

Tracing the Roots

SHAGUFTA SHARMEEN TANIA

When I look back to find the definitive moment when my writing habits took root, I can't find it. It is a distant vanishing point from which everything radiated, or maybe there was not a single point or node from where it all began. Maybe it was amma who started it, by telling us about her aunts – the proverbial seven sisters who needed to cry over trivial issues to bring the rain in monsoon; by teaching me the name of the muslin-fine rain called 'Eelshe-guri,' the rain that allowed the fishermen to catch eelish/hilsha fish. We did not have gadgets in those days, just a cackling radio and a black and white television entombed inside a wooden shuttered box. So we had stories. Why was there a purple fatty layer of meat under the hilsha fish's skin? Oh, it's because the deer lost a race with the fish and had to offer a pound of flesh, venison to the fish. The golden oriole was supposed to marry the moon, had the ritualistic pre-wedding turmeric shower too, but the wedding did not take place, so she roamed around with a yellow turmeric-smeared body. Those tears of seven sisters, those races between animals, and those unfinished wedding rituals merged like little trickles of streams in my bloodstream. With so many fictional explanations around,

why - anybody could become a writer! The radio broadcast Madankumar-Madhumala's songs, how their royal beds interchanged one night. BTV showed programmes like 'Hiramon' (talking birds belonging to the queens), that portrayed folk tales. By the time our TV

became coloured, it brought us Shelley Duvall's 'Faerie Tale Theatre,' a fantasy anthology. Stories rained down! So not only were the subterranean streams connecting and joining forces, they were rainwater that seeped through the crevices of my mind.

My life as a girl child in Dhaka was a lonely one; no community park to go to play in, just an all-enveloping pressure from parents, to excel academically. In those days, our parents kept a cage for dolls and toys to gather dust, which they called a show-case. However, books very quickly became my toys, and my eloquent playmates. Our verandas were large and wide; I remember devouring Anandamela, my favourite children's periodical in my

leisurely hours there, and sometimes staring at the simulacra made in the walls and cornices by algae-lichen-efflorescence for hours. Books were my time-machines, my confederates, my counsellors. Once books started talking, I started responding too. At first I just coloured the illustrations of people I loved (Alexander Beliaev's Amphibian Man was frog-green) and pinched the names of people I hated in the pages until they made holes. Nobody could ever say I was devoid of passion. Soon, painting and pinching were not enough, I needed to talk back. So I started writing.

My first stories from primary school had too many characters with rhyming names; well, Radio Bangladesh played endless sessions of requested songs and the trail of requesters' names always rhymed, so - I rest my case there. Those stories did not have discernible goals either, nothing fruitful ever really happened in them. But it made me giddy with pride if I could come up with a memorable simile or a metaphor. At school, I was inattentive, my habit of drawing and reading story books during lessons was unquenchable. Here I should mention my nana, amma's father, who indulged both habits. With a smile, he recited –

"Father, father, mercy take,
And I will no more verses make."
It was from Isaac Watts, trying to stop his father from administering corporal punishment for versifying things. One who was meant to do something will end up doing that anyway, nana commented. Others were not as kind as him. Nana and I had so many things in common, our boundless love for words, for classics and for synonyms.

For years I kept my stories hidden from everyone. It was fun to hide a whole world of my own... I knew exactly how Josephine March (Little Women) disdainfully looked at the rest of the clamouring lot. By the end of high-school I started sending them to be published. Some editors wanted to see me face to face, and when they saw a girl who had only just finished her first public exam, they asked – "Who wrote it for you?" I was accustomed to that question since year 08, when I started reading my stories on Radio Bangladesh. Once I had finished reading, revered novelist Selina Hossain would discuss the story. Like nana, she too had a warm, all-understanding smile, and it was a tremendous boost to be reviewed by her. After those programmes, people came to see who that girl was that read the story and unequivocally asked, "Who wrote it for you?" Well, they didn't know me, I thought to myself, they didn't know I was



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too proud to let anyone change anything in my drawing or in my writing.

