



FICTION

# The Tormented Soul

TOHON

I am now seventy, yet I remember vividly an incident from my childhood that left a deep impression on my soul.

It is the year 1960. I am in Grade 4 attending the Kurmitola Cantonment Primary School at Ayub Line, Dacca (now Dhaka).

My father is in the army and we live at the military compound. There is a parade ground sandwiched between the army barracks and the family quarters. As the name implies, the area is primarily meant for military parades, but it also has other useful purposes: sports and entertainment – variety shows and open-air movies for the ‘*jawans*’ (an Urdu/Persian word for the non-commissioned infantry soldiers).



The movies they run at the parade ground are mostly in Urdu. That’s when I first learn about Mirza Ghalib. The violent footage of action from real wars still sticks in my mind. It is the dark-age equivalent of a nine-year-old today watching Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan*.

Although East Pakistanis are Bengalis and speak Bangla, it is Urdu, which is the main language spoken in West Pakistan, that is the military language. This is because about 95% of the armed forces are comprised of West Pakistanis, mostly Punjabis.

We mingle, play and even go to school with the Urdu-speaking boys and girls. We grow up learning two languages. Even the school we attend is bilingual. In the long

run, learning Urdu would help my family greatly because we would later spend eight long years (1966–73) in West Pakistan.

Our family accommodation is next to the parade ground. I love the location. Not only can we run and play there, but the open field offers an unrestricted view of the army barracks. We watch the military parades and the marching band. Occasionally, we see a long row of military vehicles packed with soldiers in combat gear, heading for military drills at some remote location.

Even with all of this, the parade ground is only half the fun of living on the military compound. Even more exciting to a small boy is that the Dacca–Chittagong railway line runs past the cantonment and borders a no-man’s land – bushland full of fruit trees and lakes for fishing, an exciting place for adventure! So, beyond home and school, our happy, exciting days revolve around the parade ground and the no-man’s-land.

Unfortunately, every light has a shadow. This story is the story of the dark side – the day my life’s brightness suffered a total eclipse.

It is Friday and we are enjoying the weekend. There is no such thing as TV and our family does not even have a radio. On a day like this, we brothers normally play ludo or a snakes and ladders board game. But today, somehow, turns out to be an exception.

I am bored and at some point I go to the bedroom overlooking the parade ground to look through the window. It is an instinctive gesture such as an inmate confined in a cell might make.

Curiously, I see some unusual activity. There are three soldiers in uniform, which is uncommon for a Friday. Two of the soldiers are holding bayoneted rifles (probably live) and standing about a cricket-pitch length apart, guarding the third man. The third soldier, who is wearing combat gear – rifle, backpack, helmet and heavy boots – is running back and forth between the two guards. The posture of the soldier on the drill tells me that his backpack is unusually heavy, probably loaded with rocks and bricks.

I have never seen such an unusual drill. Despite my youth, I have no problem figuring out that it is a corporal punishment. We kids sometimes walk around the periphery of the barracks and once spotted a heavily fortified, guarded cell where several *jawans* were being

held captive, probably for misconduct, so I am not unfamiliar with the idea of punishment.

As I stand at the window holding the grille and watching the soldier’s ordeal, my heart first becomes heavy and then begins to ache. It is about ten in the morning and the day is getting hotter as the sun glides up the sky. From his slow, tired movements – as if he might collapse at any moment – I get a sense that the soldier must have been on the drill for a while. Unable to cope with my inner distress, I walk away from the window, but after a while cannot resist returning to check if it is all over.

An hour or so later, I find that several other *jawans* in their plain Punjabi clothes – salwar and kurta – are now being made to line up and watch the punishment. I understand that it is meant to humiliate the soldier further, as if the corporal punishment is not enough.

My troubled mind becomes increasingly anxious for the punishment to end. At about noon, I hear the azan for the Jum’ah prayer. The visitors are now gone, probably headed for the mosque. A flickering thought crosses my mind and offers some hope: after the prayer, the *namajees* would return to the barracks and their homes. One of them might be the officer who ordered this punishment. Perhaps he might sympathise with the man’s ordeal under this hot sun and give the order to call it a day.

