

ESSAY

What I write about when I write love stories

This essay is based on the panel discussion, ‘Does Anyone Write About Love Anymore?’, organised by the International Writing Program (IWP), University of Iowa, on October 14. Mashiul Alam participated in the panel as one of the 2022 Fall Writers-in-Residence.

MASHIUL ALAM

A long time ago, when I was a young writer who had just published his first collection of short stories and had just been married to a young and lovely woman, I wrote a love story in the first person, which created two unanticipated problems.

First, my wife stopped talking to me, and second, some of my friends who read the story accused me of humiliating the whole community of Bengali Muslims, being that the protagonist of the story, a Bangladeshi Muslim boy, fell in love with a Hindu girl from West Bengal, India, who disrespected his love.

Set at a university in Moscow during the final days of the Soviet Union, the story describes the complex relationship between the Bangladeshi boy from a middle-class Muslim background and the Indian girl from a Hindu upper caste and elite (Brahmin) family. This family had been forced to migrate to West Bengal as a result of the bloody communal Hindu-Muslim conflicts and the subsequent

the author’s “imagined” inferiority complex.

I promised my wife that I would never again write love stories in the first person singular, and then broke that promise again and again: I kept writing. Once they were published, I never reflected on them or tried to analyse them further.

But just a few days ago, when I was told to talk at a panel discussion about writing (or *not* writing) about love, I started looking back at my stories with an analytical eye and discovered that they were stories not about love but some other emotions and behaviours; some basic, intuitive, organic, crude, raw, and straightforward, some cultivated, subtle and complex. The above story was a tale of romantic infatuation and hereditary/racial prejudices.

A few years after I wrote that story, I wrote a novel. The main protagonist was a powerful female character who had divorced her husband for the sake of her professional career (she was a diplomat). Then she fell in love (or so she claimed) with a journalist, a gentleman of quiet and meek personality, whose wife had

meek and submissive person, realises that he should be more accommodating than his wife. She is naturally dominant and cannot help her nature. But his ego refuses to recognise his submissiveness as a defeat and comforts itself with this philosophy: jey shohe, shey rohey, meaning, those who endure, win.

So you see, this is not just a story about sincere or pretended love, but about a cold war between two intelligent, cultivated, modern human beings. Most of my short stories and novels about male-female relationships are like this. I did not write them this way; I don’t enjoy writing about conflict or combat; they become like this naturally, as if following the natural laws of the worlds I create. And so I came to wonder why: why are my love stories full of all imaginable emotions except love?

And—is it so?

Then I found a story that I wrote more than 25 years ago, where I found love. It was set in a very remote village in Bangladesh, where the people were very poor, malnourished, illiterate, superstitious and simple, like primitives. A poor young man marries a poorer girl; they love each other more than anything else in the world, so they are happy despite abject poverty. And then, one day, the girl fell sick with some flu, and there was no doctor, no medicine, and the food they usually ate to survive, rice, was impossible for her because she lost her appetite.

Desperate to help his wife in any possible way, the husband keeps telling her, “You need to eat! You need to eat! What do you wish to eat?” She names a kind of small fish found in the paddy fields and small ponds around the village. The husband runs off with a fishing net in his hands and after a while, comes back with a few fish to find his beloved wife dead. But he doesn’t cry; he stays silent for a while and then says to his dead wife, “Stupid woman! If you were going to die, why did you ask me to go fishing? Why didn’t you say, stay beside me?” Then the night comes. He goes to bed, falls asleep, and dies.

I think stories like this can only be imagined in those types of societies, where modernity has not yet reached, and the human soul has not been contaminated by “civilisation”. Romantic relationships between men and women in modern societies have lost the innocence essential to making a “love story” a story about love in the true sense.

Edited by Shabnam Nadiya

Mashiul Alam is a writer, translator, and Senior Assistant Editor at Prothom Alo. He is currently a Writer-in-Residence at the International Writing Program (IWP), University of Iowa.



FEATURE

Sister Library discusses menstrual and reproductive rights

KATERINA DON

The recent encroachment on female reproductive rights in the US has ripple effects across the world, particularly in countries that rely on donor funding. We will be seeing how the dismissal of Roe v. Wade will impact projects and lives in Bangladesh for a long time to come.

We chose this topic for the October 19 online reading of Sister Library because we felt that we were in a safe enough position to.

We have spoken to several group owners who have experienced mysterious moderation from Meta/ Facebook of posts related to abortion. One such group is a women’s only support group where members can ask anonymous questions. The ‘disappearance’ of information on safe abortions, after care, health issues related to abortion, is strange, unaccounted for, and dangerous.

