



FICTION

The Lost Soul

MOINUL ABEDIN



"Did you see the dead bodies over there?" a little wizened old woman bursting out from nowhere asked, fixing her lackluster eyes on them.

The couple got startled and stared at her in consternation. The woman was in her late seventies. Her tattered attire and withered expression made them believe that there was something wrong but nothing to be worried about. They had just arrived at their ancestral hometown after getting married a week ago to meet their relatives. The woman had shown up when they were sitting inside a nearby park.

The boy inquired, "What are you talking about?"

The woman retorted, "My husband and my two children."

"What happened to them?" the girl hollered, surprised.

The woman, getting some attention from somebody, perhaps after a long time, got encouraged and quietly sat beside them, "Don't you remember the war? One sultry afternoon they came in a body."

"Oh?" the couple asked more out of politeness than curiosity.

"They came, they came, all clad in khaki dresses, they arrived, surrounded our village, cursed us, 'shob saleko mar do,' they set our houses on fire, they came, they came, they shot my husband and two children in front of me. They picked me up. They took me to their camp, they kept me there until the winter! ..." the woman burst out laughing, and then she cried. Next she tore her hair, slammed her fist on her chest; then she proceeded to do a myriad of such antics, but all of a

sudden some policemen turned up in the scene.

The couple felt relieved.

They were the children of parents who became big business tycoons after the Liberation War. And all that happened a long time ago, too. Was she talking about that same war?

At the sight of the policemen, the old woman got doubly furious. She began to throw at them whatever she could pick up, uttering the most precise expletives, "You bastards, you killed my husband and children that day, you ruined my life..." But the cops seemed to know her well enough; they did not seem to mind. Other people of this locality also knew her, in fact, they had known her for the last good fifty years. Initially they drove her away, called her a "slut" behind her back. But with the passage of time, she became bearable, also recently her eligibility to get government allowances was proven by some journalists.

When the policemen were gently escorting this insolent septuagenarian out of the park, a Pajero, waving national flag whooshed past them. One of the cops was about to salute when the woman started to wriggle hard to shake off the policemen. She spat on them screaming her lungs out, "bugger off" and got free. Next moment, the lost soul of some bygone time disappeared inside a dark alley between two buildings to resume her hunt for the dead bodies of her husband and children.

Moinul Abedin is an English teacher at the DPS STS School, Dhaka.

POETRY

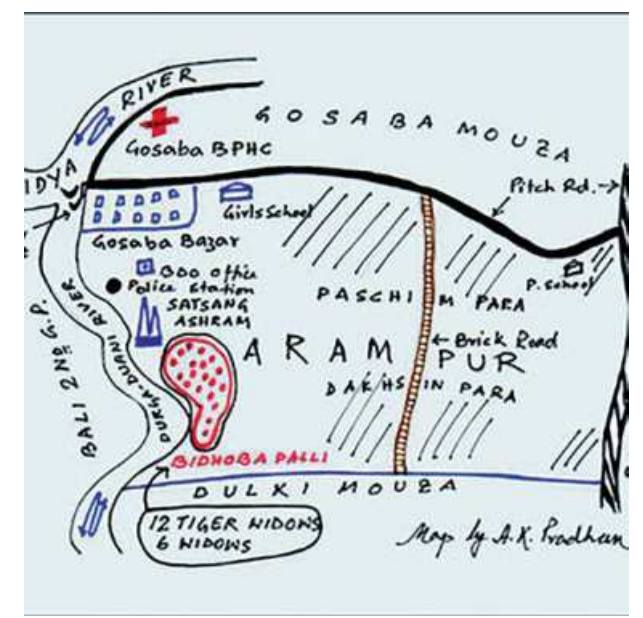
Soliloquies from the village of Orphans and Widows

TARFIA FAIZULLAH

During the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971, collaborators led the Pakistani army to Sohagpur village. In one day, they killed 164 men. Fifty-seven women survived the atrocities, only to live out life as widows. Sohagpur (Village of Love) was renamed Bidhoba Palli (Village of Widows).

The army killed every male in the village, every male. When the army was gone, there was not a single man left to bury the dead. We had to drag the bodies ourselves and bury them.
-anonymous

Tarfia Faizullah is a Bangladeshi-American poet. The piece was first published in her second book Registers of Illuminated Villages (Graywolf Press, 2018).