I keep my eyes focused on the mosque, waiting for the prayer to be over. The Friday prayers with their sermon always run long. Today it seems endless. Finally, I see the *namajees* leaving the mosque and I hold my breath in anticipation.

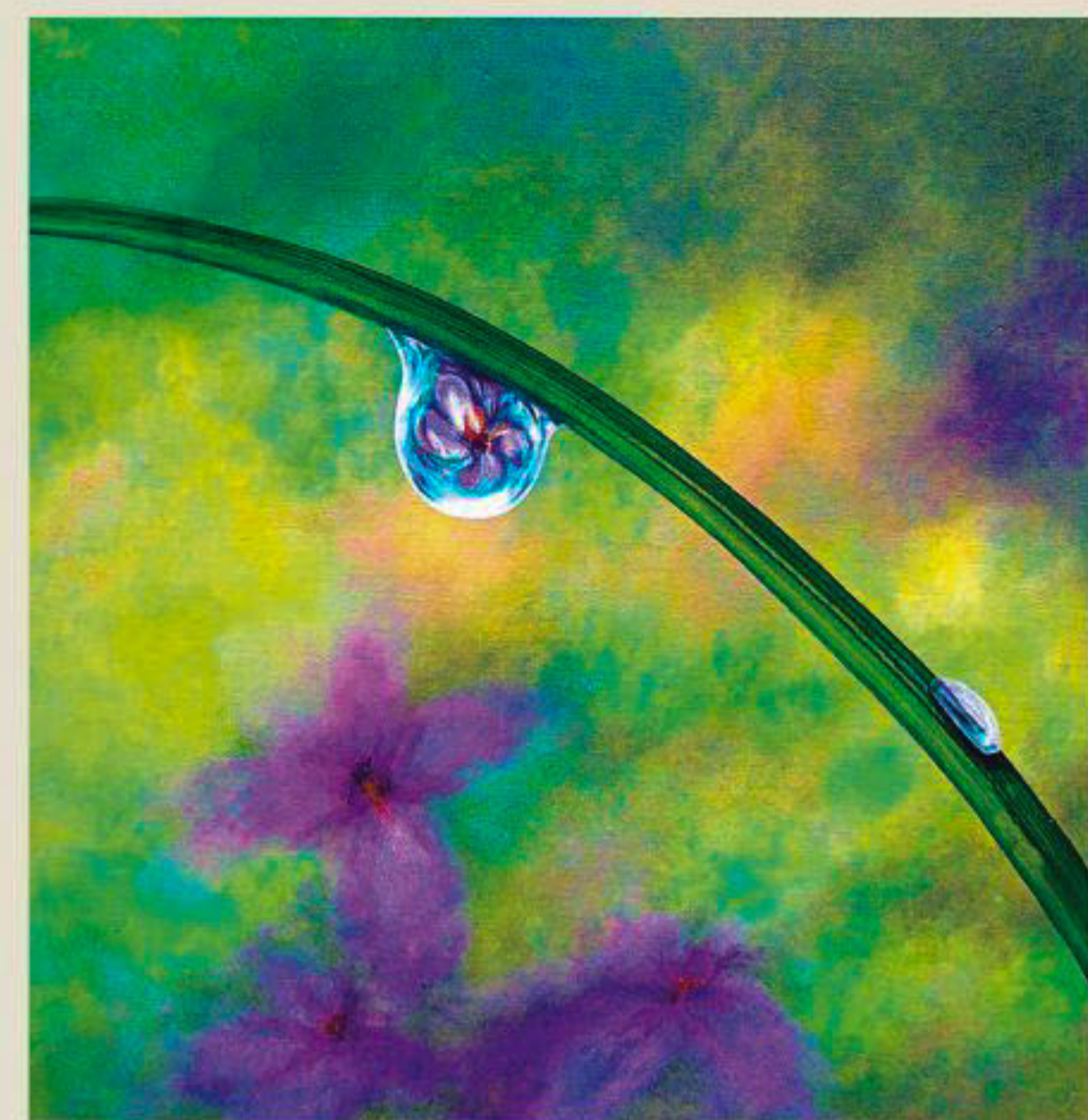
I think I must be hallucinating – it’s all a mirage in this hot, desert environment – for I see the *namajees* walking past, noticing nothing, let alone stopping for a moment to sympathise with the victim’s ordeal. I feel so incapable, as if watching through my cell’s grilled window as a fellow inmate is flogged in the prison yard.

