

FICTION

The color of red hibiscus



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

The day the allied forces arrived the soldiers left the bunker with their hands up in the air. Neela hollered from their chamber saying that they were barely dressed and they needed some clothes. Later, in an army jeep, she remained silent when an officer asked her about home.

RAHAD ABIR

The Polish nurse at the rehabilitation center asks her to decide. Does Neela want to have an abortion or wait for the delivery? "You're almost seven months," the nurse says in English. "An abortion would be very risky."

Neela learns that she doesn't need to worry about the newborn. Some foreign organisations are working to take these babies to Europe or Canada where they will be adopted by nice families.

She is given two days to think.

In the shower room Neela asks theayah to cut off her lice-infested hair.

"Don't worry, child," the old woman says. "I will shampoo it every day and within a week your hair will look lovely again."

The ayah inquires about her family. Family? How would Neela know if they are alive or dead? The rehab office will write them a letter if she provides the address, the ayah tells her.

"What month is it now?" Neela asks. "December?"

It has been nine months away from home.

That night, as Neela strokes her swollen belly, she thinks about her last afternoon with Zahed; she make-believes that the little being inside her is the fruit of their love. That afternoon, weeks before the war broke out, they were walking along the dighi pond. Zahed told her they would get married the following year. An intern at Rajshahi Medical College, he was going to become a full-fledged doctor soon. Neela herself would go to college.

"Neela, say something," Zahed said, brushing the beads of perspiration off her upper lip.

She blushed, couldn't look into his eyes.

"You don't like the groom?"

Her cheeks dimpled with a tight, shy smile.

"Why are you smiling?"

"We'll have two kids," she said. "One boy, one girl."

Zahed shook with laughter. "We're not married yet, and you're thinking about kids!"

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On the night of Neela's 16th birthday, March 25, 1971, the Pakistani army began a crackdown in the major cities across East Pakistan. Three days later when her family was packing the necessary items to depart for their ancestral village, a jeep stopped in front of their home in Rajshahi. Her father, a homeopathic doctor, thought he had a visitor, but it was the city councillor, flanked by a pair of men.

"Doctor shaheb," the councillor said to him. "Neela knows English. She is needed to do some interpreting for the military."

Before her father could respond, the two men grabbed her hands and dragged her toward the jeep. She heard her mother screaming, and saw another man kicking her father to the ground.

The jeep raced down the empty streets, then pulled into the forecourt of a mansion, next to several parked military vehicles. The councillor said something to an armed soldier in Urdu. The soldier escorted Neela through a

passageway and deposited her into a small room. The door slammed shut behind her.

She banged on the door. "Let me out!"

The door flew open, and the soldier set the muzzle of his rifle against her head. "Another sound," he said, "and I'll blow your brains out!"

Neela stood by the window, sobbing, and watching the last gold light of the day. Her father, she thought, might be out now in search of her. If news reached Zahed, he would find a way to get her out of here.

Long after dark, she was lying in bed. Her eyes flickered with the sound of the door opening. A fat officer with lots of badges on his uniform walked in. She huddled under the coverlet.

The officer fired up his pipe and regarded her. "You're such a beautiful girl," he said. "Take off your clothes."

A week or so later, she was transported to a shabby camp. No single cell this time, but a hall-like space where 15 girls and women from mid-teens to over 40 were crammed into the room. The smell of unwashed bodies and a suffocating odour from the bathroom filled the air. Windows were shuttered with nails. A dim light bulb was hanging from the middle of the ceiling.

One night some drunken soldiers barged in and raped a Hindu girl in front of all of them. Eyes shut, Neela covered her ears to avoid hearing the cries. The following morning, the Hindu girl was found hanging from the bathroom window. She'd used her salwar as a noose.

Once the dead body was removed, two

soldiers came and confiscated whatever the girls were wearing, beating and stripping them all naked. They laughed and said, "That's how you will live now, you bloody Bengali whores." For a long while Neela could not look at the others.

Three days unclothed, and then petticoats and blouses—clothes too scant to tie a noose—are thrown into the room. And an order came not to close the lavatory door under any circumstances.

Neela, like other girls, scratched her tangled hair and clammy skin all the time. They had showers once a month, twice if lucky. No one spoke; they whispered. Sometimes even the hushed voices angered the guards outside the door.

Months later Neela and four other girls were brought to another camp. There, the old woman who brought their food talked in a low tone. Neela learned that they were in the city of Bogra, and it was September. That night they heard gunfire. "Bengalis are fighting," the old woman told them over breakfast.

