

Tribute to Mozammel, my warrior friend

SHAMSUL BARI

KHANDAKER Mozammel Haque passed away early Thursday, August 8, 2019. Readers may know him for his contribution to the Grameen Bank. But I would like to remember him primarily as my warrior

friend. Our friendship was forged in 1971, when both of us were in the United States and brought together by the birth pangs of our motherland. I had just finished my course work at the University of Chicago and he was still a student at the University of Michigan. We had both gathered, spontaneously, in Washington, DC, like many others from Bangladesh, a day after the Pakistani military crackdown in Dhaka on March 25. No one asked us to be there but we were all pulled together by an invisible force, in the same way our compatriots in Bangladesh were drawn together to fight for our country.

At our gathering in the afternoon of March 26, 1971, at the residence of Enayet Karim, the deputy ambassador of Pakistan in the US, we decided to take our message about the inevitability of Bangladesh to every possible forum in the US in order to move US public opinion against the Nixon administration's unflinching support for Pakistan.

One such gathering was the annual meeting of the American Association for Asian Studies (AAAS), which was to take place on March 28 at a hotel in

the city. We all thought that the support of scholars and university professors would be important to our cause.

On arrival, I found that the meeting had already started. The topic under consideration was: "The Six-Point Demand and the Future of Pakistan". At an opportune moment, I asked the chairman of the meeting for the floor and before he could react, I began speaking: it was hypocritical of scholars to discuss the future of Pakistan when it was going through its death throes as a result of the army's unleashing of an unprecedented war of terror against the population of East Pakistan. Amid loud interruptions from Pakistani participants, I ended my statement with the conclusion that Pakistan was dead and nothing could stop the creation of Bangladesh.

Upon this, a woman from Pakistan rose up and said that Pakistan was alive and would survive eternally. To this, I replied that it would be over our dead bodies. She loudly proclaimed: "So be it." Unsurprisingly, pandemonium broke out and there were calls on the chairman to throw me out of the meeting. At this moment, a young man

sprang up like a Bengal tiger and made a passionate argument in my support. This was how I met Mozammel.

When I finally left the meeting, more than half the gathering joined me. I was told that the meeting could not proceed with the session after that. The incident was reported in The Wall Street Journal on April 2 with the headline: "The Eventual Separation of the Two Pakistans is Regarded as Likely." It was one of the earliest headlines in the US media predicting the demise of a united Pakistan.

Mozammel was to me one of the most indefatigable warriors for Bangladesh. He was everywhere that year, going from one meeting to another to talk about Bangladesh and why Pakistan with its two wings could not survive. He was such an able communicator! With his vast knowledge about the inner workings of the Pakistan army, he was sought after for every gathering. There were so many occasions when we went to meetings together or met in Chicago at the home of Dr FR Khan, who was the chairman of Bangladesh Defence League, and of which I was the general secretary, to

discuss strategy for Bangladesh.

Mozammel was no less a Muktiyoddha than those who fought on the ground to liberate Bangladesh. What Bengalis in the US did to create public opinion in favour of Bangladesh and to stop US military and financial aid to Pakistan was no less important than the physical fight for our liberation. We generated a huge number of letters to US senators and congressmen, some of whom even gave us tables in their offices and access to their stationery to send messages to those who could help our cause. Mozammel played a key role in lobbying both on Capitol Hill and all over the US and North America. When his future biographers dig up this aspect of his life, they will also discover that he was a good singer and a great cook. Without him, our life in the US in 1971 would have been much more tedious and much less memorable. With his passing, Bangladesh has lost a proud son who valiantly fought for her liberation.

Shamsul Bari is a former director of UNHCR and presently the chairman of Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB).



Khandaker Mozammel Haque, who died at the age of 74 on August 8, 2019.

In defence of 'chick-lit'

A genre that is smart, witty, uplifting and, in many ways, empowering for its readers



SARAH ANJUM BARI

A portion of my bookshelf looks "girlier" than the others. It's stacked with hardbacks and paperbacks in various shades of pink, pale yellow, glittering gold, and some pops of red and purple. Anyone who walks in and looks at this section of the shelf will know immediately that

it contains different variations of love stories, of stories about girls going on holiday and bonding with their girlfriends and reconnecting with themselves, usually having cast off a toxic job or relationship. Think of your Nora Roberts, your Cecelia Aherns and Jojo Moyeses and, if you like to step back in time, your Judith McNaughts.

But here's the thing—as loved as these authors all are, the kinds of stories they write too often get cast off into the "light fiction" genre. Fiction that isn't important. They hardly make it to critical reviews alongside other literary fiction, they hold relatively limited presence at literary festivals and panels, and they don't make it as easily to the prescribed reading lists or the titles we list when bragging about our reading tastes. The underlying premise behind this norm is one that smirks at a genre that is often smart, witty, uplifting and, in many ways, empowering for its readers. This prejudice perpetuates, through the very terms "chick-lit" (an infantilising name) and "women's literature", the toxic ideas that matters of the heart and stories about relationships—stories that actually make you happy or cater specifically to human emotions—are meant only for the eyes of women; that stories enjoyed by women should be an entirely separate and somehow less respected brand of literature.