My tormented soul yells, “Hey men, don’t you see?” before it drowns in despair and hopelessness. My welled-up eyes blur my vision. I walk away from the window. And do not return.

Tohon is a short-story writer. He contributes regularly to the Daily Star Saturday Literature page.



POETRY



FARNAZ MAHBUB

## Dewdrops

There was once a breeze filled heart  
Its melodies echoed into the clouds  
Where between the white sands it danced  
For that one chance of remembrance  
Allowing the petals of memories  
To begin the forget pathway  
A place of stagnant - wrapped inside tender leaves  
Its roots and barks galloping  
Like the hefty horse  
Whose one blink from the distance  
Creates a million pieces of dazzle

## My Song

Careless abyss of the covetous lips  
A chaotic painting - wrath of the willow tree  
The gardener’s longings; the dreamer’s inclination  
Roses and lilies – or sunflowers – but in their fickle pursuit  
Sat on the chariot – wings crossed between the lover’s moon  
A new born chant – lost in the mist – yet dwelling in heart

Farnaz Mahbub’s passion revolves around traveling and writing. Currently, she resides in Toronto, Canada.

# A Translation of Manik Bandopadhyay’s “Pragaitihashik” Prehistoric (Part-III)

MOTIUR RAHMAN

As the moon appeared, high tides and ebbs kept changing their courses, and a little chill in the air set the mood- Bhikhu lost whatever was left of his self-restraint. Repulsion was replaced by a heat of desire and the next morning he was there to see her.

“I have no issue with your gangrene. Come with me.”

“Why didn’t you come earlier? Just leave!”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“Look, I am with him now.” She pointed towards a fellow beggar around the corner.

Bhikhu examined his features closely-crippled but younger, had a disabled leg which he put on the show to draw attention. A prosthetic leg was lying by his side.

“If he finds out, he will kill you!”

“I could knock down ten like him at once.”

“Then go and talk to him, why bicker with me?”

“Leave him, come with me.”

“Look at you, man! Want to help yourself with some tobacco? You turned your back on me seeing the gangrene, and now you are here, asking for my hand? Son of a bitch! Do you earn like him? Got any place to live? Get lost now or I’ll see to it!”

Bhikhu left for the time being but did not give upon his pursuit altogether. Whenever she was on her own, he would never be late to show up. In an attempt to curry favor, he would try to initiate little chitchats.

“What’s your name, lassy?”

Such was their situation that they did not even know each other’s name, nor did they feel the urge to know.

With her signature smirk, she would tease, “What brings you here, really? Go and find some old biddy.”

Bhikhu kept insisting her. From his bag he would take out some bananas, “Stole for you. Eat now so I can see.”

She grabbed and swallowed the gift of her wooer in an instant. “Pachi, that’s what they call me. You gave me bananas and I have told you my name. Now go away!”

Bhikhu did not move, though. Just her name in exchange for his bananas was not enough. Leaning forward he would continue his small talk. Someone unfamiliar with their ways of conversing would surely take it for brawling. After a while, Bhikhu tried to get familiar with her partner, Bosir.

“Salam, *miabhai!*”

“I don’t give a fig for your ‘salam *miabhai!*’ I can see what brings you here. Beware! You see my cane? I will simply crack your head open with it!”

They exchanged a great deal of abuse. Bhikhu threatened to “take care” of him later while Bosir warned that he should never dare to come near Pachi again.

In the next couple of days, Bhikhu’s income started to drop. The people crossing the road were not new comers, and those who had already given him a penny or two did not feel they had to oblige him further. Beggars were everywhere. He could not save a penny unless it was a weekly *haat* day. Once the winter would pass, things turned out to be even more difficult. He was bound to find decent meals and a place to live in no matter how; otherwise, no younger beggar woman would agree to be his partner. All in all, the circumstances were against him.