Some nights the military men did not come at all. "The bastards are scared now," said a tall woman. "The Bengali guerrillas are winning." She said that her husband was an army captain. A week before the Massacre of March 25, her husband, along with many other Bengali officers stationed at Dhaka Cantonment, was transferred to Rawalpindi. After he disappeared from there, she was taken into a camp last August.

"Where is he now?" Neela asked. "He fled West Pakistan to join the

war," the tall woman said.

Late one night, amidst the sound of heavy gunfire, Neela and three other girls were moved to a bunker. As days passed, food became scarce. Some days they had only water.

One day a soldier who was fond of her told her that things would be over soon. "We've decided to surrender," he said. "We are waiting for the Indian allied forces to come and take us as prisoners. Just like you girls."

The day the allied forces arrived the soldiers left the bunker with their hands up in the air. Neela hollered from their chamber saying that they were barely dressed and they needed some clothes. Later, in an army jeep, she remained silent when an officer asked her about home.

"We can arrange transportation to get you girls home," he said.

Neela clutched her stomach. "I have no home."

"A rehabilitation center has been opened in Dhaka," he said. "We will send you there."

This is an excerpt. Read the full story on *The Daily Star* and Star Books and Literature's websites.

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Rahad Abir's debut novel Bengal Hound won the Georgia Author of the Year Award for literary fiction. He is the recipient of the Charles Pick Fellowship at the University of East Anglia and the Marguerite McGlenn Prize for Fiction.

FICTION

Aquatic deity

especially during her menstrual cycle, causing her mother endless anguish.

To protect Madhu from harm, her mother had kept a vigilant eye on her, yet the village had posed its own dangers. Some individuals, taking advantage of Madhu's vulnerability, had dared to lay hands on her body, causing her mother great distress. Unable to confine her daughter at home, she had allowed Madhu to roam freely but had watched her constantly.

Madhu's only fear had stemmed from a traumatic experience with injections, which had instilled in her a deep seated dread. At the mere mention of someone coming to administer a shot, she would cry out for her mother and flee back home to seek comfort in her embrace.

Thus, amidst the tranquility of village life, Madhu's journey had unfolded in a delicate balance between innocence and vulnerability, fiercely guarded by a mother's love from the harsh realities of the world.

One morning, Madhu had been playing with other boys and girls in front of Zaheer's house, eagerly awaiting Zaheer's visit with his family later that day. They had known that when Zaheer arrived home, he would bring batasha, or sugar candy, from the Pulerghat market—a treat that Zaheer's mother usually distributed among the children. That day, the group of village children had gathered in front of Zaheer's house, full of anticipation for the sweets.

Zaheer, who had earned a BA degree from Gurudayal College, worked as a teacher at a



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

school in Kishoreganj. He was married to a woman from a wealthy family in the city, and they had a son named Ayan, who was eight years old.

It had been the year 1971. On March 1, Pakistan's military ruler, President Yahya Khan, had announced the suspension of the scheduled session of the National Assembly, sparking violent protests among Bangalis. Political tension had gripped the nation.

Zaheer's school had been closed indefinitely due to the political unrest.

Zaheer's family had planned to travel to Shimulia village and stay there for a few days while the school remained closed. At that time, rickshaws had been the only convenient means of transportation to the village. As the rickshaw had departed from Kishoreganj without a hood, its passengers—Zaheer's wife, Nirjhar, and their son, Ayan—had ridden in the open air.

When the rickshaw had reached Pulerghat market, the rickshaw puller had raised the hood and covered it with a sari cloth. This precaution

had been taken because the villagers might gossip about Nirjhar traveling without a veil, implying that she lacked modesty while riding in an open rickshaw. Nirjhar, being a "city girl", had anticipated such gossip but had remained unbothered by it.

Zaheer had not gone in the rickshaw but had ridden his Mister bicycle alongside it. He usually arrived a bit earlier and spent time in front of a roadside shop or sat on a bench, chatting with acquaintances. When the rickshaw arrived with the rest of the family, they continued the journey. On reaching the Pulerghat market, the rickshaw had stopped in front of the mosque, under the shade of a jackfruit tree, for a substantial break. The rickshaw puller had closed the mouth of the mosque's tube well with his hand, drunk some water, and rinsed his mouth. Zaheer had treated him with roshogolla and tea with nimki from Gauranga's restaurant. He had also bought batasha from there for home. Ayan had been eagerly anticipating this trip ever since he had learned about it.

This is an excerpt. Read the full story on *The Daily Star* and Star Books and Literature's websites.

Abdullah Zahid is a Bangladeshi-American writer, librarian, and cultural commentator based in New York. He began his literary journey as a columnist for *Jaijaidin*, where his widely-read column "Manhattan Diary" was later published as a book of the same name. The second edition of the book was released in 2024.