes that had looked at him with repulsion and had then shut the window. I cannot recall anything about that incident myself; but in his address that wicked man had added that on that fateful day my face was covered to my chin with a small net made of pearls. In my ears I had earrings dangling. Shame on me! Why did I have the window open and why had I been standing there then? It was my position there by the window that has been my undoing. The catastrophe that ensued was because I had stood there, and because I had my

face almost bare. It is now that I understand the import of that kingly summon. It is now that I fully grasp the significance of Abdul Jabbar's invitation to the royal palace. It is now that I can see why the royal messenger arrived in our humble abode with the invitation to go to the palace; the knavery that was behind that invitation is now obvious to me. The summons, the attractive way in which the invitation was phrased, and the lavish attention given to him on his arrival at court were all meant for me. But how could Abdul Jabbar have understood Yazid's scheming? Small businessman that he was, how could he not have been seduced by the offer made to him of being made a son-in-law of the king, and of the prospects of happiness beyond all expectations promised by Yazid? A small businessman – someone who is enticed by the prospects of very small amounts of money – he was seduced by the prospects of wedding Princess Saleha and union with a celestial nymph in this world that would give him immense happiness and make him feel bliss of the most ethereal kind. It was the vision of such things happening that made him give up on me although I was blameless in every way. How heartless; how two-faced! Before he had received the summons from royalty how sorry he appeared to be at my suffering, how caring! I was in the kitchen and sweat beads had appeared on my forehead because of the heat emitted from the cooking. Some soot had found its way to parts of my clothes and hands from the coal that I had been using. He held the mirror before me and made me see the reflection of my face in it, saying, "If we had the money would you have to suffer so? Do you think I can bear to see such a sight?" And he went on to express how sorry he was in so many ways, but he gave me proof of exactly how sorry he had become only later.

That very day he headed for Damascus. He was received in the palace warmly. And the very moment the proposal came his way he accepted it – sacrificing me in the process. Praise be to Bibi Saleha though! She had the most level-headed response – when one can treat one's only wife in this manner, when one can be enticed by money to abandon the wife who was ever so fond of him, what is there left to believe in anymore? The marriage was denied; he got exactly what he deserved next! It was Yazid who triumphed completely. It was his desire that would be fulfilled. He had used his wiles to find a way of possessing Zayneb. And Abdul Jabbar was left with nothing but regret at what he had done. He then managed to sneak out of the palace and hide himself amidst people. He became averse to family life and put on the garbs of a fakir. But all is as the Almighty wishes things to be! What fate had in store for me took place. I became a widow. In the prime of my life I was deprived of a husband. And where could I go then? I headed for my paternal home.

"Hardened sinner that he was, Yazid was bent on fulfilling his desire. Without considering the consequences of what he was doing, he resolved to send an emissary. He let it be known that he had everything that a woman desires and did not want for riches or jewelry. Moreover, he could offer to make the woman he desired most his principal queen. But when I heard Lord Hasan's proposal from the emissary I chose him – although it was the last of the proposals conveyed to me by Moslem. I spurned the prospects offered of being the royal consort of the heir apparent of the kingdom of Damascus!"

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small sum of money through his labors? What did we have to do with royalty and kingly dispositions, with a member of a family descended from royalty, who pursues pleasure and satisfaction; why did I have to be involved with him and his pleasures? Why did I end up in the king's zenana? That Zayneb would be seen inside Medina's holy palace was an astonishing development; that she could be a prisoner in the royal prison of Damascus was an even more amazing twist of fate for her. What do I have to do with this prison? Alas! Alas! If anyone chose to examine the events of my life closely and reflect on what had

REVIEWS

THE OVER TAKERS: STORIES TO MULL OVER

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REVIEWED BY SHAHID ALAM

I was scratching my head as I completed reading the first story in Wasi Ahmed's anthology of short stories entitled *The Over Takers*. I was scratching my head when I had finished the eleventh tale, also the last in the engrossing volume. In between the bookends of the stories, I kept scratching my head as I went through the remaining nine. The tale of my fingers literally and figuratively running through my hair will soon become apparent. Suffice to say, these are stories the kind of which I do not recall encountering in Bangladeshi writers. Wasi Ahmed is a Bangladeshi fiction writer who had written these stories in Bangla and which had appeared in various magazines and journals. They have been translated into English by the author, Afsan Chowdhury, Rani Ray, Debjani Sengupta, and Hugh Ferrer (who must have been the one who "didn't know a word of Bangla" in the author's Acknowledgements), and presented in *The Over Takers*.