Gerard Genette, the French literary theorist, was fascinated with how a book's "paratexts"—every part of a book besides the text proper—influence the way it is perceived. In "Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation" (1987), he wrote how the cover with all its elements of colour, font, illustration, and publisher's emblem can indicate to an audience what kind of book it is. In early 20th-century France, for instance, yellow covers denoted "licentious" books (which eventually inspired the title of Aubrey Beardsley's scandalous quarterly The Yellow Book). Nowhere is such an influence of the book cover more noticeable than in what we think of as chick-lit.

Author Maureen Johnson made an experiment out of this for the Huffington Post in 2013. Her article "Coverflip: Gendered Book Covers Turned Around" reimaged popular classics if they were written by and for women—"Georgette" R Martin's "A Game of Thrones" featured the mother of dragons standing against a purple



"Chick-lit" novels are relatable and entertaining enough to inspire a love of reading amongst even those too scared to take up the project of finishing an entire novel.

SOURCE: FACEBOOK

horizon decorated with gold curlicues, and "Nellie" Gaiman's "Stardust" featured an image of a woman locked blissfully in a man's embrace, among other famous titles. The images evoked a striking message about how we automatically perceive a story as far more "feminine" with a simple shift in cover design. Add in some bright or pale colours, some curled or chalky fonts and/or a picture of a woman or her belongings—boots, jewellery, dresses, makeup—and the overall image is one that advertises its content as light literature comprising syrupy prose and two-dimensional stock characters.

Some of these tropes are obviously true. Literary fiction is revered because it often experiments with form and content; because it fleshes out incomplete, flawed characters whose struggles often remain unresolved at the end of the text. Such books push the reader to read differently, to think differently about both the possibilities of a novel and the world around

her. "Chick-lit" novels, on the other hand, usually portray a Bridget Jones-type character whose troubles almost always find a happy ending by the time one turns the final page. The genre also has a glaring flaw—it almost entirely portrays straight white women living in the West in leading roles. Luckily, that trend is slowly shifting, with queer characters and characters of colour commanding their presence in many novels.

These books (the good ones at least) offer more than just fluffy escape. In the absence of a challenging form and language, such stories offer enough comfort and optimism that the reader is able to absorb some strength from their characters. Camus' Mersault may evoke a thought or two about the pointlessness of the human condition, but Jojo Moyes' 'Lou taught me far more about finding humour and colour amidst life's worst tragedies. Bridget Jones has taught nearly every teenage girl how to embrace one's

bodily imperfections and distinguish between a good and a bad love interest. These stories are relatable and entertaining enough to inspire a love of reading amongst even those too scared to take up the project of finishing an entire novel.

Literature, like all crafts, improves upon practice, upon collective discussion and analysis. Including such stories in reading lists and in critical discussions will encourage far more people to fall in love with reading and find the courage to move on to more challenging forms of literature. It will also motivate writers and the publishing industry to hone and experiment on the form, content, and subject matters of a genre that all but holds its readers' hands through the daily pitfalls of living in this world. I can't think of a more worthwhile accomplishment for a book.

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QUOTABLE Quote

MOTHER TERESA
(1910–1997)
Albanian-Indian Roman Catholic nun and missionary

Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow has not yet come. We have only today. Let us begin.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Flower part
- 6 Moisten the turkey
- 11 Stood up
- 12 Writer Sinclair
- 13 Showing pride
- 15 Mex. neighbor
- 16 Mineo of movies
- 17 Enjoy Aspen
- 18 Fragrance
- 20 That guy's
- 21 Live and breathe
- 22 Borscht veggie
- 23 Variety show
- 26 Deck chiefs, for short
- 27 Ready for business
- 28 Junior, to senior

DOWN

- 1 Make lumber out of
- 2 Wipe away
- 3 From the Arctic
- 4 Inquire
- 5 Free time
- 6 "Taps" tooter
- 29 Storage site
- 30 Army member
- 34 Drama division
- 35 Court
- 36 Singer Carly-Jepsen
- 37 Behind schedule
- 40 Slump
- 41 Famous
- 42 Act the waiter
- 43 Mimicking
- 7 Fitting
- 8 Hides away
- 9 Gandalf's creator
- 10 Signs up
- 14 Newborn's need
- 19 Satyr's kin
- 22 Agent 007
- 23 Jason of "All the President's Men"
- 24 Food lover
- 25 Avenue in Monopoly
- 26 Sandwich meat
- 28 Before long
- 30 Shoplift
- 31 Fuming
- 32 Diner patron
- 33 Slender
- 38 Fall mo.
- 39 Cut off

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

P	A	C	K	S	B	I	O	S
E	M	A	I	L	R	A	C	E
P	A	S	T	A	O	N	T	A
U	S	E	S	R	I	A	B	E
P	S	Y	C	H	O	L	O	G
Y	E	W	F	O	R	K		
Y	A	W	N	S	H	A	N	D
A	L	A	I	H	U	G		
P	S	Y	C	H	E	D	E	L
S	O	T	E	N	D	E	R	A
A	R	O	M	A	L	O	G	A
T	A	G	U	P	E	L	A	T
N	O	D	S	S	E	L	E	S

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott