

The General’s Time

“Men are tyrants, Julia,” her father used to say. “They don’t have to look it, wear it, or say it. They just are.” Her father boasted a tyrannical personality without being a tyrant. “I’m too strong for that. Weak men become tyrants. Men who couldn’t hold their ground without losing control.”

NADEEM ZAMAN

She woke up to milky streetlight spilled on the bed, his exposed neck in its creamy glow. The dark dip between the wings of the collar bones a misshapen waking eye. Keeping watch. She shifted the weight off her right shoulder to turn to the other side. The shoulder was pulsing a heart-beat rhythm of pain. Pain unlike the kind he had brought on a million of his people. A million pairs of hands that would swim oceans, leap mountains, brave war-zones, to switch places with her. For access to that throat. She landed softly on her left. It was time for the other shoulder to share the pain. His eyes opened. She was doing it again. Staring at him. It was short, but still long enough. When she did that when she should be sleeping, his hands twitched, his heart banged the drum of his panicked impulse to retreat. Neither his weapon nor his uniform was available. Not anymore. Folded on her dressing table stool, with the discipline of the barracks from half a century ago, were his simple button-down shirt, pants, and undershorts. He had only his bare hands to defend himself from hers. Only his tired old arthritic knees and ankles, and the throb of an ancient femoral injury from a riding accident when his body could take the abuse, to hobble him out of there. Timing was everything.



that from such a close and familiar source, a hand he knew, a finger he trusted, could be so destructive.

He felt her presence. He had long ago stopped closing his eyes in the shower or while taking a bath no matter how much soap got in and burned them, even with armed guards outside the door. Better men than he had seen their ends with greater odds at being safe. Eyes wide open were a man’s true friend.

“Tea for me,” he said. He wanted tea when he missed home. It had to be doused in sweetened condensed milk, too sweet to be tea anymore, almost dessert.

Hassan’s tea stall on a misty December morning with the old men huddled around an oil drum fire sipping the best tea on earth. The memory slams him like a mad bull. It hurts.

He could abandon caution to its service. Let them pluck him from the plane and parade him out of the airport to the army stadium – for the spectacle factor – and hang him, shoot him, draw and quarter him, burn his remains in the center of the field. All he would ask for is a cup of Hassan’s tea, his last wish.

But Hassan was long gone. He went to his funeral, prayed at his grave, fed beggars outside the cemetery, cried on the ride back to the presidential residence and then into his late wife’s arms.

He spooned the condensed milk like it was regular milk, waiting for the gluey, rich liquid to dissolve into his tea, then stirred the mixture until somewhere in his mind he heard the signal that it was ready.

“Maybe,” said Julia, “it’s safe now?” He shook his head. She had no concept, no idea, no inkling.

“Omar?” said Julia. “You know people. You have friends. You can get in touch with them in London. You can go and be back without anyone even knowing.”

The teacup held to his lips, he took the time to shake his head again before drinking.

“It saddens me to see you like this,” said Julia.

He laughed softly, very softly. The kind that made her prickle.

“You’re thinking about it,” she said. “More every day.”

“Do you always act on things you think about?” he said.

“Is that supposed to mean something?”

“It means Do you always act on things you think about?”

“Don’t look at me like that,” said Julia, placing beats between the words. “I will never be on trial with you. Not you, Omar. Never you.”

Twenty-six months existed between his life now and the one that didn’t meet a violent end.

“It’s over, sir,” his chief-of-staff blubbered over the phone.

“I won’t ask where you are,” General Qureshi said. “I won’t even ask why you left without seeing me one more time.”

“Sir...” the chief-of-staff sobbed, “my mother is ill. I don’t know if I’ll see her again.”

“Thank you,” said General Qureshi.

“Sir,” the chief-of-staff couldn’t go on. General Qureshi cut the line.

Across from him sat the British and American liaisons. Canada, France, and Germany had coolly crept away leaving their best wishes for General Omar Qureshi’s safety and well-being in messages delivered by aides no older than college interns, through third-party intermediaries in their respective foreign offices.

General Qureshi took it as a promising sign that he would live, for the time being. Time enough for the Two Nations to come to his – well, whether he liked it or not – rescue. Imperial masters, past and present, could be counted on to at least consider more ways to lessen the burdens of their guilt.

The American liaison cleared his throat. “General Qureshi, the US government is ready to offer its assistance for a short-term solution with your safety as a first priority. Sir, you understand our terms.”

The terms were for General Qureshi to accept his overthrow and the legitimacy of the interim government. They happened to be identical to the ones set forth by the interim government itself.

London bore a more palatable offer. “The government of the United Kingdom,” said the British liaison, “is ready and willing to offer asylum on humanitarian grounds and in accordance with the Geneva Conventions.”

Never failed, General Qureshi thought, like clockwork, never failed how swiftly the condescension followed the generosity. But they were offers and he needed to get out.

“Very well,” he said. “May I offer you gentleman tea? Or coffee? Or both?” The two men looked toward the sound behind the General, an intake of breath. The General, waiting for their answer, paid it no mind.

Nadeem Zaman is the author of the novel *In the Time of the Others* (long listed for the 2019 DSC Prize in South Asian Literature) and the story collection *Up in the Main House & Other Stories*. His fiction has appeared in journals in the US, Hong Kong, India, and Bangladesh.

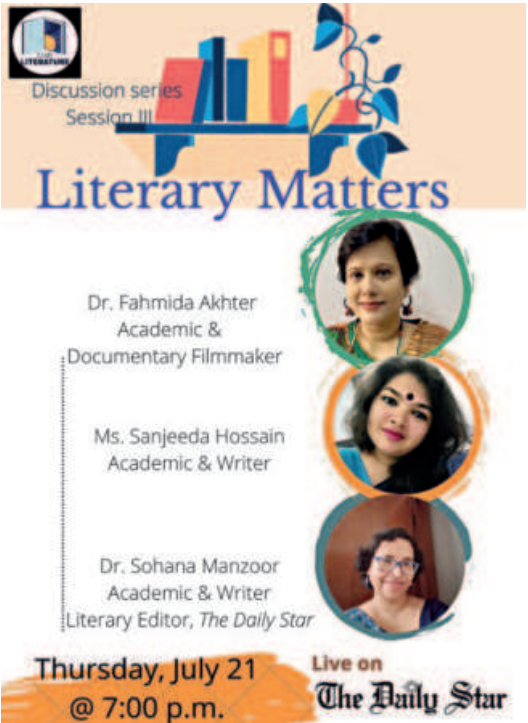
On Literary Matters

SHAHRIYER HOSSAIN SHETU

There are many platforms that integrate writers and poets. But somehow, academics are only thought of when one becomes a celebrity. Literary Matters, an online literary discussion series, was launched by The Daily Star in May 2022 with the thought of bringing in the up-and-coming academics who are also involved in other creative and intellectual areas. In the last three sessions of Literary Matters, a total of six such individuals were invited and the programs were livestreamed through Facebook and YouTube. Prof. Sabiha Huq of Khulna University, Noora Shamsi Bahar of North South University, Prof. Shafiqul Islam of Shahjalal University of Science and Technology and Mohammad Mosiur Rahman of ULAB were the four guests of the first two session. The host of the program is Dr. Sohana Manzoor, the Literary Editor of The Daily Star and an associate professor of English, ULAB. She is assisted by Ziauddin Al-Amin Shiplu, a member of the multimedia team of the Daily Star.

