

Editor's Note

"What's in a name?" asked Shakespeare. We often say that too as if names do not matter. Yet how else can we introduce ourselves if we do not have names? There was a time when people would end up with nick-names like Buddhu, Shuddhu, Nidhu, Choi-choi, Admi, Gedi, Lillu, Potka and what not! Sometimes I wonder if it was because in those days people had so many children that they would call them whatever that came to mind. In modern times, when people have fewer children, names have become problematic in other ways. Modern day parents often come up with so unusual names for their children that sometimes it is difficult to pronounce them. I remember that under such a circumstance, I almost got thrashed for suggesting "Purish" as a name for the new born brother of some Barish. Names and naming are, indeed, interesting and important aspects of human life.

This issue of *Star Literature*, therefore, is about that essential aspect of our beings- names. We have invited four of our regular authors to write about their names and the significance of naming.

All About My Name

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

I hate my name, particularly my nick name: Shuman. It's so common that some of my classmates at Jahangirnagar University used to call me "common." Despite its literal meaning that aligns with Oscarsque "beautiful mind," the proper name has been damaged by its overuse. I guess in the late '60s and early '70s, it was not considered that bad a name. It was quite trendy for my father's generation to look for Bangla names to distinguish their newborns from those from West Pakistan. An Arabic or a Persian formal name along with a Bangla nickname was the order of the day.

The irony is my father named me after a Pakistani singer: Shamshad Begum. He was probably a fan of the classical singer, but that does not necessarily explain my nomenclature, which is tinged with a story that is too hard to swallow, too supernatural to be natural. Then again it had been told by a person whom I would trust with my entire life—my deceased father, Mr. N.A.G. Mortuza.

One day, a year before I was born, when he was going to his office in Motijheel, he was waylaid by a mad beggar in scanty clothes. This mad man was touching the feet of all incoming rickshaw passengers and asking for alms. When my father's turn came, the man just put in my father's palm all the coins he had collected and said, "You are going to have two sons. Name them - Shamsad and Haider." Sure enough, as the first born, I was handcuffed to a mystical uni-sex Persian name that literally meant "a sapling" or an "evergreen shrub." My mother probably still has those old coins wrapped in a small bundle as a memento of that incident. My younger brother, however, managed to have got rid of his name during his school registration as it matched the name of the caretaker of our grandma's house.

So I ended up with a mouthful name: S.M. Shamsad Mortuza. The first letter stood for my family title - Sardar; the second one of course confirming my Muslim identity - Muhammad, while my dad's name blazoned at the end. But when at school, little did I care about our family title or the legacy it carried.



At the time of registration for my SSC examination, I decided to do a root over of my SM squares name. I simply retained SM, and gave up being an esquire (a punny wish).

When I moved to Willes Little Flower School in Class 5, there was this girl called Shamshad Jahan. Trust me it's not nice to be in a class where you have to share a girl's name, especially when you are ten-year-old. I started going by my father's name, my last name. I dropped off the tail as a bait, and it worked. My friends started bulldozing it at their own will: Mortooz, cartooz, tormuj ... For me, what mattered the most was the fact that they were no longer teasing me for sharing the name of the first girl of our class. My teachers were also calling me Mortuza without any decorum of adding Mr. before the last name. My friends would phone me asking for Mortuza, and our maid would say that I was not home—thinking it to be for my dad. Then in the evening my dad would return the call only to find out the phone was for me. Mortuza senior and Mortuza junior would exchange a laugh. It's funny how my family name became my first name at school. I tried to change it during my intermediate days at college with

mixed results; different people were using different parts of my name depending on their convenience.

When I moved to the university, my effort to establish my first name —Shamsad —did not meet any visible success. I noticed people were struggling to say it: they would call me Jamshed, Shamseer, Shamsul and what not. How difficult is it to say, Shamsad? I would never know. I know I have spelled it wrong with a missing H, making it phonetically incorrect. Then again the morphemes can be split into two parts: you can tell that I am sad to see sham before me!

In 1999, I was working as an intern at a tribal school in Arizona. And these kindergarten kids would call me - Shimsham, shamsam and so on! And the teacher had to intervene (bless her soul), "how come you can say Arnold Schwarzenegger - and not Shamsad!"

Why blame the kids from the Yaqui tribes, when my own people keep on messing up my name? My friends at the University of Arizona would call me Sammy. I also used "Sam" to order food in an eatery or a taxi over the phone. Even though I had two Samanthas in my class,

it never became an issue. Going by Sam was a lot easier, and even my Profs would use that!

There is no point in being rigid with names. I pitied those who could not pronounce my name and introduced myself using my nick name to my friends at Jahangirnagar. Little did I know that my name would stay with me even after I had joined my alma mater as a lecturer. My students would call me Shuman Sir behind my back. The tradition started with some of the immediate junior batches with whom I had the good fortune of sharing my student life as well as the beginning of my teaching career. For them I was Shuman bhai who later obtained an upgraded designation. By the time, mobile phones became popular, my students came up with a tech savvy acronym - SMS (Shamsad Mortuza Shuman).

Well they are not the only ones to fiddle with my name. I like playing with my name. I always have. I used to write the initial S of my name like an integration sign (with elongated S) placed before "human."

Integration of human - Shuman: I chose it as my life's motto.