FICTION

A Translation of Abu Ishaque's "Moyna Keno Koi na Kotha"

Why Doesn't the Myna Speak?

BY SOHANA MANZOOR

"Joy Bangla!" Solayman rolled off his bed in terror. Twisting his body, he dived under the bed stand and lay flat. His whole body was trembling. The freedom fighters must have surrounded his house!

He had gone on an operation last night with seven armed Pakistani soldiers and ten to twelve non-Bengalis. He was the one who had led the way to Gopibagh. But they failed to find any of the said freedom fighters there. There were a dozen houses under lock and key. They had broken in and plundered the houses. After dividing the looted stuff, his share consisted of a radio, a table fan, a table clock, two flower vases and about a dozen spoons of different sizes. He had fallen into a deep slumber after returning early dawn. He had sent his wife and children to his in-laws' house when all the troubles started. So, there was nobody else at home now. The part-time maid servant probably had left as she found the door locked.

So, he had woken up late and had been thinking about his next "operation" when he heard the words, "Joy Bangla!" They hit his chest like two powerful bullets.

Stretching full-length under his bed-frame, he strained to hear more. However, the heart-shaking sounds seemed to have died down.

Slowly, he came out from his hiding place. He opened the windows one by one to check if anyone had entered the premises of his house.

The single-floor unit was surrounded by a wall. On top of the wall, there were shards of glass. The only entrance to the house was on the Pakurtola Lane. It was highly unlikely that anybody had got into his haven.

Solayman could not understand where the sound came from. He did not start to imagine things, did he? Sound of western music came out from the direction of the two-storeyed house that stood in the west. The one storeyed house on the east stood in silence.

Solayman looked at the table-clock -- 17 minutes past 10. He should get out of the house right away. His job was to wander through the lanes

and streets for information-- which household played *Swadhin Bangla Betar*, which house was frequented by suspicious looking young men, which houses had huge locks on the front-doors, etc. He collected all these information through the day and in the evening, entered a small office which sported a signboard "Continental Enterprise." It was actually a military intelligence office.

"Joy Bangla!"

"Joy Bangla!" Solayman jumped in fear. That was close and real. He heard it twice and two different voices. And the voices were pretty young. Many young boys also had joined the freedom fighters,

The voice was loud and clear. Major Janjua and his soldiers jumped up. Their shocked eyes fell on a cage hanging in the veranda. It held a hill myna and it was watching them. It shrieked again. "Joy Bangla."

he had heard. These kids carried bullets, bombs, rifles and guns!

"Joy Bangla!" The sound came again. It clearly came from the house that stood on the east. Somebody was going out or coming in. They were using the words as greetings, for sure. That house must be a secret hideout of the *Muktibahini*!

He could not possibly wait till the evening with such a piece of news. He dressed up quickly and locked his front door. Looking around carefully he tried to understand if anybody was watching him. Everything was quiet.

Around twelve noon, a military truck arrived in front of house number 7 at Pakurtola Lane. A team of soldiers jumped out and surrounded the house at the order of Major Janjua. They all took positions on the ground while Major Janjua approached the front door with a revolver in his hand. Like



his men, he, too, was crawling. Then he barked, "Who is inside? Hands up! Surrender immediately."

Inside, it was all silent. Then, a door opened and an old man came out. His hands were down and a boy of about ten followed him.

"*Tumhaar ki naam achhe?*" asked Major Janjua.

"Shamsher Majumdar," the old man replied. He felt insulted being addressed by "tumi" as opposed to "apni." But he kept his cool.

"Are you a Hindu?"

"No, I am Muslim," the man replied unafraid. His only son had been shot dead in his government residence by the Pakistani soldiers. His grandson, a college student, had run off to join the freedom fighters. What would he be afraid of? He knew Urdu but he would never speak in that language in his own home.

"What kind of a Muslim are you? 'Majumdar' is a last name used by Hindus."

"Listen, Major Saheeb, if the Rathor Rajput last name holders of your country can be Muslims, why not 'Majumdar'? Besides, 'majm' is an Arabic word and 'daar' is Persian."