According to a study funded by WHO, almost 90 percent of abortions in countries with liberal abortion laws are considered safe, compared with just 25 percent of abortions in countries where abortion is banned, or permitted under certain circumstances. This does not take into account the suicide deaths that are caused by fear or lack of after care.

For women looking for answers in Bangladesh, the choice is meagre. Abortion is not legal, but menstrual regulation is. You will face questions about your marital status. You might be turned away if the status is not right. You might be turned away without your husband. If you make it past the screening and get the procedure, don’t wait for aftercare. Don’t expect support. Go home. Don’t tell anyone.

Lucy Burns, the author of *Larger Than An Orange* (Penguin, 2021), captures the physical, mental and spiritual impact of an abortion on her, which lasted over two years. Her painful diary is speckled with compulsive-obsessive behaviour and self-destruction. It is a very hard read, and Sister Library will only be reading parts to illustrate how difficult this experience is, even in countries where there are robust medical systems, free mental health care and acceptance of female sexuality.

The reading, led by Shaveena Anam and Syeda Samara Mortada, is an effort to support female autonomy and safety.

Syeda Samara Mortada is a feminist activist, and a SRHR expert currently working as the partner-Coordinator of Bonhishkha, a feminist organisation in Bangladesh that works towards achieving equality of genders. Shaveena Anam is a feminist, facilitator and trainer, currently working with Acumen Academy Bangladesh. We hope to create a resource bank in Bangla of links, articles and references to support women as they face the decision, make the choice and recover from it.

Katerina Don is the curator of HerStory Foundation.

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Contradictions in a book on the Bangladesh Liberation War

KAZI ZAWAD

“The historian’s problem is to discover *what it really was* that happened. And he deals with it by offering an explanation of the form”, wrote William Dray of the University of Toronto in the last century.

Very few books on the history of the Liberation War of Bangladesh have been based on extensive research to explain the “what it actually was”. Most of them are based on interviews or memoirs, the latter often transcribed by a third person. Chandrashekhar Dasgupta’s *India and the Bangladesh Liberation War* (Juggernaut, 2021) promises to be one of the few countable outliers.

The front blurb raises the questions: Did India have a plan to break up Pakistan? When and why did it involve itself with the Bangladesh freedom struggle? Did India “win the war but lose the peace” by signing the Simla Agreement?

Dasgupta concludes: Indira Gandhi and her principal aide, Haksar, could not match the theoretical sophistication of their American counterparts, Nixon and Kissinger. But they “achieved success” by dint of their clear vision. Awami League’s victory in the 1970 elections gave rise “to hope as well as apprehensions” of the Indian policymakers. They feared that, if the Pakistan army decided to thwart the transition to democracy, a long drawn-out guerilla war would pass under the control of China or India’s own Naxalites.

Yahya’s decision to crush Bengali aspirations through a reign of terror was the death blow to the unity of Pakistan. It triggered a massive refugee exodus and increased India’s security concern. And so India decided to help the freedom fighters, but an immediate march to Dhaka was ruled out, because the army had no such contingency plan. India wanted to end the liberation war before the year end so that Chinese intervention or UN-imposed ceasefire would not divert it. India had no grand strategy from before but they marshalled all state power to create a coordinated ad-hoc plan.

The main war-strategy did not include capturing Dhaka. Only at a very late stage was that aim included in the war-plan by Lt General Jacob.

This book comprises 18 years of research. However, some parts of it question the credibility

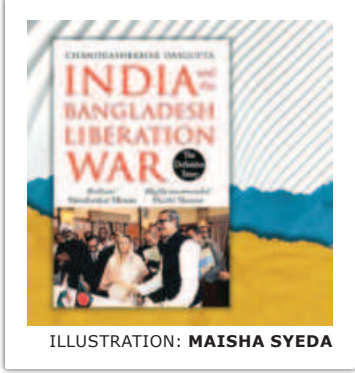


ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

of the research.

In the chapter, “Indian reactions- January 1971”, Dasgupta describes the doubts in the minds of the policymakers. He writes that the senior Ministry of External Affairs officials and RAW were divided on the issue of the separation of East Pakistan. In a meeting of senior diplomats and intelligence officers on January 6, 1971, “[o]nly the head of the Pakistan division (of MEA), Asoke Ray, agreed with Kao (head of RAW) to support the Bengali regulars declaring for independence”. The discord in the meeting was definitely no “documentary evidence”.