The third session of Literary Matters was held Thursday, July 21 and the guests were Dr. Fahmida Akhtar from Jahangirnagar University and Sanjeeda Hossain from the University of Dhaka. A professor of the Department of Drama and Dramatics, Fahmida Akhtar spoke of her deep-rooted passion for documentary film making which she started in the early 2000s when there were very few women in the business. She worked with many renowned figures like Subarna Mustapha and Jaya Ahsan. With a smile and a twinkle in her eyes she stated that if she were not in the academia, she would not have gone for her PhD. These days, however, because of her teaching constraints and publication demands, she has almost given up on film-making. But she hopes to return to it once she gets some free time for herself. She believes that the best part of teaching is being able to connect with the younger bodies of students that never ceases to amaze her. While addressing the issue of challenges faced by women, Dr. Akhtar mentioned that in a patriarchal setting a woman is constantly pressure of compromising work because of her children. She pointed out how raising children is a full-time work, but she like many other women is also a full-time teacher as well. No wonder that women have greater adaptability than men.

Sanjeeda Hossain, a young and enthusiastic faculty member of the Department of English, University of Dhaka, holds a more optimistic view of women’s position in society. She thinks that as more and more women are joining the work force, people’s view of women is also gradually changing. She herself is a working mother and has to juggle between work and parenting. She had always wanted to be a teacher and being able to teach means the world to her. Both Prof. Akhtar and Hossain are indebted to their mothers for their support in their careers in different ways. They admitted that while balancing work and



household activities are somehow doable, but it is very difficult to find time for their other passions; e.g. film making and writing.

At one point of the discussion, Dr. Fahmida spoke of the Liberation War of 1971, which continues to be a wound for the creative minds in Bangladesh. She concurred with the host that is the most significant and celebrated chapter of our history. But she also pointed out that the popular depiction of the War often angers her because the “Muktujuddho” has been appropriated by the male gaze. A woman mostly plays a sacrificial role in most films and stories on the Liberation War. Hence Dr. Fahmida claims that she is inspired by the ethos, but her creativity rises out of a deep sense of frustration.

In this connection Ms. Hossain spoke of motherhood and how it has a special meaning for her as she idolizes her own mother. At her workplace too, she is surrounded by powerful women who are, at the same time, very good mothers. She also referred to mother figures of literature from Jocasta to Gertrude and even Miss Havisham. For her, mother figures are powerful and complex.

Finally, the discussion took an intriguing turn – to podcasts, youtube, blog posts and social media. Both the guests admitted that it is impossible to remain connected to each other in this world without social media. As a researcher, Dr. Akhtar finds Researchgate to be very useful. While both Drs. Manzoor and Akhtar use Facebook, Ms. Hossain avoids it and prefers Instagram instead.

The program came to an end after the guests deliberated on their current projects, publications and other plans. Overall, it was an interesting discussion that focused on problems and prospects of profession and creativity.

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POETRY

Next Time, Tell Me

SUMAYA MASHRUFA

There’s no other way but to go numb.
But then the excruciating job is to make oneself un-numb.
How does one do that?
You have to be un-numb.
Otherwise, how can one write, dream, hope and hug the loved ones, whoever they might be!
How does one make them go un-numb?
If I could find someone in my vicinity, who also dreams up colours of emotions on a blank wall, I would ask that.
But obviously, I don’t find them.

Without telling me, they went extinct.
Without telling me, they went for a walk and never came back.
Without telling me, they ended up in a ditch somewhere.

Without telling me, they died last night, last month, last year.

Without telling me, they are crying holding the dead crows of the sky.
Without telling me, they are typing down words of love that are pretty unsellable

in this current economy.

Without telling me, they are closing their eyes trying to sleep, tired of loving the wrong ones.
Without telling me, they wake up in the morning, eyelids heavy with nightmares and nostalgia for things that never were.

Without telling me, they are crossing the overbridges, unloved.
Without telling me, they are on a park bench in the rain, unloved.
Without telling me, they are standing in the middle of the high noon traffic, unloved.
Without telling me, they are in adda with people talking over each other, unloved.

Without telling me, they are drunk, sober, stoned, abstinent, agitated, calm, chaotic, euphoric.
Without telling me, they expired.

So, I’m in a cult of one.
Here.
Where, now, fascists are fighting for freedom.

Sumaya Mashrufa is a writer and poet based in Dhaka.

