

A Canary in the Mine

"I heard there were fairies down in the garden
Behind the trees and down in the garden
Walking on tip toes, waving their wands
Sipping on fairy tea, singing their songs
Can you see them?"

—From a children's song by Peter Combe



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

BLOWN' IN THE WIND
NORMALLY, you and I would not see fairies or hear them singing. They exist in a world where we fear (or do not care) to tread (anymore). Even if we do, we will not admit it in public. For instance, you have not heard me saying that I secretly went to the airport to see the landing of the majestic Concorde in the mid-80s. Sure enough, no one with better things to do will go to the airport just to catch sight of an iconic plane, right? Well, I was proved wrong then, and I am proved wrong now!

When fairies sing, they cleave the audience into two: believers and non-believers. Agnostics like me do not count. As the saying goes, you cannot be half-pregnant. Yet, the media *tamasha* attracted me to the tale of a fairy child, Pori Moni—a *nom de plume*, a stage name adopted by one of the boldest silver screen figures in our country. Frankly, I have stopped reading mainstream news for some time now. I rather read the comments section where the real news is. They are like the canaries in a mine: they help you detect the available toxic elements that can hurt humans. They tell you about social

mobility—the rapid changes within or between the strata in a society where new categories are constantly being formed, reformed, and deformed.

Even people who can barely write are not afraid to express their opinions in public. Even people who see life with monocles are not afraid to share their tunnel visions in public terrain. Some of them use the media to solidify their group ideologies or to become public pressure groups. It would be interesting to analyse the relationship between the way these groups adopt new technology and use mass media and the way they construct certain ideologies (often conservative, patriarchal, and extreme right/left-wing). Their group formation and growth through social interactions is equally significant. It seems that there is a verbal army deployed to wage a proxy war against mainstream liberalism. They are prompt to react.

Once a bitesize saga of the Pori Moni affairs started making the rounds on social media, there was an outpouring of comments and tags. One group started critiquing her nocturnal lifestyle while the other group focused on pointing out the overall social, moral and cultural decadence involving the new moneyed class. There was a third group who used the comments threads to draw traction to a missing Islamic public speaker. If you ask me, if a facility is legally operated with the provisions for individuals to enjoy its services, we should not make a judgement call based on gender. Then again, if anyone is making a public nuisance, immediate actions must be taken. A celebrity cannot expect preferential treatment while vandalising property. By the same token, influential owners of the facility cannot physically harass a client and take matters into their own hands. A

professional institution must have a protocol and mechanism in place to deal with rogue clients. I will not, of course, comment on an ongoing investigation. However, I shall highlight one of my concerns. Following the alleged abuse, Pori Moni called a press briefing at her place, where she hinted at something very alarming. She said that her life was



Actress Pori Moni (centre) talks to reporters after coming out from the DB office on June 15, 2021.

COURTESY: PROTHOM ALO

under threat, and she suspected that her murder would be staged as a suicide.

Pori Moni, thereby, sang a dirge that was reminiscent of a young girl who killed herself following a phone call with a very influential businessman. The death of that girl, Munia, is another symbolic death of a canary in the mine shaft. Munia, as is now known, was interred into the dark chambers of life. Remember the cartoon involving a canary and a cat. The story reminds

one of a cat that swallowed the canary, saying, "You'll be all right!" The news surfaced for a while before being buried alive. The comment threads mummified the dead woman as a "social climber" and "gold digger". In a media trial, the woman named after a small bird was marked as a fallen woman whereas the cat with his proverbial nine lives shifted

our cricket team. While playing for a club that has understandably fallen out of favour of the power centre, the sports sensation expressed his frustrations over some bad decisions of the field umpires. He acted like a bad manager fighting with his tools. He kicked at the stumps when a decision did not come in his favour; he obscenely placed the wicket before the legs of an umpire when a leg before wicket was not given; he verbally charged the umpires when they prematurely asked for the cover sheets to stop the play that would have handed the opponent a win under the D/L method.

