



POETRY

Chawk Bazar, 2019

TOWHIDUL ISLAM KHAN

The fire of Muspelheim rages
In the dark alleys where for ages
Ancient arts of beauty have been stockpiled
By the masters of money and mind.

Alchemists of the new generation
Stack artefacts beside puddles, potholes,
Never-ending streets without emotion,
Where one once could see blossoms of roses.

Newborns' noses sniff
Out a confused whiff
Of perfume
And burned flesh -
Unfamiliar for their senses,
But not for occupants of countless committees.
Poof, goes the bricks,
And the cement,
And iron wicks,

And the souls.

Flames of Tartarus leap out of its realm
And enter the curtained bedrooms upstairs,
Climbing the dancing fumes that overwhelm
The forgetful nation that loves to mourn
(And drool for drama)
But never to act.

The Lady scrubs her wrists.
Scrubs as the dead rises
And falls
And Rises again
To make space for more.

Eau de Mort, made in Chawk Bazar.

Towhidul Islam Khan is Senior Lecturer, DEH, ULAB.



FICTION



A Writer's Enigma

MARZIA RAHMAN

I cannot write. For a month, it lingers.
Every morning, I sit in front of my laptop
and hope to write something new,
something noble. But nothing comes out.
Not a word, not a sentence. As if the sea of
creativity has dried up.

I knock my other writer friends. "It's
very common. Don't fret," they say. "Take
a break. Go out. Go south, or may be
north."

My editor suggests taking an extended
separation from the daunting task. "Read
the works of other writers," he says. "But
don't think of writing." And I don't. I just
sit in solitude watching the deranged mess
of my non-creative life.

I try to do everything, follow each
tangible advice. Still I can't do it. It's
driving me crazy. If I can't write, I can't
live. It's a sickness without any
medication. I can't even go and see a
doctor about it. There is no one as such.
But shouldn't there be one? Don't the
writers need medical help for their
unmedical phase of life?

I seek refuge in nature's abode, apply
tested truths on my troubled soul. Nothing
helps. No one can cure me. I am beyond
recovery. Only one thing left to do. I will
die and go to the next world. I need to ask
God why I can no longer write. He
perhaps has an answer for me. A subtle but
palpable one.

I sit down to write a suicide note:
"Please forgive me! It's no one's fault." And at
that precise moment, it strikes. A new plot,
a new thread of a story. I tear up the stupid
note, open Words on my laptop to write
something new, something noble that has
never been written before. The words
stream on to the screen quite
spontaneously, weaving into a magical
sentence, bit by bit.

Oh! The peace, the tranquility, the joy
that it brings!

Writers are such enigmatic people, you
know —the first line that I type.

Marzia Rahman is a writer and translator
based in Dhaka.

REVIEWS

DSLitEditor@gmail.com

DREAMS & SHADOWS: Perspectives on Multifarious Issues

Of dreams & shadows: Selected Writings. Rummana Chowdhury, Bihaan Music, 2018

REVIEWED BY SHAHID ALAM

"When white people commit acts of terrorism, we term them mentally ill. When governments commit acts of war and terrorism, we call it Foreign Policy. When a Muslim commits an act of terror, we call it terrorism. It's all the same car, just with a different driver." These lines should indicate a penchant for plain speaking by the writer.

Rummana Chowdhury's collection of her own compositions, twenty eight in all, most of which appeared in a couple of English language newspapers in Bangladesh, will provide ample evidence of her plain speaking, made from the core of her heart, belief, and observation. Not unnaturally, they will probably not be universally agreed upon, but they should at least be compelling enough for the reader to take an interest in.

Of dreams & shadows: Selected Writings is an anthology of essays from the pen of a versatile woman. Rummana Chowdhury is a prolific writer of Bangladeshi origin, covering a wide range of literary genres that have landed her a number of awards and accolades in North America, Europe, and South Asia. Although she has been living and working in Canada for over thirty five years, she has never lost touch with her country of birth and formative years, and writes in both Bengali and English. In her early years, she was a multiple time national badminton champion of Bangladesh, was a formidable debater, and hosted popular TV and radio shows. Her writings show glimpses of her versatility.

