



‘FOR YOUR SAKE, O FREEDOM’ 1971 and Bangladeshi poetry

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One was an exile in one's own home. Under such dire conditions, Rahman composed the 38 poems of his book.

The manuscript was smuggled through Mukti Bahini channels to Kolkata, where the critic Abu Sayeed Ayub published some of the poems in *Desh*. For obvious security reasons Ayub chose a nom de plume for the poet:

Majlum Adib, which, significantly, means “persecuted writer”. After Bangladesh achieved independence, the first edition of *Bondi Shibir Theke*, comprising a selection of the poems, was published in Kolkata in 1972. The definitive edition later published in Bangladesh gives a richer and more varied picture of wartime Bangladesh, and repays careful study.

Several poems depict the desperate situation of those who were stuck in a city under occupation. “*Pather Kukur*” (“Stray Dog”), for instance, contrasts the anxiety-ridden people in a house who sit in “funereal silence” with the carefree stray dog that roams outside and charges after an army Jeep. The speaker can only wish he “were at least that stray dog”. There is a realistic account of the harassment people faced in the streets alongside a satirical portrait of Yahya Khan (“*Pratyahik*”: “Quotidian”); an elegiac description of a shell-shattered house (“*Ekhane Dorja Chhilo*”: “I Remember”, in my translation); and in a laudable exercise in empathy, a monologue of a fatally wounded Pakistani soldier who realises that he has been used as an instrument of tyranny (“*Jonoiko Pathan Shoinik*”: “A Pathan Soldier”).

While Shamsur Rahman was the most prolific of our major poets, his younger contemporary Shaheed Quaderi was the opposite. Still, his small but distinguished output includes five memorable poems relating to the war. In “*Kobita, Akshyam Astra Amar*” (“Poetry, My Useless Weapon”) he desperately exhorts his lines to “roar at least once like field guns”. “*Nishidhyo Journal Theke*” (“From a Forbidden Journal”) depicts a devastated Dhaka city and a martyred boy, yet ends on an affirmative note. “*Pakhira Signal Dai*” (“Signalling Birds”, in my translation) celebrates the freedom of the birds with “ID-less wings” as they soar above the occupied city. “*Blackouter Purnimai*” (“Blackout on a Full Moon”) looks forward to the return of those who have become refugees. “*Swadhinatar Shahar*” (“The City after Liberation”) presents a perceptive and melancholy picture of the ambiguous gifts brought by independence.

Muktijuddher Kabita (“Poems of the Liberation War”), edited by the late lamented litterateur Abul Hasanat, showcases 270 poems by 126 poets. It gives a fair impression of our Liberation War poetry, its recurrent themes and tropes, its tonal range, its prosodic predilections. The poets range from Jasimuddin, then the doyen of Bangladeshi poets, to those who were young only the other day. The veteran pastoral poet’s robust rhymed couplets in the poem “*Muktijoddha*” (“Freedom Fighter”) is a stirring and confident monologue that convincingly overturns the myth of the non-martial Bangalee. So do numerous poems in this anthology; collectively they become a chorus of heroic national self-affirmation.

The reader will find many such poems; here are a few more that arrested my attention: Ahsan Habib’s “Search”, Syed Shamsul Haque’s clever pattern poems, “Guerilla” and “Bostur Akar” (“The Shape of Things”), Fazal Shahabuddin’s “*Muktijoddhake*” (“To a Freedom Fighter”), Manzur-e-Mowla’s “Hey Bir” (“O Hero”), Khondkar Ashraf Hussein’s “Bowski Bridge”.

Faruk Alamgir’s “*Modhynanney Muktijoddhake*” (“To a Freedom Fighter at MIDDAY”) adds a realistic twist by ending on the note of disillusionment that overtook many freedom fighters after independence. Unsurprisingly, several poems invoke the leader of the independence struggle, for instance, Belal Chowdhury’s “*Abohoman Bangla o Bangalir*” (“Of Eternal Bengal and Bangalees”), which ends by mentioning “An imperishable red waterlily/ Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman”; his historic speech of March 7, 1971 is given effective mythopoeic treatment in Nirmalendu Goon’s “*Swadhinata ei shobdota amader ki bhabe holo*” (“How we gained possession of the word freedom”).

What about English language poetry and the war? Mention must be made of Razia Khan’s title poem of her first collection, “Argus under Anaesthesia” and “God in the Goblet”, from the same collection. The first is a heartfelt response to the crackdown, the second to the massacre of intellectuals. I have published three poems about the war, “Crackdown” and “Bangladesh 1971”, written just after independence, and a third looking back on that fateful year. I wish I had written more. I will conclude with a salute to Allen Ginsberg, whose “September on Jessor Road” remains unmatched as an evocation of the desolation of the refugee trail.

I do not know if there have been any critical studies of the poetry of our independence war. It would be a worthwhile subject for a PhD; I hope young researchers will take note.

Kaiser Haq is a Bangladeshi poet, translator, essayist, critic, and academic. He is a professor at the Department of English & Humanities, ULAB.

You said

Shamsur Rahman

(Translated by Fakrul Alam)

Notun Bazar was burning, burning!
Shops, stores, woodpiles
Piled up iron, timber, mosques and temples
Notun Bazar was burning, burning!

Parrot cages, copies of Rabindranath’s collected works, sweet-meat shops
Maps old documents all aflame
Just as bees swarm out of hives buzzing,
Flushed out with smoke from a fire
All of us flushed out by flames
All of us swarming and fleeing the city like bees
Scattering here, there, everywhere
Hugging her newly-born babe in her bosom a bewildered mother
Fleeing like a singed forest deer
In the distance bullets whizzing past, ransacking army jeeps hogging roads.
Shrieks
And screams filling streets. The two of us

Stunned into silence. Trembling, we embracing each other somehow.
You saying:
“Save me, save from this fire lit by barbarians
Hide me in the fold of your eyes
In the depth of your heart or within your ribcage
Suck me in an instant
In kiss after kiss.”

Notun Bazar was burning, burning
Flames here there everywhere
Lead bullets zinging past us like hail
You had said
“Save me!”
But hapless me not able to say even that openly!

Fakrul Alam is Supernumerary Professor, Department of English,
University of Dhaka.

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