He had to do something about it. He saw no way of adding to his income if he continued to stay there. Of course, he could not steal or work. Without killing someone it was impossible to burgle with his one hand. Also, he did not feel like going to a new city, leaving Pachi behind. The happy life of Binnu majhi made him utterly jealous, and sometimes he felt like setting that man’s house on fire.

Loitering around the riverside, Bhikhu was overwhelmed with passion. He fancied that his yearning would only be fulfilled if he himself could possess all the women and relish all the delicacies there were in the world.

He spent a few more days in such distress and affliction. One night, he gathered all his belongings and stepped outside, fetching himself a sharp-end iron rod on the way.



It was a dark night with the sky full of glittering stars. God’s creations were lulled to a hushed silence and profound serenity. After all this time, Bhikhu was finally out with a heinous mission at such a deep hour of the night. He was exulted at the very thought of the errand, and muttered to himself, “If only it were the left one you took, Lord, instead of the right!”

A little ahead was a forest close to which some poor people built little shanties; one of them belonged to Bosir. He used to go to the city early in the morning and come back at dusk. Pachi cooked for him while he smoked tobacco. At night she used to patch his wound with a coarse piece of rag. The salacious words they shared with each other till they fell asleep could be heard from outside their hut. The surrounding effused a certain kind of stench. While Bosir snored in sleep, Pachi kept on muttering.

A furtive follower, one day Bhikhu saw all these.

He eavesdropped cautiously for some time. A shabby hut as it was, Pachi did not bar the door with clamp; she just closed it with somewhat of a support. Holding the rod in one hand Bhikhu opened the door and sneaked into the room. He

was absorbed in thoughts for a while. He knew it was not possible to locate Bosir’s heart; moreover, his clumsy left hand might fail him, giving away his presence to Bosir. That would be a big trouble he was not ready to face yet.

Putting all those thoughts aside, Bhikhu tiptoed to their head and thrust the rod right through Bosir’s eye into the palate. Unsure about the severity of the attack, he went on to choke Bashir with his left hand first and then threatened Pachi, “Shout, and I will kill you too!”

Petrified, Pachi did not make any noise. Rather she started gasping. Bhikhu warned her again, “If you want to save yourself, just keep quiet! No sound at all!”

As Bosir succumbed to death, he slowly took his hand away. Restored, he said, “Put the light on, Pachi.”

Bhikhu took a look at the dead body with pride as he had taken away a young life with his one bare hand. “See, who crushed whose head now? How many times did I tell him not to brawl with me, and leave my lady alone!” Bhikhu was grimacing ear to ear at Bosir’s corpse and broke out in hideous laughter. Suddenly, he turned to Pachi, “Why don’t you talk! Should I do the same with you?”

Scared to death, she said, “What will you do now?”

“Tell me where he has kept his money.”

Pachi had discovered this little secret with much difficulty. She tried to play ignorant. Once Bhikhu held the woman by her hair, eventually she had to give in. Bosir’s savings just managed to be a little over a hundred taka. Bhikhu had earned far more in the past, yet he was elated.

“Get what you need, Pachi. We’ll start soon. It’s a full moon outside!”

Pachi was ready at once. Holding Bhikhu’s hand she stepped outside, limping.

“Where do we go?”

“The town. I will manage a boat from the *ghat* and by morning we will be at Chipatipur. There we will stay in a hideout the whole day and start again at night to get to the town. Hurry, Pachi, we have a long way ahead!”

Pachi found it difficult to walk with her condition. All of a sudden, Bhikhu stopped and turned back to her.

“Does it hurt?”

“It does.”

“What if I carry you?”

“You will?”

Lifting the lady on his back with her hands around his neck, Bhikhu was passing through the far stretching paddy fields in long strides. From behind the shades of the trees over the horizon the moon was about to appear. Awaiting a clandestine moon-rise, the whole earth was in a silent, peaceful slumber.

It might as well be that the glowing moon over the horizon, and the tranquil earth down here have their own histories. But the arcane darkness that Bhikhu and Pachi gradually accumulated into their own beings from the mothers’ womb on their way to this world, and the darkness they will leave behind shrouded in the essence of their posterity – is prehistoric. No beam of light has been able to reach there, nor shall it ever be lightened.

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