Several essays, like the one from which the opening lines of this review

have been taken ("Roots of Radicalization: Some Thoughts"), deal with a major issue that has affected much of the world in the post-Cold War, the Internet Age. Chowdhury, in the opening essay, "The Victims of the Paris Bombings Are Not Just Parisians," is obviously distressed by the plight of all the victims of violence in this era. Yet she also mentions another sobering issue that has accompanied this phenomenon: "Westerners are finally being given just a small taste of the constant fear that people from other nations have endured for generations. So solidarity with, and compassion for, the French is a good thing. But solidarity or compassion for the victims of terrorism everywhere is even better, in particular those who've fallen victim to the terrorism sponsored in all our names. Otherwise, we all become victims."

Chowdhury makes her political preference clear as she assesses the 2015 Canadian Election, but gives more than just an appraisal ("The 2015 Canadian Election and Canada's Broken Electoral System") as she notes the "stark contrast between developing and developed nations." She harks back to 1982, the year she immigrated to Canada, and extols the rule of the then Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, whose noteworthy legacy includes the Constitution Act of 1982 and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms under the Canada Act that have enhanced the civil liberties of the people. She is hopeful that the current prime minister, Justin Trudeau, Pierre's son, "will bring back Canada's 'idealistic global face.'" Thus far, her

hopes seem to be well placed. She has harsh words for the regime of his predecessor Stephen Harper, calling it "autocratic and malicious," and his Conservative government "one of the most repressive governments in the history of Canada." Harper, she characterizes as "an Islam-hating, fear mongering, diversity degrading, corporate-loving negative energy monger" (doesn't it find an echo in Donald Trump?!!). In "Canada's Apartheid System," she focuses on one of those less palatable, and not much highlighted, blights of Canadian society.

She dwells on a serious topic in the course of discussing the issue of mental health ("Attitudes to Mental Health in Canada and Bangladesh," Parts I and II), and concludes that "we must address the root causes of our stress and our traumas in order to alleviate the social evils which plague us." She repeatedly returns to social issues and, in "Let us Strive: Towards the Mainstream," she addresses the Bangladeshi Diaspora on how to break into the mainstream in Canada for a variety of compelling reasons: "...we must learn to think outside of ourselves, and create alliances with people of all different races, cultures, religions and belief systems. Mix with exactly the kind of people who look, think and act nothing like you." She points out how it is important to learn about one's own self as well as about others. Sound advice indeed.

Chowdhury acknowledges that the Muslim Diaspora is faced with challenges, some of their own making, others inherent in various factors, but



ends on an optimistic note: "Which geographical Calendar do we follow when celebrating Eid?" she asks. She ponders over the issue of Arab supremacy, lateral racism within Muslim communities and issues of nationalities within certain mosques.

The author takes up the issue of Mother's Day with some trenchant observations in "Why I Couldn't Celebrate Mother's Day This Year" thus: "No one is made to feel more honoured than a mother on Mother's Day, yet no one is more often blamed for the bad behaviour of families or their children.... What mothers need on Mother's Day, and, in fact, for the rest of the year, is an end to the balancing

game, and an end to the shaming game." An interesting piece is Chowdhury's "The Era of the Hijab," where she sees the banning of the hijab as a political move in banning the "Muslim woman's right to participate in society and participate in democracy."

There are a number of essays paying tribute to people and objects. "Her Library of Gilded Saris" is an ode to the magic of the sari and everything it symbolizes. "Tribute: Through Memories and Melodies" extols the many virtues of former Chief Justice of Bangladesh Mustafa Kamal, while the self-explanatory "Kolkata: Dimensions of the Human Spirit" is a eulogy to an intriguing city. The Canadian Nobel Laureate Alice Munro is given a wonderful appreciation in "The Extraordinary in Ordinary Life: Alice Munro." Chowdhury's love of books and reading gets a tender treatment in "Books: The Path to Pure Pleasure."

Rummana Chowdhury is a prolific, thoughtful writer, particularly partial to dealing with social issues. Some may differ with some of her views, but that adds to the quality of her work, not the least for provoking difference of opinion, in addition to much that virtually all can agree upon. All in all, *Of dreams & shadows: Selected Writings* is an anthology of eclectic subject matters that should provide food for thought for a variety of readers.

Shahid Alam is thespian, and Professor, Media and Communication department, IUB.