Major Janjua understood Bengali well even though he could not speak. He felt somewhat embarrassed. His own last name once belonged to the Hindus. There still were many Hindus of the same name in India. But he persisted, "Very well, recite *Kalema*

Shahadat.
"Ashhadu Allah Ilaha Illallahu la shrikalahu wa ashhadu anna Muhammadan abduhu wa Rasuluhu."
"You are Muslim all right. Who is that boy behind you?"
"He works in my house."
"Who else lives here?"
"My wife. She is paralysed and cannot get up from the bed."
"We know that you have sheltered the *Muktis* here."
"Mukti? No..."
"Joy Bangla lives in your house."
"Impossible."
"Do not lie, old man. We will search your place."
"Go ahead."

Major Janjua and his men searched the entire house and found nobody except his paralysed wife.

He asked old Mr. Majumdar again, "Didn't the freedom fighters come today?"

"Nobody came."
"You have white hair on your head and still you're lying?"
"I'm telling the truth."
"Habilder, handcuff this man."
One of the soldiers put handcuffs on his hands.

Major Janjua turned to the boy. "You boy, what's your name?"

"Lebu. Lebu Sheikh."
"Did anyone come to this house today?"

"No, nobody came."
"Tell the truth, boy." Major Janjua

smacked his cane across the boy's back. Lebu started to cry, "Nobody came, Sir."

"Joy Bangla."

The voice was loud and clear. Major Janjua and his soldiers jumped up. Their shocked eyes fell on a cage hanging in the veranda. It held a hill myna and it was watching them. It shrieked again, "Joy Bangla."

Finally, the mystery was solved. But who spoke with the bird? They knew that there was another voice in the house.

Major Janjua barked at Lebu, "Hey boy, who speaks with this Myna? There's someone else who replies back to him saying, 'Joy Bangla.' Speak quickly."

"A-aar-- ai moynadare bengai!" a sniffing Lebu replied in his very own dialect.

"Bengai?-- what's 'bengai'?" asked a perplexed Janjua.

"The boy just mimics the myna," Majumdar explained in English. "No, no. This boy must have taught the myna to speak those words."

"No, he did not teach him."
"Then who did?"

"A number of processions passed by the roads in the past weeks. The myna learnt from them." Shamsher Majumdar did not reveal that his grandson had taught the myna to say those words before he went off to join the *Muktibahini*.

Major Janjua seemed to believe the old man. He looked at Lebu and said, "You have learnt to mimic the Myna quite well. Now, mimic me. Say, 'Pakistan Zindabad.'"

"Hakistan Zindabad."
"You bastard, what did you say?"

Major Janjua lashed out with his cane. The old man said, "What are you beating him for, Major Saheeb? He is an illiterate boy from Noakhali. His people cannot pronounce p. They use h instead."

Major Janjua ordered his people to let go of the Old man and the boy and arrest the myna instead.

"Joy Bangla," the bird protested. "Harajade, what did you say?"

Major Janjua struck out and hit the cage.

"*Dadabhai, kola khabo* (Dadabhai, I want to eat a banana). *Joy Bangla!*"

"And I will eat your head!" barked Janjua.

Even though Majumdar protested strongly, the army took away the myna in its cage. The old man watched in tearful eyes.

Major Janjua took the myna to his house in the cantonment. There was nobody else except his batman whom he instructed to teach the myna to say, "Pakistan Zindabad."

Sherdil tried to make the myna say "Pakistan Zindabad," but to no avail. The myna continued to screech, "Joy Bangla."

Major Janjua ordered, okay, it may not learn to say, "Pakistan Zindabad," but it must stop uttering "Joy Bangla." Whenever the bird utters those two words, water must be sprinkled on it.

But nothing worked. Finally, Janjua was tired and ordered his batman to release the bird. How long can one listen to "Joy Bangla" at one's own home? It was even more unacceptable inside the cantonment.

The bird, however, did not go far. Sometimes, when there was nobody around, it came to sit on top of its old cage. And then it would fly to sit on the branches of a nearby jackfruit tree and squeal, "Joy Bangla!"

One evening, Major Janjua had just returned from one of his "operations," and sat on the veranda with a mug of coffee. He had only taken a sip when the tactless bird screamed, "Joy Bangla." Janjua took out his revolver and fired at the bird. But it was too far away. Before he could take aim again, it took flight. Nobody heard it ever again in the Cantonment area.

The country became independent. And in an independent Bangladesh, many heard the myna sing. It went on calling out for some years before finally disappearing. Perhaps, it went back to its home in the mountains. A bird, too, understands when it is not safe to call out "Joy Bangla."

Sohana Manzoor is Associate Professor, Department of English & Humanities, ULAB. She is also the Literary Editor of The Daily Star.