Syed Shamsul Haq's "Khelaram Khele Ja": An English Translation (Carry on Playboy), with a Critical Introduction

Maliha Huq

202056005

Department of English and Humanities

Fall 2023

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A Thesis Submitted to

The Department of English and Humanities

University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh

In Partial Fulfilment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

MA in English

Maliha Huq

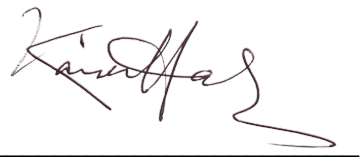
202056005

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Kaiser Hamidul Haq

Fall 2023

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

I hereby declare that this thesis is the student's own work and effort. All sources of information incorporated here have been duly acknowledged. This thesis has been submitted with my approval.



Kaiser Hamidul Haq

Professor

Department of English and Humanities

DECLARATION

This thesis is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature, and acknowledgement of collaborative research and discussions.

Maliha Huq
202056005
Department of English and Humanities

Dedication

I dedicate this to both my families—the one I was born into and the one I have recently become a part of. Your unwavering support and patience has helped me immensely along the way.

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the guidance of my supervisor Professor Kaiser Hamidul Haq. Professor Haq gave me inspiration to dive into the world of literary translations and valuable advice for shaping up my dissertation. I am extremely thankful for his precious time. I would like to add that Professor Haq gave me the opportunity to meet Dr. Anwara Syed Haq personally—a significant event which further inspired this dissertation..

I am indebted to Dr. Anwara Syed Haq—wife of Syed Shamsul Haq, notable writer of Bangla literature and a psychiatrist by profession—for giving me access to Syed Haq's study room, his books and paintings and anecdotes from their shared life.

My heartfelt gratitude to my Baba, my sister Mahima and my husband Rakib for dealing with my tantrums along the way. I humbly acknowledge all of your contributions. I cannot ever thank my Mamuni enough for all she has done for me; I love you Mamuni. My gratitude goes to my supportive Amma (mother-in-law), Abbu (father-in-law) and Rafiq (brother-in-law). Thanks to my ever so patient family for looking me after in every way possible.

I want to thank the Department of English and Humanities for supporting me throughout the MA journey.

Above all, I thank Allah, the Infinitely Merciful for blessing me with resolve and faith.

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Abstract

In lieu of a dissertation, my submission is a translation of a selection of chapters of Syed Shamsul Haq's novel, *Khelaram Khele Ja*. The translated chapters are preceded by an introduction providing the detailed picture of the literary-historical background and account of the author's life and literary career, and a critical analysis of the novel.

Introduction

Khelaram Khele Ja was published in 1973. This year marks the golden jubilee of its publication. According to Syed Shamsusl Haq, it is 'the most misunderstood novel of Bangladesh'. When *Khelaram Khele Ja* was first published in *Sachitra Sandhani* (Literary Magazine), many people called its writing vulgar and its content pornographic. Even today, this book somewhat bears that label of being controversial. It has gained equal popularity in Bangladesh and West Bengal, India. *Khelaram Khele Ja* is inspired by the aftermath of the 1947 Bengal Partition. The timeline of this novel is the 1960s, the transition period between 1947 (Partition of Bengal) and 1971 (Bangladesh Liberation War), specifically reflecting the socio-political condition of the sixties East Pakistan/ Bengal. It is a portrayal of the evolution of sixties' middle class and upper middle class Bengali society.

The seed of this novel was sown dormant in Syed Haq's consciousness for almost ten years before it germinated into writing in 1969, the year of the East Pakistan Mass Uprising. It is based on one of the many tragic anecdotes of Partition—a brother who fled to save his life, leaving behind his sister in the hands of communal delinquents. Syed Haq has mentioned, 'Stories and novels are not created in heaven but on earth. Novels are occurrences that could happen in our own life.'

The elusive nature of great literary works is not a new phenomenon. In the case of *Khelaram Khele Ja,* the protagonist Babar Ali is the misunderstood character. Babar seems like a seasoned womaniser of thirty-nine, wooing teenage girls—Latifa, Jaheda and Babli among others—to fulfil his sexual desires. Being a public figure and a popular TV host, he banks on his fame and charisma to fulfil this need. We notice this singular trait of his character till chapter 4.

In chapter 5, readers are introduced to Babar's philosophy in life: "Carry on playboy". The nostalgia of a lost home, a lost youth, a lost life hits Babar—life has only caused him deception and loneliness, and now he cannot ever trust anyone. Hence, carry on, playboy. Especially, upon close inspection, by the middle of the book (chapters 9 and 10), readers realise that Babar's character has more substance than that of a playboy. He has a disturbing past, scarred by the 1947 Partition. He was originally born and brought up in Bardhaman, West Bengal. But he had to leave his country behind because of the communal atrocities. Babar's parents were already dead. However, the most tragic part of his past was the rape and murder of his younger sister, Hashnu. Babar is often charged by his guilt-ridden conscience for leaving Hashnu to die while he fled and saved his own life. Consciously, he refuses to admit his crime. But the unconscious force of this suppression drives his entire life, forms his personality and influences his actions till death. There is an ambivalence within Babar, which is reflective of modern writing.

Khelaram Khele Ja has twenty three chapters in total. The title *Khelaram Khele Ja* has been translated to *Carry on Playboy* in English. For the dissertation, I have translated chapters 9, 22 and 23, and parts of chapters 10 and 11 of the novel. The rationale behind selecting these chapters is to uncover Babar's guilt-ridden psyche and why he behaves the way he behaves.

In chapter 9, we see a restless Babar who can go to any extent to seduce Jaheda. Jaheda is a college teen who stays in a girls' hostel in Dhaka. She is Babar's recent prey who will become useless once Babar seduces her. By the end of this chapter, we see Babar stumbling upon the business tycoon Feroz Mazma. Mazma offers Babar to accompany him to Shiyalbukka to have fun with tribal prostitutes. Babar refuses the offer because it does not go with his ethics.

Chapter 10 is a sequence of Babar's dreams showing his repressed desires and memories. The readers come to know about Babar's life in Bardhaman in this chapter. His string of dreams from the afternoon forces him to recall his father, mother and his younger sister, Hashnu. The insouciant womaniser suddenly turns into a lonely son and a defeated brother. Hashnu's screams haunt him.

In chapter 11, Babar drives to North Bengal with Jaheda. Babar puts on an act to impress Jaheda and make her comfortable, all of which is part of his scheme of seducing her. Babar finally gets hold of Jaheda in chapter 22. In chapter 23, they drive back to Dhaka. But this time, Babar is completely disinterested in Jaheda. He plans to look for his next prey. But in a turn of events, Babar gets stabbed in the back while saving Jaheda from rapists. In his mind's eye, Babar returns to the field in Bardhaman, where he left Hashnu behind. By standing up for Jaheda, he visualises protecting his own sister.

Syed Shamsul Haq (1935-2016) was born in Kurigram on December 27, 1935. He is revered as a 'Sabyasachi' writer (literally meaning an ambidextrous writer). His oeuvre is a confluence of poetry, novels, short stories, plays, nonfiction essays, translated works, song lyrics, painting and sculpting. He has written nearly two hundred books in his lifetime. He was awarded Bangla Academy Literary Award in 1966, the Ekushey Padak in 1984 and the Independence Day Award, Bangladesh's highest civilian award, in 2000 for his contributions to Bangla literature. His notable works include *Payer Awaj Pawa Jai, Nishiddho Loban, Khelaram Khele Ja, Neel Dongshon, Mrigoya* and *Nuroldiner Sarajibon*.

He is from the 1950s generation of writers—Shamsur Rahman, Al Mahmud, Shaheed Quaderi—who brought modernism to our art and literature. The 1950s was the golden decade for

our politics, music, painting and literature. The language movement of 1952 greatly inspired this generation of artists and they played a pivotal role in shaping the mindset of the East Pakistani population.

Primarily, he was a poet—an exceptional one at that, deriving inspiration not from Europe but from our own illustrious history. His modern poetry has shaped the secular collective consciousness of Bangladesh. His collection of sonnets, "Poraner Goheen Bhitor" (Deep inside the Heart), stands as his masterpiece in poetry. Its vernacular is reminiscent of *Punthi* (oral tradition of storytelling in rural Bengal) literature, folk tales and ballads. Possessing a formidable command of language and metre, his poetry unearths the heart of Bangladesh. Whether in his plays, fiction, essays, or translations, he has maintained this poetic essence.

Haq primarily focused on portraying the psychological ambivalence, the conflict between ideology and poverty, and the challenges faced by middle-class individuals in Muslim Bengal. He has written about how the people in Bangladesh changed over time in terms of society, politics, and ideas after gaining independence. He is one of the seminal Bangladeshi writers of 1971 novels: *Nishiddha Loban, Dwitio Diner Kahini, Brishti O Bidrohigon, Ek Mutho Janmabhumi, Neel Dangshon,* are some of them. The characters in his novels centred around our Liberation War embody the unwavering spirit of our nation, illustrating how Bengalis can resiliently confront even the most challenging situations. Syed Shamsul Haq extensively explored our roots, aiming to understand the origins of our courage and confidence.

He is equally successful as a playwright and columnist. Haq has laid the foundation of modern poetic plays in this country through his work, *Nuroldiner Sarajibon*. He has also

beautifully translated some of Shakespeare's plays, *Hamlet* being one of them. *Hritkolomer Taane* is one of his popular collections of essays and columns produced by Haq.

Only a number of Haq's work has been translated into English from his vast body of work. Two of his novels, *Neel Dangshan* and *Nishiddha Loban*, have recently been translated into English as part of the Library of Bangladesh series. Bengal Lights published these translations in a neat paperback. Saugata Ghosh translated the books, and Arunava Sinha edited the series. His selected poetry collection and "Poraner Gohin Bhitor" have been translated by Sonia Nishat Amin. Afsan Chowdhury translated his *Boishake Rochito Pongktimala* (Verses Composed in Boishakh), and Radha Chakravarty translated his novella *Gupto Jibon, Prakashyo Mrittu*.

Translating the work of a wordsmith like Syed Haq is both highly challenging and necessary. Bengali is a melodiously rich language and Syed Haq was a master of composing this melody. Finding proper English substitutes for Bengali words has been difficult at times. Especially, translating the Bengali idioms and phrases (*O ma, baap re baap*) and onomatopoeic expressions (*gharghar, shanshan,* etc.) have been challenging. However, I have tried to remain true to the sense and feel of the original while keeping readability in mind. The transliterated Bengali and Urdu words have been kept to a minimum—only in places where they reveal the necessary context. Their English meaning and explanations have been provided as footnotes.

The role of translation is becoming prominent by the day in world literature. The increasing anglophone readership is taking interest in knowing the culture and customs of non-English speaking societies through their literature. Translation has the power to bridge this gap. My aim is to translate the novel in its entirety in the near future.

Translated Chapters: "Carry on Playboy"

Chapter 9

Babar comes directly to the city's telegraph office from Patenga airport. He collects a form and jots down in a rustle—it was planned beforehand what message to write—

Express Telegram

Jaheda Islam

Saint Mary College Hostel

Iskaton, Dhaka

Father seriously ill, come sharp.

-Mother.

Babar counts the money and pays. He asks curiously, 'Will the telegram reach by today?'

'Yes, yes.'

'What time?'

'Roughly within two hours.'

'Thanks.'

Babar, feeling relieved, takes a deep breath after getting out. He chuckles, and lights a cigarette unhurriedly. Jaheda called this morning. He told her about this telegram, an effective excuse for leaving the hostel with a suitcase. Jaheda was astounded.

'No, no, please don't mention that my father is sick.'

'C'mon, he won't fall sick just because we're saying so. These are superstitions.'

'What if we get caught.'

‘Impossible. The telegram will be sent from Chittagong. And your father is currently residing there.’

‘Nobody can catch us out’, Babar did not let Jaheda get a word in edgewise, ‘You must arrive by eight AM tomorrow. Okay? I’ll hang up now.’

The only thing he did not mention is that Babar would go to Chittagong himself to send the telegram.

Babar takes a rickshaw. Everything seems so sweet, smooth and sightly. He is visiting Chittagong after a long time. Things seem to have changed. Signboards, people, vehicles, rugged roads, the breeze, the sunlight—everything. Where will he set out? Roaming around sounds good. Nothing to do anymore, nothing to worry about. Only leisure, only indolence.

Babar leaves the rickshaw and starts walking.

After returning to Dhaka tonight, he has to make sure that his car is okay. Tomorrow’s journey will be long. He will also refuel the car tonight and ask Mannan to wash it. Its maintenance is long overdue. The other day, while returning from Mymensingh, he noticed that the clutch made a noise when engaged—like a whimpering pup. He will meet Jaheda tomorrow. They will stay together in Rangpur.

Today, he will relax. Maybe he can sleep for a while. Yes, sleep. It is only a quarter past twelve now. His return flight is at nine thirty PM. Babar takes a scooter and reaches Hotel Shahjahan. He chuckles. Emperor Babar’s son was Humayun. Humayun’s son was Akbar. Akbar’s son was Shahjahan. Quite the connection with his name. Babar’s father named him after the Mughal emperor. If the old man were alive, he could live a comfortable life. All his life he was a schoolmaster. ‘Laziness is a grave enemy, lower your gaze while walking, sugarcane syrup

is too sweet—write down, children, work on your handwriting. Next up is mathematics—three threes are nine, three fours are twelve. Now English—The sun never sets on the British Empire.'

Huh! Truth is relative after all.

Babar puts down his name in the register. The receptionist unhooks a key from the board. Babar spots 'M D Feroz Mazma' written on one of the hotel room cards. That name is not so common.

He asks the receptionist, 'Is this gentleman from Dhaka?'

'Yes.'

'Businessman?'

'Yes, that's right.'

'Tall? Bright? With a pencil-thin moustache?'

'Yes, it's him.'

Babar goes upstairs and knocks on the door.

'*Andar aao*[1].'

Mazmadar's Urdu travels outside. Babar pushes the door to enter. Feroz is playing cards while reclining on his bed. There is another gentleman sitting in front of him and a lump of notes and coins gathered before them.

'Oh! Is that you? Come on in, when did you arrive from Dhaka?'

'Today. I had some work. *Teen patti*[2]?'

'Just for fun! Timepass. Meet my friend Nazmul Haq.'

The gentleman stretches his hand forward with a mechanical swiftness.

Babar adds, 'I saw your name on the board. When did you arrive here?'

---

[1] Urdu for 'Come in.'
[2] South Asian gambling card game

‘Four days now.’

‘For business purposes?’

‘Definitely. But that’s already taken care of. Now we are looking for something more non-business.’ Mazmadar narrows his eyes, ‘Meaning… you understand, don’t you? Just a change of air. Mr Haq told me that good stuff is available, which place was it again Mr Haq?’

Nazmul Haq makes a nonchalant remark, ‘Shiyalbukka.’

‘What’s Shiyalbukka?’ Babar asks curiously.

‘It’s a place. Short of Rangamati.’

‘Peculiar name.’

‘Yes. *Shiyalbukka*.’

Nazmul Haq yips out the name like a sly *shiyal*[3]. Then he refocuses on *teen patti* making a snorting noise.

Feroz Mazmadar adds, ‘Shiyalbukka has fantastic tribal squaws. Talk about thighs, jugs and body!’

‘I see.’

Feroz brays and gulps down the whiskey. Babar notices a whiskey bottle hiding under the teapoy.

‘Will this do, Mr Babar?’

‘What?’

‘Whiskey. And Shiyalbukka too, if you like. What do you say?’

Nazmul Haq gives Babar a curious side-eye.

Babar replies, ‘It's better that you go.’

---

[3] fox

‘Afraid, are you? What are you afraid of, mister? You are happily unmarried, after all. It’s us, the married scoundrels who are regretting. Each day appears with a new pestilence. Our temperament is praiseworthy. Domestic issues day and night. Not an iota of peace, not even in sleep. Who do I earn a bloody living for! What’s the place again, Mr Haq?’

‘Shiyalbukka.’

‘Yes, that’s right, Shiyalbukka.’

Feroz Mazmadar sways and spouts the name once or twice like a rhyme. Then he pours a glass of whiskey and hands it to Babar, ‘Let’s go, brother, please. We will leave this afternoon. Mr Haq has got a car. We will stay, enjoy the night and then return tomorrow.’

‘I’ll pass.’

‘C’mon, I am telling you. If you don’t believe my words, ask Mr Haq how extraordinary the stuff is. Pom pompom. Not your random stuff, these are cashmere socks, warm and cosy inside. What do you say, Mr Haq?’

Nazmul Haq puts his mind to shuffling. Then solemnly pronounces, ‘*Great* stuff.’

‘What did I tell you? Let’s get a thrill!’

Nazmul Haq hands the cards to Feroz Mazmadar. Feroz keeps them aside, ‘We can play later.’

Nazmul Haq starts playing by himself, exemplifying the mute and the deaf.

Babar interjects, ‘How is your business going Mr Mazmadar? We barely get to catch up in Dhaka.’

‘Ah, don’t you mention my business! I came here with something in mind. But in vain.’

‘Why, what happened?’

‘It’s not even two percent of what I imagined. I highly doubt it's even a percent.’

‘Carry on.’

‘Allah is Almighty, brother, He is. There will be no stability without autonomy. Only the Aga Khanis and Punjabis are reaping all benefits. We clowns are left with sucking our thumbs and dancing away. Sheikh Mujib might come to power this time around.’

‘So will we finally get autonomy?’

‘That’s his plan.’

‘I pray to Allah, brother. I am on Sheikh Mujib’s side. He is a fierce tiger cub, I am telling you. What’s your opinion, Mr Babar? Aren’t I right? Who else is so remarkably brave?’

Babar empties the glass with his last sip. Feroz Mazmadar refills it promptly, adding, ‘I am warning you Mr Haq, do not vote for anyone other than Sheikh Mujib, otherwise we can’t be on talking terms.’

Nazmul Haq replies in a listless tone, ‘I doubt if there will be an election this time.’

‘What do you mean?’ Feroz Mazmadar loudly slaps his thigh in excitement.

‘You are forgetting Bhashani,’ Nazmul Haq replies while keeping his eyes fixed on the cards.