Much later when I was researching for my PhD on Shamanism in British poetry, I came across an interesting find. The root word for the Alaskan word shaman (referring to a tribal medicine man or kabiraj) is "Schumann" which means show-man. The German name Schumann is still there ... it was quite a serendipity. I guess as schuman I was destined to work on the figure of the shaman who heals society through showmanship and performance. Luckily, I didn't become a shoe-man!

At DU, some of my pupils have compared my teaching style with my fellow Capricorn, my senior colleague Syed Manzoorul Islam. Although humbled by the suggestion, I chuckled and said: I am not SMI; I am I, SM (loosely borrowing Asimov's short story title "I, Robot").

Then again, as the bard puts it, what's in a name?

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The Timeless Bond

TOHON

I was so excited when my first story – "My American Dream"—appeared in *The Daily Star* back in 2007 that I quickly emailed the web link to all my friends. And they promptly responded with "What is Tohon?" as if the name was more important than the story itself.

As I kept writing, the readers kept asking "What's in the name Tohon?" Now the Editor herself is curious. So, I am writing this story and, if she chooses to publish the piece, you can bet, I will email the link to all my friends who have been asking me the question all these years.

Many times, I heard my mother narrating a particular story about me to her friends. As a small child I would cry often and the worse part was that once I started crying, I would not stop. Our family friend, Uncle Baig, my dad's military colleague from Punjab, used to call me "bichchu" (for *bichha* or centipede).

It still puzzles me why Uncle Baig would relate a crying child to a dangerous, crawling, poisonous, ugly-looking insect. Maybe he meant scorpion because both scorpions and centipedes come from the same invertebrate family: arthropods. And both of God's small creatures ("dangerous beasts," in my view) have the capability of stinging (scorpions) or biting (centipedes) with painful results, even killing the victim.

As I grew up, I came to suspect that perhaps Uncle Baig had X-ray eyes and was able to see my inner demon. As it turns out, deep inside, I have always been violent. I would rather self-destruct than succumb to the control of others, thus emulating a scorpion which kills itself under similar conditions.

Now, getting back to the story, during the period of my incessant crying, my

mother must have been a thoughtful woman to start calling me "Tuhin" (a Bengali word for "snow on a mountain peak," like Everest). She hoped the name "snow" might calm her irritable boy down and transform him into a happy child.

Did her trick work? It sure did. I am not sure if my mother was aware of the timing of this change. But as a symbol of her love for her happy boy, she fondly started calling me "baba Tohon" – as if "Tohon" – an affectionate name without meaning – was now more fitting than Tuhin."

I do not recall the first time that I heard her address me with that name, but I do remember the last time she uttered those two words.

It was December 1999. Upon receiving a frantic phone call from my brother, I rushed home from Australia. My mother was gravely ill, bedridden, and had lost her memory as well as her speech. She stared at me with a blank look and I could not be sure if she recognised her favourite son.

My sister-in-law cried, telling me that even the previous weeks she had kept repeating: "Aamar forsha cheleta koi?" meaning "Where is my fair-complexioned boy?"

Except for my mother herself, no one in our family had a fair complexion. By "forsha" I suppose, in her subconscious mind, she implied "beautiful" – like beauty in the eyes of the beholder.

I stayed with her for two weeks and kept praying, "Please God, I want to hear, one last time, the sweetest of all things, "Tohon," from my mother's mouth." God did not fail me. The day I was heading back, I went to her room and held her hand in mine for the last time. She looked at me and, lo and behold, uttered



"baba Tohon."

As far as my memory goes, she always loved me dearly. In her eyes, I was "ideal": although shy, timid and passive, I was also disciplined and obedient, kind and caring, and always attended happily to household chores. At times, upset with my elder brother, she would say in exasperation, "I would have no problem raising a hundred sons like Tohon."

"But, Ammu," my brother would tease her back, "Tohon is your daughter, not a son."

As it turned out, in one of my dreams I once saw myself as a daughter in our household. I was happy to see myself as a loving and caring girl, but hoped that someday I would also dream of my darker side – a deadly, venomous scorpion.

At nineteen (1969), I went to study

engineering and have been away from home since then. A few years after my graduation, I travelled overseas and saw my mother only during my visits. But I would always write her letters. I knew that she eagerly awaited my correspondence and I never failed her.

In early 2000, in her sleep, my mother silently slipped away to another world. I flew to Dhaka. While I was grieving for the loss of my mother, I had one important mission in my mind: to find the letters I wrote to her over the years, for I knew she must have saved them all.

I exhausted myself searching all over her room – the desk and the drawers, the bookshelf and the books, the almirah and the neatly folded clothes and linens, and the suitcases containing some of her favourite belongings – but there were no letters, not a single one of them. Filled with disappointment, I nearly gave up, but then thought of searching one last place: underneath her mattress. And yes, there they were, so many of them. On one hand, I was thrilled to have found this precious treasure, and on the other, tears rolled down my cheeks as the letters resurrected our eternal bond.

The story does not quite finish there. Years later, in an unusual dream, I would experience an afterlife meeting with my mother – two souls reuniting in another world.

So, when my friends ask me, "What's in the name "Tohon?" I say, "My mother used to call me by that name."

"What does it mean?" they enquire.

I go silent, "God, help me! How do I explain it?"

"Yes?" They wait for an answer.

I say, "Tohon' means, a timeless bond between two souls."

Tohon is a short story writer and regular contributor to the Star Literary Page.