Not a few readers might be tempted to declare that they had gone through some strange stories that they had found problematic in deciphering. And their conclusion could not be dismissed peremptorily. There are accounts that, at first glance, might appear strange and divorced from reality. However, a closer look would reveal subliminal meanings behind the apparently surreal accounts and depictions of odd situations that both ordinary citizens and social misfits find themselves in. The stories are pretty much about ordinary people living ordinary lives, but who constitute a part of the vast fabric called human existence.

The second story, which has been

selected as the book's title, "The Over Takers," is both strange and allegorical. Atiq, the protagonist, was a "chemical engineer turned gardener," one who, instead of making use of his academic degree/training to land himself the expected (from Bangladeshi society) comfortable middle class job and existence, decided to grow bonsai plants. The author indulges in allegorical depictions and profound philosophical thoughts like Atiq pondering over the question, "Why should he tend plants to teach anyone a lesson!" The opening story, on the other hand, "The Dogs of Dolphin Lane" is mainly about dogcatchers of the City Corporation trapping stray dogs, killing them swiftly with poison injected from syringes, and carting them off from the area. While a number of grown-up residents of the area applauded the action, others termed it "stupid eyewash" by the authority to paper over its failure in order to successfully tackle "traffic jam, flies, mosquitoes, garbage, water logging, robberies, murders and so on." The author, in the course of telling this tale, paints an interesting picture of a common phenomenon where "colorful fishes called dreams danced and swirled with their resplendent fins and tails!"

Dolphin Lane returns in the last story, "The Hole." On the surface, it deals with the dastardly deeds of "a dishonest milkman who in the early morning had stood knee deep in the waters of Dhanmandi Lake filling his milk filled plastic bucket with lake water. He had been unmoved by the dawn light or early risers as he had gone about his task of mixing dirty water with the milk." And thereby

hangs a tale beyond the story of the adulterating maestro. An absurd scenario was created when his punishment was being debated by the people, enabling the writer to depict the peculiar idiosyncrasies of politics. "Youth belonging to the government party protested but because it was the best venue possible, they had to accept the location. The opposition leader's supporters were thrilled by this development. It seemed politically potential to them."

The next one called "A Passage to America" again has subliminal meanings beyond that of the Bangladeshis (and other nationalities) trying to emigrate into the land of milk and honey. Along the way Wasi Ahmed does not hold back on throwing some trenchant remarks: "What greater security was there in life than a US passport?" And, "The US is not Bangladesh, here laws apply...." Finally, in a deliberate or incidental reference to fake news, he mentions "Dhaka's perennially misrepresenting newspapers." "Full Circle" is another existential tale told in a strange setting with unusual people engaged in unusual activities, where life's occasional absurdities are highlighted. So is, briefly, "the immense glow of greenness", and, on a sub-textual level, "mental castration."

"Kalashnikov's Rose" is of much interest, which begins with the capture in Dhaka of a terrorist carrying a disassembled Kalashnikov rifle, more familiarly known as AK-47, the most famous gun in the world. A brief account is provided by Ahmed on how the gun was invented by the Russian Michael Kalashnikov in 1947. (K in AK refers to the inventor's name, 47 to

1947; A to Avtokat or Automatic). Kalashnikov equated his gun to poetry with this subtle explanation: "Poetry doesn't care for meanings. One has to understand, just as one has to understand my gun." If this is an accurate reproduction of his statement, then the contextual implication should jump out at the reader. "Reverie at Midday" is about a woman working in a clerical position in an unassuming courier service. Her mechanical life is portrayed in a space with a broken air-conditioner that the owner, who mostly spends time at another of his establishments, does not bother to have repaired even when it becomes boiling hot.

"Skyward" is a story of both symbolism and straightforward observation. The reader will get doses of both in the story as this small sample will show: "...the entire city had become a dump yard for garbage and that there were countless sources — habitats — of bad smell all over the city. These habitats had come up everywhere, in all the places — roads and alleys, parks, kindergartens, playgrounds, parliament house, office buildings, chests and cabinets, newspaper offices, teleprinters, TV channels." "Six Meters Distance", among other things, draws attention to the Press Club (of Dhaka) and the "cracking speeches in human-chain programs under the generous shade of Korui trees in front" of it. "The Monument or Eleman's Tail" ostensibly talks about a man with an appendage at his back, and adds a supernatural element, but it is also a commentary on the society. "The Cage's Strange Bird" exposes the dirty not-so-hush-hush secrets of the government institutions,



in this case a rehabilitation center, told through a disabled freedom fighter's ordeal. The center's two-faced character is an indictment on issues of neglect, corruption, chicanery, and inhumanity in different kinds of institutions. As the author relates through the protagonist's travails, "One-legged, one-handed Suleman knows the reason well enough."

All in all, *The Over Takers* should make the reader think about ordinary people muddling through their lives in stories that are woven in an unusual style that adds to their quality.

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