‘Keep your Bhashani! We want autonomy. There is no other solution. It doesn't matter if things happen your way, or my way. It’s a dicey business. Don’t you get it? The country is still running because of Mr Sheikh. Don’t you admit, brother?’

Babar smiles, ‘I don’t understand politics.’

‘Ahha!’ Feroz Mazmadar gets pissed, ‘You might not understand politics, but don’t you understand basic rights?’

‘Keep quiet, keep quiet.’ Nazmul Haq utters in a low voice, closing his eyes. Then gives a big leisurely yawn. Babar notices that half of this gentleman’s teeth are missing.

Feroz Mazmadar falls silent. He swallows a gulp, spreads an innocent smile and tells Babar, ‘Keep your politics! Who discusses bloody politics? Waste of time. So brother, Shiyalbukka? Yes?’

Babar replies, ‘To be honest, I never go on these non-business trips.’

‘Well, you don’t need any! Chicks are available in the television industry.’

‘Tsk tsk, that’s not it.’

‘Very well, I also live in Dhaka. The other day I noticed you in cafe Aram with a beauty. She was young. Who is she?’

‘My niece.’

‘Don’t lie, mister. At least don’t lie to your friends. Any romantic affair?’

‘That’s nonsense.’

‘Then let’s drive to Shiyalbukka. No more objections.’

‘You guys should go.’

‘I know, I know, you don’t enjoy riding without romance.’

This statement unsettles Babar. Is Feroz Mazmadar right? If not, then why is Babar resisting sleeping with tribal prostitutes in exchange for money?

What relationship did he have with Latifa? What kind of affair did he intend to have with Babli? Why is he taking Jaheda to North Bengal? These girls offer him the same thing as the prostitutes of Shiyalbukka. Then why the hesitation?

Feroz Mazmader bursts into a belly laugh.

‘So then, aren’t I right?’

Babar stands up. He responds, ‘I think you are too drunk. I still need to finish my work at Agrabad. I’ll take your leave.’

Babar returns to his room and orders whiskey. He unbuttons his shirt, unlaces his shoes and ingests two neat pegs straight. He collapses on the bed and asks the waiter to awaken him at seven thirty, ‘If anyone looks for me, tell them I am away.’

Chapter 10

As the aeroplane flies into Dhaka's night-sky, Babar recalls his string of dreams from the afternoon. He has forgotten their order and details, mere floating images.

In one dream, his father was standing in the rain with an umbrella. Rainwater was rolling down his beard. He was drenched in his knee-length *dhoti*[4]. Father used to wear *dhoti.* Babar stood beside him, but Father did not speak.

Another one, someone cut Father's throat and fled. An unknown girl, with tangled hair, was crying beside him on the ground. Sheikh Mujib was walking past them. The girl held onto his feet and screamed something. Sheikh looked up to the sky like a boatman, shielding his view with a palm. Then he slowly vanished into the fog.

A dream—Babar's windshield was broken, entirely uncovered. Air was whooshing inside the car. Driving became impossible.

There were other dreams which he cannot remember now.

Yes, there is one more.

A lean lion was wagging his tail and moving about inside its cage in a zoo. It had an uncanny resemblance to Mr Kazi's[5] face. Babar urged the lion to eat a huge ripe banana. But it remained unheeding.

Another one—Babar kept flying from one sky to another, countless skies. Cloudless skies.

'Ladies and gentlemen, please fasten your seatbelts.'

Babar realises that he did not unfasten it after take-off. He stubs out the cigarette and asks for a glass of water.

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[4] a loincloth worn by men in Indian subcontinent
[5] Latifa's father

Dhaka's flashy lights below are visible through the window. The bird's-eye-view resembles a firefly-lit jungle from Babar's childhood. '*Maa go, amar Kajla Didi koi*[6]?'

He parked his car in the airport before flying off to Chittagong. A solitary car standing, at ten in the night. Just like me—Babar wonders. He touches the door handle affectionately.

Then he intentionally drives past Jaheda's hostel, to gaze at the one or two windows with lights still on.

After returning home Babar feels exhausted, wasted and upset. The bright squares of the hostel windows keep glaring before his eyes.

Babar feels despondent for no apparent reason.

'Why?'

He cannot figure out why. A helplessness keeps creeping up on him, an all consuming despondency starts drowning him. His soul is becoming restless, aching inside. He does not know what will relieve him.

Mannan enters, 'Should I serve dinner?'

'No.'

He lies on the bed and closes his eyes after Mannan leaves. A cigarette keeps burning between his fingers. A stray cat is meowing somewhere ceaselessly. Who knows what is bothering it?

In his childhood, when midnight neared and cats cried, Mother used to clasp Babar to her bosom. He would plop his head in her cold, soft bosom—the tingling smell of spicess soaked his senses with an intoxication. Mother's bosom cocooning his world. Like a half-empty marsupium, Mother's bosom would become his last refuge.

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[6] 'Oh mother, where is my Kajla *Didi* (elder sister)'; a line from poet Jatindramohan Bagchi's poem, 'Kajla Didi'. A young child from rural Bengal has lost her elder sister. So she asks her mother where her *Didi* is. She is too young to comprehend death.

Babar plops his head in the pillow for a long time. Tears are welling up inside, but do not drip. Babar is startled by this inhibition. He is dazed by his pathetic coldness—memories have no effect on him.

Babar stands up quickly, fetches the bottle of whiskey and drinks some with an immediacy. Then he looks for a glass and fills it with ice and more whiskey. He sits on an ottoman. His distrait hand keeps twirling the glass in a counterclockwise motion. He presses the glassy coldness against his cheeks, eye sockets, forehead, under his chin.

It poured heavily on Mother's burial day.

Babar squishes the cigarette under his foot.

Hashnu, his younger sister, is staring at him with wide eyes. She parts her lips to say something.

'Where are you taking Mother, Father?'

'To Allah.'

'Why?'

'Everyone must return to Allah, *Khoka*[7].'

'But why?'

'It's inevitable, that's why.'

'Why? Who is Allah?'

'He is everything. He has created and sent us on earth. And He will take us back. He has taken back your mother today.'

'Do people return there in sleep?'

'Yes *Khoka*, yes.'

---

[7] son

Haa haa haa.

