



PHOTO: AUTHOR

Remembering Mohiuddin Ahmed, the founder of UPL

DILRUBA Z. ARA

Countless people cross our path as we walk through this temporal life; but only one or two strike us as people with no darkness within. Mohiuddin Ahmed was one of those unique humans. He radiated pure light, and for those within this light, time always moved peacefully because life seemed to have met all his wants and needs, and as a man so at ease with the ways of life, he effortlessly smoothed out the many negative thoughts of his visitors and friends, just by being who he was.

Nadia (Mahrukh) had texted me about his deteriorating condition a few hours before his passing. I had known he was unwell, but it was still difficult for me to cope with that news. I went out walking in the countryside, keeping my thoughts at bay. While I was out, the final text came. For a second everything went blurred, even though the Nordic sun was bright and strong. My legs bent, and I had to sit by the path in the shade of a tree. It was hours before I could walk back home.

Since then, I have been trying to come to terms with this grief and loss. On his first family memorial service on Zoom, I was a dumb participant, even though many words were bubbling in my head. It has taken me



house before he called for me.

It was a neat room that smelt of books, wisdom and olden times. There was a set of sofas before his desk. He invited me to take a seat, while he himself sat opposite me. He had a reassuring expression on his face, and I remember him laying the contract on the table and offering me a pen. He kept his eyes fixed on the document as I read through it. He must have had read the doubts on my face. As soon as I was ready, he declared with the confidence of any great leader that he knew what he was doing and that I shouldn't worry. Later, as I got to know him, I found out that it was one of his virtues to follow his gut feelings and never to stall matters that he somehow knew would be beneficial for his publishing house.

Having signed the deal, I joined him for lunch, which had been brought from his home. During that space of time, I mentioned that I had some of Abba's stories in English ready. He had never met my father but knew who he was. Without a second thought, he took the collection as well. Thus began our relationship, which turned to be one of a kind. In retrospect, I think the uniqueness rested on the fact he made me feel exclusive – when he was with me, he never mentioned anyone else or showed interest in anyone else's works.

Since then, we spoke frequently on the phone, and I met him regularly during my visits to Dhaka, which was often more than once per year. Apart my mother, he was the only person in Dhaka with whom I would spend my time. Because Motijheel was far away from Banani, where my family home is, Chacha would usually pick me up in his microbus – literally a mobile office – on his way to the UPL.

While we navigated through Dhaka's maddening traffic, he worked on manuscripts, signed documents, made phone calls and in between his official work shared with me memories from his student life in Punjab. He sang ghazals and recited poems by Shakespeare, and he described and impersonated episodes from his time in the dorm. Sometimes, he would stop the van when we passed by fruit-wallahs and get me some fruit. Once he got me a couple of Arong mugs from a roadside vendor. During his recesses, we would share coffee and lunch, and discussed literature and music. And when he was busy, I would walk through his

bookstore or sit there reading and writing. This was our standard routine whenever I went to Dhaka.

In the span of the next few years, Chacha's health slowly deteriorated. Parkinson's started eating him from inside, but with the courage of a soldier, he faced it and refused to let it affect his mind and life. When Nadia returned from the States in 2014 and started the UPL branch office in Badda, Chacha took me there to introduce me to her.

Thereafter I would meet Chacha, either in Badda or at his home in Gulshan, where I also got to know Chachi and Nadeem. I had free access to Chacha's room, and when he couldn't greet me in the living room, I would sit by his bed and speak with him or listen to him. Thus, I also witnessed his bond with each of his family members, including the people who worked for him. He was always the same decent human being who believed in equality and never for a second misused his authority.

The day he became Emeritus Publisher, he picked me up from my home in Banani and I was the privileged one he tried out his speech on, enroute to the Bangla Academy to receive his prize.