Again, the comments were split. Some felt Shakib was the real hero stamping out the corruption corroding the cricket council (the pun on c, c, c, c is unintended), while others felt that as a senior player and role model, he should have been more responsible. Again, if you ask me, you can't soar like an eagle and crap like a canary. Shakib has taken our cricket to new heights—no question there. He has been the brand ambassador of our cricket, and the grateful country has reciprocated the gesture with love and admiration. He cannot spoil the gift by rubbing mud in the face of the people who love him. The people who have taken to social media in his defence mostly form a group that uses the instance to vent their frustrations with an over-controlling and overbearing system. Shakib is their canary in the coal mine.

The whistling of Shakib, by extension of Munia and Pori Moni, suggests how much oxygen is available in the shaft. The amount of toxicity suggests we must act fast to find the equilibrium.

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After two decades of war, the US leaves an uncertain future for Afghans

Civilians are paying an exceptionally high price for this misadventure



SAYEEED AHMED

JUNE 2002. I was on my first visit to Kabul. People were trying to put together their lives with new hope. Kids seemed happy and curious. Some were walking to

whatever remained of the schools. Some were playing on the streets, while others were curiously watching the foreigners.

Fast forward to 2021. On June 15, armed men gunned down five polio vaccinators and injured several others in Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar province. On June 9, masked gunmen stormed into an office of HALO Trust, a charity engaged in mine clearing, and killed at least 10, injuring many others. On June 6, a roadside bomb killed 11 civilians traveling on a bus in western Afghanistan. Last month, Dasht-e-Barchi, a Hazara Shia Muslim neighbourhood in west Kabul, experienced a wave of Taliban violence—most of the 85 killed were school-going girls between the ages of 11 and 17. Such mindless violence has continued since the US signed the Doha Peace Agreement with the Taliban in February 2020. We have lost count of the casualties. Our senses have become numb.

What's more, the Taliban have warned neighbouring states against allowing any American military base in their territories. The Afghans, who, in the Taliban's view, had cooperated with the Americans—such as the interpreters—now fear for their safety after the withdrawal. In short, the Taliban are well on their way to returning as the definite victors while the American troops are slinking away.

If such is the outcome of two decades

of bloody war, why did the US launch the offensive in 2001? What has caused the withdrawal? And who pays the price for its colossal misadventure?

WHY THE 2001 OFFENSIVE?

The short answer is strategic positioning in the Eurasian "heartland" and Afghan mineral resources.

In 1904, English geographer Halford Mackinder, one of the founding fathers of geopolitics and geostrategy, published a paper titled "The Geographical Pivot of History" (republished in *The Geographical Journal* in December 2004). According to Mackinder, whoever controls the Eurasian continent or the "heartland" can exercise global dominance. This heartland comprises Central Asia and the Caspian basin—while Russia dominated it for many years, of late, Chinese influence is also increasing in this region. The other attraction for the US was Afghan minerals. Imperial Britain had conducted mineral assessments in Afghanistan till the 1919 Anglo-Afghan War. Subsequently, Russia (erstwhile Soviet Union) had continued such explorations until its departure in 1989. All these explorations suggested a lucrative reserve, including of several rare earth elements.

Thus, military strategy and the lure of minerals formed the background of America's ambitious 2001 offensive. Its official goal was to prevent terror groups from using Afghanistan as a safe haven. But in 2021, the number of such groups has risen from four to at least 20. Membership of Al Qaeda (including their offshoots) has increased from 400 to tens of thousands globally. The precarious security situation in the region has made mining almost impossible. Two decades of war have drained the US of trillions of dollars without making any discernible progress. Despite the high-sounding

goals, the 2001 offensive and the massive firepower it deployed ended up as a dismal failure.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

Matthew Hoh, a senior fellow with the Center for International Policy and a Marine combat veteran, explained in a CNN opinion piece last month how the US misinterpreted the whole premise in Afghanistan. First, Washington's impression of the jihadists as the source of insurgency was utterly misplaced.

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Instead, most insurgents were only fighting foreign occupation forces. Second, several Afghan units resorted to atrocities, often against civilians, including women and children. By association, American troops were also implicated, strengthening the local population's resolve against their presence. Third, it was surprisingly easy for the Afghan insurgents to drain the American troops of their resources and patience. They lured them into frequent battles with minimal cost and effort. Eventually, the American policymakers realised that this was an endless war with no chances of winning it. Finally, Washington assumed that once Kabul came under control, the whole country

would follow. It ignored the fact that Afghanistan is a complex mosaic of many tribes. Further, it interpreted Islam as a monolithic and extremist faith which, in reality, it is not. Many Muslims follow progressive and inclusive Islamic thoughts.