Babar tries. Few tears drip down his eyes. He takes a long sip.

Babar dreamt of Father today during the flight. Rainwater was rolling down his beard. He was walking through the field, but he did not speak. Babar aches with pain. He starts walking back and forth to get rid of Father's memories. He stands in front of a calendar to glance at the pictures. He leafs through a magazine. He opens his wardrobe and fills his chest with the whiff of washed clothes. He drinks up and refills to the brim with ice and liquor. 'Go away Hashnu, leave. Leave, I say.' Hashnu disagrees. Hashnu spreads across his mind. The telephone suddenly rings. Jaheda? Latifa? No, Latifa or Babli?

'Hello?'

Someone with a deep voice asks, 'Is Mr Rozario there?'

'Wrong number.'

Babar returns to the living room. The telephone rings again. Maybe they'll ask for Rozario again. Babar ignores it. The ringing stops after a while as nobody picks up. An unbroken silence befalls.

'Go away, Hashnu.'

Babar flicks the burning matchstick. It goes out while swirling in the air and falls at a corner.

'O Hashnu, what do you want?'

Hashnu had two teeth with caries. She looked pretty when she smiled. Hashnu just smiled, like a soundless, prolonged, slow-motion cinema.

Babar feels ever lonelier. Memories of blood relations have unfolded an acute sense of emptiness within him. He realises that he has no loved one in this country. He has forgotten what

family means, so his family is repaying him with loneliness. He has avoided this feeling for a long time.

He gulps down water.

Haa Haa. I have nobody. None. Nothing is mine. Not this land, not this heart, not the people. 'Has the lemon tree bloomed in Bardhaman? Is the blind *fakir*[8] still alive, Hashnu?'

'How crazy of me, you can't reply. You are already dead.'

'Really?'

'No, I don't believe it, I think you are alive.'

'I looked for you so much, you just disappeared.'

'Did they torture you, dear?'

Babar can see before his eyes—the field was quietly overcast with dusk. As they walked, the thick darkness kept sticking to their feet like glue. Babar kept walking despite that, with Hashnu's hand tightly clutched. They walked for their life. They must reach home before nightfall.

He cannot remember now where they went. No need to remember it now. It seemed that Hashnu and Babar had been walking in that darkness since birth.

Someone was approaching.

Maybe not.

Babar looked behind to check. He could not see anyone but sensed that they were being followed. The follower kept stretching his hands ever longer to nab them. He pulled Hashnu on an impulse and hid behind the undergrowth by a pole.

Hashnu almost screamed, '*Dada*[9]!'

---

[8] beggar
[9] elder brother

‘Hush.’

Babar quietly lay low in the undergrowth with Hashnu. Mosquitos kept biting. It became intolerable. They gritted their teeth and almost stopped breathing to survive. Water hitting at the pole base made a clapping noise.

Two voices became audible from the opposite side, along the pole base. Not exactly voices, but breathing. One of them was grinding his teeth, possibly due to cold. It sounded like someone’s low-voice giggles at times.

What are they doing there?

Babar became alert. Hashnu looked at his face in the darkness. Either because of the starlight or fear, Hashnu’s face looked pale.

‘*Dada.*’

‘Hush.’

Babar held Hashnu’s mouth shut and became all ears to the sound source. He could feel a cold fluid rushing down his spine. The inside of his thighs got wet with warmth.

A murderous sound echoed.

Someone muttered, ‘Bloody bastard, are you Hindu or Muslim?’

The second guy replied with a hissing giggle.

‘Answer.’

The first guy threatened in a guttural tone.

The second guy cried, ‘Aaaaa’.

His pleading came out in hisses, ‘Hee hee NO, hee hee NO, hee hee NO NO.’

‘Shut up, you bastard.’

‘I have a wife back home, please. No, it hurts. NO! NO!.’

His screeches almost tore down the darkness before someone stopped it from falling apart. A rattling wheeze came out, like coolies releasing restrained breath while putting down sacks of paddies. Again, and again.

A pin-drop silence followed.

Babar was just planning to pull out Hashnu and run away when he directly encountered the first guy. He was holding a blood-lathered knife. An amulet glinted around his neck. Babar could not see anything else. He does not remember anything else.

All Babar remembers is running dementedly through the field.

The sky and air kept echoing with Hashnu's gut-wrenching screeches, '*Da-da*!'

Babar pours more whiskey.

Hashnu was never found.

Why did he flee without Hashnu? Why did he not fight? Why? Why?

Which one is normal? Fleeing? Or, fighting? It is idealistic for a fictional character to stand against crime. Such characters are applauded in cinema and praised by fiction readers. But only Babar knows how he fled with his own life. Will I be disgusted for being gutless?

Or, is idealism wrong?

People idealise the impossible.

I know they do not know, but I
who have followed so many times
the road from the murderer to the murdered
from the murdered to the punishment
and from the punishment to the other murder groping

the inexhaustible purple

that night of homecoming

when the Furies began to whistle

in the sparse grass-

I saw snakes crossed with vipers

Entained on the Vile Generation our destiny.

Babar has opened George Seferis' book after a long time. His eyes brim with tears while reading. He closes the book and strokes over its soft cover. It is covered with dirt. The dust jacket feels grimy. He brings out his pocket handkerchief and sweeps the dust cautiously. Then he puts it inside the almirah. Babar drinks up.

'Hashnu, do not ever come back. Go away.'

Hashnu does not go away.

Babar wants to look inside the almirah. Once he tried his hand at translating some poems. Where are those papers?

'Hashnu, do you want to kill me?'

Here they are. Yes, he has found a complete translation. And there are few translated lines from another poem. The rest are also here.

I did the right thing by fleeing. I will make the same choice a hundred times. What does it matter to anyone?

Babar folds the papers and puts them away in an envelope.

All bastards flee. But while writing, gossipping, lecturing, they say otherwise. I know all of it. I know everyone.

‘O Hashnu, won’t you leave?’

Babar throws away the empty glass. It hits the wall and rattles into pieces. He feels the tipsiness in his head. The liquor is doing wonders. Babar opens the balcony door to get outside. A rushing breeze washes his face. He looks at his watch. No, it is not that late.

Babar longs to meet someone. Anyone. He needs to talk to feel better. He wants to go somewhere else. If he goes inside now, Hashnu will follow him with her caries-ridden smile. And her gut-wrenching screams, ‘*Da-da*!’

Babar starts his car.

He swiftly drives off to the highway. After an uninterrupted drive, he reaches Jaheda’s hostel and parks nearby. He lights up a cigarette, leans his head backwards, stretches his legs forward and keeps gazing at the bright squares of windows.

His chest pitter-patters. Morning will arrive late. Jaheda will arrive in the morning.

‘Jaheda’.

‘Nice Jaheda’.

‘My nice Jaheda’.

This lilting repetition works like nectar. It puts Babar’s soul to rest.

‘Hat’.

‘Look at that hat’.

‘Look at that black hat’.

‘Look at John’s black hat’.

‘Look at John’s black hat on the table’.

‘Look at John’s black hat on Tom’s table’.

Huh!

Like this, from zero to one, one to two, two to three, three to four, and repeat. Let us begin from zero. From zero to me. From me to you. From you and me to him. From you, me and him to many.

‘Do many become us?’

‘I don’t believe in that.’

‘I admit, I don’t believe it. Go to hell.’

‘Go away, Hashnu. Leave now.’

Chapter 11

Babar stands at his balcony and looks at Jaheda paying money. It seems as if Babar forgot how to move; he stands perfectly still for a moment. Then he click-clacks downstairs and stands in front of Jaheda. Babar smiles. Jaheda does not smile back or talk, she pays the scooter fare. Babar walks to the balcony with Jaheda's small suitcase. Jaheda follows him. Babar opens the door for her. Jaheda enters swiftly and sits on the first seat she (encounters). Babar keeps the suitcase and smiles again.

This time Jaheda tries to smile back, but her eyes do not light up. She looks timid and nervous.

'Did you have tea?'

Jaheda shakes her head from side to side.

'Breakfast?'

She quietly shakes her head again. Babar pierces her with a sharp gaze and goes inside without a word. He had prepared Jaheda's breakfast beforehand. He checks if everything is okay and asks Mannan for hot milk. Babar boils water for tea. He steps outside, 'Come.'

Jaheda looks at him with inquisitiveness.

'Have your breakfast.'

Jaheda follows him quietly. She sits close to the dining table. Babar sits on the opposite chair, away from Jaheda. Jaheda eats a spoonful of cornflakes, a morsel of bread, and breaks a corner of her omelette. She takes a small sip of tea prepared by Babar from the cup.

Babar wishes to say, why are you eating so less?—but fails, as if he were hypnotised: the Jaheda he knows seems unknown to him. He keeps gazing at her lively soft face above the black dress.

Jaheda looks at him, then turns her gaze away and starts tearing the bread on her plate. But she doesn't eat, instead looks at Babar again.

Babar asks, 'When did the telegram reach?'

'Five PM.'

'I hope you didn't face any difficulties.'

Jaheda quietly shakes her head from side to side.

'What did the Hostel Super say?'

'Nothing.'

'How many days of leave did you get?'

I did not mention anything.

Jaheda sips her tea mindfully. Babar asks her, 'Do you feel sick?'

Jaheda shakes her head from side to side, but realises that shaking head is not enough as an answer. So she gently adds, 'No.'

Jaheda looks up and asks out of the blue, 'Others haven't arrived yet?'

'Who are you talking about?'

'Anyone.'

Babar understands what Jaheda is talking about. Jaheda assumed that this was a group tour. Babar wants to make an excuse for her but checks himself. There are times when telling the truth is better.

He replies, 'Nobody is supposed to come. Did you assume that others will join?'

Jaheda sits quietly, holding the cup of tea.

‘You and I are going. I had to go by myself. Every year, I go on a vacation for two or three days. I thought of taking you this time. It’s eight-oh-five already. We have to leave now or we’ll miss the Aricha ferry. Let’s get going.’

Babar stands up. Jaheda takes a moment before standing up. That moment feels like an eternity to Babar. Babar smiles pleasantly, ‘Go and sit in the car.’

Jaheda hesitates.

‘What is it?’

‘You carry on, I'll join.’

‘Oh, okay.’

Babar steps out and explains everything to Mannan. He forbids Mannan to leave the house even for a moment. And hands him some money. Jaheda comes out of the washroom. Babar overlooks the matter to avoid embarrassment, ‘Get in the car.’ Babar shuts the door, sits next to Jaheda, loads Jaheda’s suitcase in the back and starts the engine. He drives carefully to the main road. Babar asks her, ‘Where are your glasses?’

‘With me.’

‘Wear them.’

Jaheda opens her bag and wears the sunglasses like an obedient pupil.

Babar speeds up the car. As he speeds up, the breeze becomes fragrant with Jaheda’s sweet scent. Babar chuckles. They cross Residential School, then the shadow of an old tree. Is it sunny already? There is a field on the right, a double-storey house on the left, a row of houses, a bridge, Mirpur Bazar. The traffic light turns red as they reach Mirpur bridge. Cars are passing from the opposite direction. Babar lights a cigarette.

‘You are so quiet.’

‘Not really.’

Jaheda fixes herself and says for the sake of saying, ‘Why have they piled up sand here?’

‘They have carried the sand by boat! It is required for construction. See, trucks filled with sand are heading to the cities.’

‘Oh.’

Jaheda lowers her gaze. Babar notices that the people around are looking at Jaheda curiously. One of them is smiling from ear to ear and the blue comb in his pocket is peeking out.

The red light turns green. He slowly crosses the bridge and speeds up as he drives over the slope. The wind starts howling even stronger than before. The chilly wind blows Jaheda’s hair and her fragrance makes Babar dreamy . The fields, houses, ponds, boats, sunlight on both sides of the road start moving past them speedily. The tires make a crunching noise, no other sound is heard. Jaheda’s presence and the warmth of winter sun makes the car feel cosy.

‘Still quiet!’

‘No reason.’

They cross miles after miles. They cross the bridge over Karna river.

Babar breaks the silence, ‘Do you know how to drive?’

‘No.’

‘Do you want to learn?’

Jaheda gives a dry smile in response.

‘You can learn from me. Okay?’

‘Okay.’

At this point, the throbbing tension between them could be cut with a knife. Babar knows Jaheda cannot go back now. She is at the mercy of fate. Somewhere in his heart Babar feels empathy for Jaheda seeing her so quiet. He lets his feelings grow and asks, 'Are you worried about something?'

'No.'

'Did you sleep well last night?'

'Yes.'

'Do you stay by yourself in your room?'

'No. There are two others, Pappu and Sharmin.'

'You didn't eat your breakfast properly today.'

'I did.'

'Which grade is Pappu in?'

'She is with me.'

'Sharmin?'

'She is a year senior to me.'

'Don't you find Economics difficult?

Jaheda responds with a dry smile.

'Economics is very interesting. Everyone should study it. You will be surprised if I explain to you how Economics drives people's activities, belief system, achievements and perception.'

Jaheda smiles again without saying anything.

'Do you want gum? Here.'

Babar takes out chewing gum from his dashboard. Their shoulders touch. Jaheda shifts to the left.

Babar chuckles.

‘The gum is good, try it.’

‘Maybe later.’

They cross Savar Dairy Farm.

‘There is a beautiful timber forest ahead.’

After a while, they reach the forest. There are rows and rows of trees on both sides of the road. The road slopes slightly upward. Red soil. There comes a swamp, then a timber forest. A flock of birds is chirping.

‘Isn’t it beautiful?’, asks Babar.

‘Hmm.’

‘I will take you to Ranjandrapur someday.’

Jaheda takes out the gum from her mouth and carefully wraps it into a paper ball, then throws it away. Babar keeps driving quietly.

Far ahead on the right, there is the mausoleum of Ghorapir.

Babar asks, ‘Do you know there is a mausoleum here? There is also an old banyan tree. People have tied countless red ribbons to its branches.’

‘Why?’

‘Couples struggling to have a boy child make an offering to God by tying pieces of cloth to the branches. The green leaves and red ribbons look beautiful together, like a painting. Blind faith and superstitions are prevalent in this part of the world. I'll take you there one day.

Jaheda lowers her face.

‘I have a feeling, when you get married, your first-born will be a daughter. I like daughters. I wonder why people get upset when daughters are born. They mask their inferiority with fake smiles. There was a time when newborn girls were strangled to death. A story of a friend comes to mind. I visited his native village with him. I noticed a round grave there. It looked strange. I asked, ‘Whose grave is this?’

‘My grandmother's.’, my friend replied.’

Jaheda asks, ‘Why was the grave round?’

‘I asked the same question. My friend told me that there used to be a well there. His grandmother was young back then, a new mother to a boy child. A Qawali gathering was held in the house for some occasions. His grandmother was sneakily observing it from behind the matte screen of the inner quarters. When his grandfather found out about this, he bathed and clothed[10] her with new clothes and threw her into the well. Then he cemented the opening of the well. Later, my friend's father placed a gravestone there with her name. Just imagine, such a trivial matter.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes, I've seen the grave with my own eyes. Did I upset you?’

Jaheda does not respond. Biting her lips, she looks ahead the road.

Far away, there is an unfinished bridge in Nayarhat, approaching closer like an arrow.

Babar pulls over to buy a ferry ticket and returns. He drives carefully down the slope to the ferry port. The ferry was standing. The khalasis make inviting hand gestures to Babar. Babar says, ‘We are lucky that we didn't have to wait for the ferry. If we can catch all the ferries on time, we will reach Rangpur by four.’

[10] The three-step Muslim ritual of washing, shrouding and burying the dead

‘Will we stay in Rangpur?’

‘Yes, tonight. Then we will go to Dinajpur tomorrow. We will drive up to Panchagar and touch Bagura as we return. We will be driving past Bagura today but won't stop by.’

A coach from EPRTC is standing on the ferry deck. The ferry starts as soon as Babar’s car gets on the ferry. The ferry starts moving swiftly. Jaheda watches in awe how two boats are tied together to facilitate crossing over.

Babar says, ‘We are actually leaving Dhaka now.’

Jaheda leans back on the car. The strong wind of the river tosses her hair like fine tamarisk leaves. Jaheda looks tense. It seems as if she were thinking about life and death.

‘What are you thinking?’

‘Nothing.’

This is first-ever in this morning that Jeheda glows with an innocent smile. Babar is pretty surprised. This is the pure innocent appearance that he has since been praying for, many times, in many ways he wanted to speak to Jaheda but what has suddenly happened, what words has he spoken that settled like a tiny bird on her head and her face is beaming? Babar cannot fathom it. Still, in response, he tries to make himself beautiful as well with a broad smile as they ferry across the river.

‘What’s written there?’

Jaheda signalled her eyes towards the brass badge fixed on the chest of the Khalasis.

‘You don’t know how to read Bangla. The word *‘Janapath’* is written on it. It means highway. I will teach you how to read Bangla.

‘It is pretty difficult, you know?’ These days I understand a little.’ Jaheda raises her face towards Babar and says, ‘My father has sent me to an English medium school. My mother does not understand English. So, I can’t write letters to her. I only write in English.’

‘Does your father read the letters to your mother?’

‘Yes’, ‘But everything cannot be written keeping my father posted.’

‘You’re right’. Babar moves closer to Jaheda, ‘You see, I’ve been speaking with you in English all along. At times, I wish you could understand Bangla.’

‘I do. You can speak in Bangla.’

Jaheda speaks in Bangla for the first time since this morning.

‘Yes, I can. But I’m afraid that you won’t understand everything I say.’

‘Every word has an explicit, literal meaning. But to understand its implicit meaning, you have to relate to the country, the soil, the air and the hearts of the people. It runs in the blood. To grasp that meaning, you need to study Bengali from an early age. For instance, take the word *Sraban.* Do you know what *Sraban* is?

Jaheda smiles, ‘Of course! *Sraban* is the name of a Bengali month.’

‘But that’s not all. If you could read Bengali poems, listen to Bengali songs, if Bengali were a part of your memory, then uttering the word ‘*Sraban’* could have opened a world of dreams before your eyes. Perhaps, you could hear a solemn song and your heart would fill with deep passion.’

‘Will you teach me?’

‘Why not! I can do everything for you.’