There are several noteworthy memories, and among those one was in 2016. During one of our luncheons, I happened to mention that my mother was unwell so I might not be able to visit him the following day. Chacha listened silently, but later in the evening, he suddenly called me to say he wished to pay my mother a visit. I told him that he couldn't do that because we had no lift, and Chacha was wheelchair bound. But he wouldn't listen to me. He would go up the stairs at any price. Finally, I had to give in; together with his attendance I had to help him up to the second floor, where my mother lived. It was an arduous task and time consuming. He was exhausted, and I had tears in my eyes as I sat him in our living room where my mother was already present to greet him. They chitchatted a while. Going down was even more laborious for Chacha than climbing up, but he bore it with dignity.

Last year, after Chacha's recovery from Covid, Nadia arranged a video meeting for us, and I was grateful that he had beaten the virus. Little did I suspect that he would go so soon.

Chacha met my children, Navid and Tania, in 2015 when we were in Dhaka for the launch of my novel *Blame* during the Lit Fest. One single phone call from him brought them permission to visit our National Assembly building, designed by Louis Khan. It was an experience Navid, who is an architect, will cherish for the rest of his life. When Tania was elected as the editor of Stockholm's Royal Technical College magazine, Chacha was the first to send her a congratulatory letter, another testimony to his uniqueness.

I have tried here to portray Mohiuddin Ahmed as a human being. Many have already spoken of his role as a publisher, and I have nothing new to add to that – except that the Swedish translation of my novel *List of Offences* is going to be published in Sweden by another reputed publisher, who has been as quick as Chacha to appreciate it. I am saddened that Chacha is no longer here to experience the responses to the book which had brought us together.

Dilruba Z. Ara is an internationally acclaimed Swedish-Bangladeshi writer, novelist, translator, artist and educator. She lives and works in Lund, Sweden, and writes from there. To know more about her, visit www.dilrubazara.com

POETRY

Now As We Live In Two Different Cities

MD MEHEDI HASAN

We stopped talking earlier.
Yet there was a chance that
I'd run into you.
There was a chance of
seeing you on the Gollamari bridge
buying vegetables.
In red roses
I see your simple expectations
whenever I travel by the city flower market.
Rickshaws, autos carry me to
all the rides that we took, to our memories—
this city is the collage of our days.
Would it be easy for you now
to forget me?
As my love we now
live in two different cities.
Let me know.



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A Woman of Substance

TASNEEM HOSSAIN

She lies on the bed, a broken canvas.
Fragments and splinters of an old frame,
Faded colors of painted priceless picture,
Greys and white, crooked dark veins, wrinkled paper skin.

Frames abound on the wall's fortress,
A beauty to behold, ablaze with youth fire;
Larger than life passionate self-portraits,
One can only stand, stare and admire.

Brightly shining sapphire sea blue eyes,
Small pointed nose, gentle and sweet;
Strawberry melting soft sweet red lips,
Cascading down golden curls on ivory skin;

Swan long flawless neck, waist you could hold in a hand.
Strong, slender curvaceous body, fit for any outfit,
Flamboyant costumes, hair styles so chic,
Dynamic and coy, bold and brave all well portrayed.

Gazes across and beyond all from the wall,
Ravishing alluring smile for onlookers and all;
Balanced flawless, eight body postured, danseuse,
Dazzling, daring goddess, even deities would pursue.

Unequaled beauty everyone's craze,
Lies old and feeble on the bed;
Old she is with wrinkled skin,
Grey white hair, feeble bones so thin.

The man on the door stands with a note.
Stares in awe, what should he compose?
The famous ballerina, a living legend,
Wasted away lies on the bed. Broken!

The body on the bed moves with elegance and poise.
Looks at him, smiles and he gasps:
Sparkling, smiling bright blue eyes,
He stands there, bewitched and sighs.

Ah, the eyes!

Age has left her body a barren land.
Twinkling beautiful eyes, speak of no regrets,
An ocean of passion, pride and content remain,
A woman of substance, ages with grace.

Tasneem Hossain is a multilingual poet, columnist, op ed columnist and training consultant. She is the director of Continuing Education Centre, Bangladesh.