While studying architecture, I naturally gravitated towards words and language; my head was a brownfield site, a haven for words growing wildly - that ground was full of runners that multiplied, and spread profusely. Somehow, words started to define who I was, to a greater extent than any architectural drawings.

I landed on the silver bells and cockle shells of the UK at the age of 28. A change of surroundings always means danger in the animal kingdom, and so it was, in my case. I was suddenly not a mediocre architect and an aspiring writer (relocation being akin to some scathing act of treason in the Bengali literary world); rather, I was just another national insurance number that began part-time work, a student doing post-grad while surviving on the breadline, a spectator stalking red buses displaying ads for Frida's exhibitions in the Tate (knowing the ticket-price would be equal to the food shopping for a week), another tenant in one of the mice-infested attics of North London, a hyperopic immigrant who saw the faraway land more vividly than the new-found home.

However, that tenant being an avid reader, lived very near to a public library. A fathomless pit of old movies and books, that library yielded a refuge for a mind already infested with words and imagery. I finished my unfinished stories, edited

them fiercely, and started publishing stories in Bengali again. Creating a full manuscript in English was still an unrealised dream.

I received the Arts Council Grant for translating and co-translating my Bengali stories, gathered some courage to submit a self-translated work to the BBC NSSA. My story made it to the long-list! A residency with NCW (National Centre for Writing) helped my learning too. The next year, I submitted a self-translated piece to the Commonwealth Short Stories Competition, and got short-listed. As well as feeling elation, these incidents also made me much more confident about my writing and translation abilities. As a writer, I believe that God is in the details, and I try writing in a way which gives the reader a visual, olfactory, and tactile experience of the words, and the story. My stories chronicle how our own lives can become a constant monologue - to which nobody is listening.

Born in Bangladesh and initially trained as an architect, Shagufta Sharmeen Tania has authored nine books. Her work has appeared in Wasafiri, Asia Literary Review, City Press and Speaking Volumes Anthology. Her short story 'Sincerely Yours' was long listed for the BBC Short Story Award 2021. This year, another of her short stories, "What Men Live By" has been short listed for Commonwealth Short Story Prize 2022.

My Defeat

TOHON

Prologue

Life is a battlefield. Every living species fights a different battle; therefore, I can only talk about mine.

There are two battles that I have been fighting all my life: outer and inner. I am winner in my outer battle but the inner battles leave me wounded and defeated.

Outer Battle

I was lucky to be born in a family where my parents could offer the basic necessities of life. In addition, I was blessed with three distinctions: discipline, diligence and motivation. And, then my fate took me – first to what was then West Pakistan (1966-73) where I did my college and university and then to the USA (1977-82) where I earned an MS and PhD in

mango seed in the hands of a farmer who sowed it in fertile soil. When the seed sprouted, he watered it regularly and protected it from the grazing cattle. In time, the tree provided shade to his cattle, allowed birds to nest and hosted blossoms with fragrant flowers for bees to suck honey. Finally, it produced scented, sweet mangoes for men, monkeys, crows, flies and even nocturnal bats to enjoy.

Inner Battles

While I have been born with positive traits, I have also always been a sensitive, sentimental and emotional man. But my serious limitations have been timidity, poor reflexes and ineptitude in handling tools. So, I ended up being an introverted passive thinker as opposed to being proactive and assertive.

Leadership is a quality I lack. I do not regret this, for it offered me the opportunity to spend time with my kids – to read them stories, play with them, take them to parks and drive them to after-hour school activities. It also gave me time to keep my journal up to date and, as my childhood habit, attend to household chores, raking dry leaves and gardening. I would go running with our dog, Spotty, give him bath weekly and keep him clean. While I failed to become a manager at work, I became a devoted family man.

But in my inner world I would endure agonies witnessing injustice and cruelty on this planet. The hate, anger and jealousy that I possess pained me too. The following episodes are excerpts from my diaries to reflect on my inner struggles. Cowardice, Dacca 1960
I am in Grade 4 at the cantonment primary school. I watch silently as my classmate Abul Bashir is bullied by a couple of other boys. I do not have the courage to stand up for him.