The combination of all these incorrect assumptions and impressions, mishandling of public sentiment, atrocities, and the unfavourable terrain led to a catastrophic failure of the American mission. Unfortunately, history is replete with similar fates of many invading foreign powers. We may euphemistically call it a withdrawal. But, in reality, Washington is only joining the long line of empires conceding abysmal ends in this inhospitable terrain.

WHO PAYS FOR THIS MISADVENTURE?

Ordinary Afghan civilians caught up in the mindless conflicts between the different factions have already paid a steep price. A 2019 study by Brown University indicated that crossfire, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), assassinations, bombings, night raids of houses of suspected insurgents, and cluster bombs had killed civilians in disproportionate numbers. A rough estimate puts the total number of war deaths since 2001 at 157,000, of which more than 47,000 were civilians. In addition, around 2.7 million Afghans fled abroad and another four million were internally displaced in these two decades, according to a recent AP story. As the current trend of continued violence indicates, these numbers are likely to increase. Afghan women stand to lose everything they have achieved so far. In a Taliban-controlled regime, they will go back to restricted indoor lives, deprived of education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. A recent BBC documentary, "Killing Hope: Targeted Attacks in Afghanistan," shows how

young professionals, often women, are being murdered.

WHAT IS THE ENDGAME?

Although officially withdrawing, the Americans will keep at least a thousand troops and some CIA officers on the ground to supervise Afghan National Army operations and gather intel. We are yet to see how it will pursue mining



US soldiers load onto a Chinook helicopter to head out on a mission in Afghanistan.

FILE PHOTO: US ARMY HANDOUT VIA REUTERS

minerals or strategic objectives in the coming years. Aborting is not an option because too much is at stake in this far-flung, rugged, and hostile territory, historically known as the "graveyard of empires". Meanwhile, little kids like the ones I met on Kabul's streets will continue to become the innocent victims of a brutal power game.

Dr Sayeed Ahmed is a consulting engineer and freelance writer. He has extensive experience in infrastructure project implementation in Bangladesh and abroad.

QUOTABLE Quote

ORHAN PAMUK
(1952-)
Turkish novelist

Happiness is holding someone in your arms and knowing you hold the whole world.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Prime minister Johnson
- 6 NFL pioneer George
- 11 Silly
- 12 Conjure up
- 13 Natural color
- 14 Bad kind of situation
- 15 A quantity of
- 17 Minimal change
- 18 Winter treat for birds
- 20 Bike part
- 22 Braying beast
- 23 Waits a moment
- 26 Stylishly quaint
- 28 Words to live by
- 29 Sticks
- 31 Stashed
- 32 Wax-coated

DOWN

- 1 Shirt protector
- 2 Low bill
- 3 Parties noisily
- 4 Silver bar
- 5 Appear
- 6 Blood watcher
- 7 Guacamole base
- 8 Deal a crushing

cheese

- 33 Disarray
- 34 Start of an idea
- 36 Do the decks
- 38 African lilies
- 40 Wed in haste
- 43 Wolf pack member
- 44 Bar seat
- 45 Southpaw
- 46 Packs down

punishment

- 9 Related
- 10 Dispatched
- 16 Sense of self
- 18 Poet Teasdale
- 19 Not new
- 21 Avenue liners
- 23 Circle dance
- 24 Singer Redding
- 25 Auction bids
- 27 Steak-house specialty
- 30 Print units
- 33 Island south of Sicily
- 34 Old France
- 35 Dresden's river
- 37 Sunset site
- 39 Pig's place
- 41 Catchy music
- 42 High trains

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THURSDAY'S ANSWERS

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

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BEETLE, GO GET ME A SANDWICH. WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME? I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN WHAT WAS IN IT FOR ME.

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

GUESS WHAT? OUR CLASS IS GOING TO MAKE A TIME CAPSULE! THAT SOUNDS FUN. YEAH, AND WE ALL GET TO CHOOSE ONE THING TO BURY IN IT FOR TEN YEARS! YOUR BROTHER WON'T FIT INSIDE. WE WON'T KNOW THAT UNTIL WE TRY.