Then there is the question of whether India was entitled by law to give military assistance to the Bangladeshi guerillas—a point that has been raised in *Cases and Materials on International Law* by David Harris (Thomson Reuters, 2010). An International Court of Justice report in 1972 concluded that India’s attack on Pakistan under the doctrine of self-defence is not justified. But India could act on humanitarian grounds as the large-scale violation of human rights in East Pakistan created a continuous and unbearable refugee problem in India.

Dasgupta himself quotes Swaran Singh’s speech in the Security Council: “International Law requires that where a mother state has irrevocably lost the allegiance of such a large section of its people . . . and cannot bring them under its sway, conditions for the separate existence of such a State come into being”. All these nullify Haksar’s point. Yet Dasgupta accepts Haksar’s explanation without any mention of these, proving his research biased.

Most writers of books on the 1971 war have considered the day of surrender of the Pakistani army as the last day of the war. Dasgupta gives a detailed, day to day account of the signing of Simla Agreement.

A “what it really was” analysis of the 1971 war does not mean the description of the actions of India only. It should also cover their mistakes and failures. The cover of this book claims to be a “definitive story”, but its research and narrative are not holistic.

Kazi Zawad is a former Senior Producer at BBC Bangla.

SHORT STORY REVIEW

Can a city hold a home?

Shagufta Sharmeen Tania’s short story, “What Men Live By”, was shortlisted for the 2022 Commonwealth Short Story Prize. It is available to read on addastories.org.

MAISHA SYEDA

“What Men Live By” opens like a children’s story—the way *Matilda* or most Roald Dahl books would start out—with simple, everyday events and straightforward descriptions. Eventually, though, one line caught my attention and I couldn’t help but smile: “Here they referred to weather like this as four seasons in one day”. It reminded me of my brief stay away from home in Melbourne—where they said the same.

What I found out gradually was that there was more ‘telling’ in this story, as opposed to the expert-prescribed ‘showing’. “I was too young to understand the conflict between Safdar and my mother”, the narrator’s child self reflects matter-of-factly. Presenting, perhaps to a foreign reader, the nuances of her native culture and ideas that we take for granted, she writes, “Back in those days in our country, [insane people] were forced to marry to ‘cure’ their madness”. The distinction in the voice—one, that of the adult narrator and the other, of the child observer—comes through without hitches.

The narrator’s memories—and the makeup of the plot—revolve around a Mahua tree named Fulgharia, planted by her uncle, Safdar, in their Kalyanpur house. It disappoints and deprives the family for years by not “flowering on moonlit nights, nor providing ghee or deworming medicine”. Parallels of the ‘unfruitful’ tree are drawn with Safdar whose marriage, mental health, and eventually Safdar himself “[break] down”. However, the tree springs back to life and “large cracks show in the grey trunk, like the passage of time”, restoring a silver lining of hope for the family, for the young narrator, and the readers.

Upon being shortlisted for the Commonwealth Prize, Shagufta



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

Sharmeen told *The Daily Star* that her “story concerns the lost souls of a metropolis... those magnificent beasts that cannot find their places in a growing, sprawling cityscape”.

In that vein, the narrative also highlights Madhu, a beautiful, big white rabbit with ruby eyes, who had been brought from Belgium for animal testing. Despite being wanted by the narrator, the rabbit’s advances of friendship are rejected by the long term resident and housecat, Satin. Soon, “members of our household became impatient with Madhu’s ways” of digging holes everywhere. The narrator’s cousin eventually takes it home to a colony, where people come to visit it, even asking to adopt it.

The writer’s sentiment about lost souls shine through here—it projected onto my mind an image of a giant rabbit trapped in a maze of buildings and urban structures, looking for a home.

I found the narrative to be poignant, having stayed away from home for some time. It invoked a sense of nostalgia:

the setting of colonies, trees, pets; Kalyanpur felt known. An introspective piece written by a displaced adult shaped by the memories of home, from the perspective of a child trying to grasp at a carousel of events happening around her—there was a thread that bound her experiences to mine.

Yet, the events that she wrote about, although familiar, felt distant. To satisfy my curiosity I ventured to read the original Bangla version, “Manush Ja Niye Bache”. I then understood why I couldn’t quite connect to them.

Judging from its title, a native speaker would be able to tell that the English translation (done by the author herself) doesn’t quite have the same impact as that of the Bangla; there is big disparity between the Bangla title and the gendered, implied meaning of the title in English. In Bangla the story sounds closer to home. The tone in the original is more poetic, the characters and events more wholesome and endearing.

Maisha Syeda is a writer, painter, and the Sub-editor of Daily Star Books.