It hurts me today just as it hurt me then. This episode remains one of the most shameful regrets of my life. Famine, Sudan 1998
There is a serious famine in Sudan. The photographs of skeletal children with their out-of-proportion heads and

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bulging eyes are too painful to bear. Through their pain, I see my selfishness. Through their suffering, I begin to suffer. Destruction, Brisbane 2001

As I water a lone sugar cane that I planted a while ago, I realise that it is foolish to consider oneself non-violent on the basis of becoming a vegetarian. I ask myself: Do the ants that I stamp on or drown suffer the same pain that humans endure when they are crushed under tons of rubble or swept away by a tidal bore? I know they do, for I see them running for their lives.

Even if one lives on vegetables, God knows how many lives are destroyed as lands are ploughed, plants are watered and crops are harvested. I begin to see that living is rooted in violence, for life is sustained by life.

Violence, Brisbane 2001
It is cold morning. I step onto the lawn to get some sun. The plants, leaves and flowers, wearing dazzling dew, gently waving in the soft breeze, looks beautiful. Then it occurs to me that I am blocking the sun, a vital source of their nourishment. So, I move aside. But it is not enough. I am still blocking the sun, this time from the grass. And worse, I am crushing it under my feet. I return to the driveway, under the shade of trees. I prefer plants to block the sun from me, rather than I should block it from them. Killing Ground, World 2022

While the world struggles to cope with Covid-19 the New Year begins with the Ukraine invasion. The world news no longer focuses on the bleeding wounds of Iraq and Afghanistan. The ongoing casualties in Syria and Yemen have become the norm, while it is needless to mention the endless Palestinian saga.

Since Cain killed his brother Abel the Earth has increasingly become a killing ground. Man now has the capability to destroy the world many times over. Beyond the age-old bayonets, bullets and bombs, there is now a new paradigm in modern warfare: 'Gitmo,' 'WMD,' 'drone attack' and 'collateral damage' – meaning 'no innocent blood on my hands.'

Epilogue

As I reflect on my life, I realise that my instincts, impulses, and emotion control my reactions. On one hand, I suffer for the suffering world and, on the other hand, I suffer for my weaknesses. So, I ask myself: how do I know that the life on this earth is not another world's hell? Or, perhaps, at the beginning of time, an all-powerful Author writes an epic masterpiece. Once the writing is done, He brings the story to life such that all the fictional characters become real. I am one of countless fictional characters playing a scripted role and, my wound, my pain and my defeat are all part of that eternal, epic masterpiece.

Or, maybe, in the beginning, the omnipotent God, with His countless senses and dimensions, creates a seed – call it the 'primal seed.' He infuses it with life's essential ingredients: instructions, knowledge, code, memory and, above all, adaptability. In time the seed evolves and diversifies within earth's varied environment, giving rise to diverse species – plants, land and aquatic animals, birds, insects and humans.

Therefore, human knowledge and wisdom, actions and reactions, joy and suffering, victory and defeat are nothing but fruit, like the fruit in the trees – some are sweet, some are sour, some are bitter and some are even poisonous. But they all offer, in different ways, nourishment to the living world.

In that sense, Einstein's scientific achievement, Tagore's literary brilliance, Gandhi's non-violence and Hitler's brutality are all to do with the seeds they were born of. Like a river, life runs its course and all living species, big and small, beautiful and ugly and loving and fearsome are essentially equal. It all boils down to the primal seed God created in His infinite wisdom.

Tohon is a short story writer for The Daily Star and the author of Emil Joseph Burcik (2021), Life's Invisible Battles (2020), The Jihadi (2016) and The Landscape of a Mind (2015).



Petroleum Engineering.

My degrees offered me opportunities to work in the Middle East, Australia, the UK and South East Asia. Also, I have been happily married and blessed with three children and now two grandchildren. Metaphorically, my life has been a