Jaheda asks, ‘how many ferries left?’

‘One more. Then the big one, from Aricha to Nagarbari. And then the last one.’

‘Three more?’, said Jaheda off her round mouth.

After crossing the river, Babar gets inside the car and tells Jaheda, ‘Say something, I want to listen.’

‘What should I say?’

‘You have lots to say. Tell me about yourself’

‘I’ve got nothing to say.’

‘Still.’

‘I have been wondering.’

‘What are you wondering?’

‘Why am I here, what am I doing?’

‘You’re here with me, we’re talking, I’m driving. We’re in Manikganj now.’

‘I can’t believe what is happening. I feel I don’t know where I am.’

Babar responds ‘You’re between the past and the future, you will always remain there. Babar does not mention that these words are not his words. He silently watches the houses, villages, people, boats, village shops passing by. A bus, half a truck storm past swiftly.

Babar says, ‘Say something.’

Jaheda keeps quiet.

‘Do you want to hear a story?’

‘What story? Your story?’

‘Do you think I write stories? I have read stories. I’ll tell you a funny one, an anecdote. There was a laundry shop. The laundryman was young. He enjoyed gawking at women. One day, he was sitting on the counter. A young woman entered his shop. She was wearing a miniskirt. Mini in true sense—the mini skirt ended just below her waist. The woman noticed that the

laundryman was gazing at her with wide eyes. So she remarked, ‘What an insolent man!’ The laundryman replied confidently, ‘I am not insolent, madam. I was wondering, the clothes that are washed in my laundry do not usually shrink this much. Did you get it washed from the other laundry shop?’

Babar bursts into a belly laugh.

Jaheda responds, ‘Come on! How is that a story?’

‘I’ll tell you another. A madman was trying to eavesdrop on a wall. A policeman from a distance noticed this and wanted to check what was going on. What was the madman trying to hear for the past half an hour? So the policeman also stood beside the madman and tried eavesdropping on the wall. Nothing could be heard. The policeman kept pressing his ear on the wall for a long time, still he could not hear anything. The policeman got annoyed and said to the madman, ‘You fool, nothing can be heard from here.’ The madman replied with a smile, ‘Yes, I also can’t hear anything.’

Jaheda starts laughing at the joke, ‘Come on! This doesn’t happen in reality.’

‘I can tell you more.’

Jaheda smiles and puts another chewing gum in her mouth. Her pink tongue peaks out a little, then moves inside. Babar is fascinated, ‘Have another.’

‘How many at a time!’

‘Good point.’

Babar emphasises those words. Jaheda flushes with coyness.

Babar knows that this is the moment of quietude. He keeps driving in silence. The ‘Welcome’ signboard of Manikganj greets them and then bids them farewell.

Jaheda starts, ‘Didn’t you want to share another anecdote with me!’

‘Hmm, I was thinking, which one should I tell you?’

‘A beautiful one.’

‘Alright.’

Babar struggles to recall any anecdote this time. He goes through his memory to find one. He lights up a cigarette. Then he suddenly remembers one.

‘This is a long one. And it’s not funny, yet funny in a way.’

‘It’ll do.’

‘There once was a farmer in a country. He had a daughter.’

‘Don’t start a fairytale now.’

‘Why, are you too old for fairytales?’

‘Of course.’

‘Did your mother tell you fairytales?’

‘No, my father did not allow it. He had this notion that listening to Bengali would make my English weak.’

‘So, you have never heard a fairytale?’

‘Oh, I have heard many, in the convent school. Cinderella, Aladdin and the wonder lamp, Snow White and the seven dwarfs.’

‘I will tell you a fairytale today. This fairytale is for adults.’

This draws Jaheda’s attention and she sits up properly to listen. She tries to make it a point with her body language that she is not a child anymore, but an adult woman.

‘There once was a farmer in a country who had a daughter. One day the farmer told the King that his daughter could make gold out of hay. Just imagine, as if he met the king frequently.’

‘It’s possible in a fairytale.’

‘Not only that, the farmer’s words were false. He told this lie to prove his bravado to the king. After all, the farmer loved his daughter dearly. What trouble! Now, the king put the farmer’s daughter inside a room filled with hay and said, ‘There is a heap of hay here, if you cannot turn it into gold by tomorrow dawn, then you will be decapitated.’ The king then left for his palace. What a foolish man this king was! First of all, he didn’t even think, if the girl could make gold, then why was her father so poor. Secondly, if I were the king, I would have sat on my throne inside that very room to witness how hay is turned into gold. These kings from fairy tales have no curiosity.’

‘Keep your remarks aside.’

‘Oh, if we don’t make remarks, this will be reduced to a children's fairy tale. You are not a child after all.’

‘Carry on with the story.’

‘I will.’

Babar overtakes a truck and drives in a carefree manner while continuing his story, ‘The girl kept crying the whole night sitting atop the heap of hays. After all, she did not know how to make gold. Who could save her life at that point? All of a sudden, a one and a half hand long man jumped into the room. The man heard everything and said to the girl, ‘I will turn this hay into gold for you. But how will you return the favour? The farmer’s daughter replied, ‘I will give you this necklace.’ The man turned the hay into gold and left with her necklace. The following day, the king once again put the girl inside a bigger room with more hay and said, ‘Turn these into gold as well.’ The girl cried the whole night and the one and a half hand long man visited her room again. The girl gave away her ring this time. The following day the king became

overjoyed to see so much gold and said, ‘If you can make another room full of hay into gold, then I will make you my queen. But if you fail, you’ll be decapitated.’ Decapitation is a common punishment in fairy tales, isn’t it?

Jaheda laughs, ‘Luckily I was not born in that era.’

Babar continues, ‘The girl started crying that night as well and like before, the one and a half hand long man appeared. She told him the situation.’

They fail to catch any ferry at Tora port. The ferry was already across. Jaheda asks, ‘How long?’

‘The ferry will be here shortly. Now, pay attention to the story. The man asked the girl, ‘I will turn everything into gold, but how will you repay me tonight?’ The girl replied, ‘I have nothing left to give you.’

Jaheda says, ‘How can a farmer’s daughter have a necklace and a ring in the first place?’

‘Farmer’s daughters from fairytales can have them. This time, you are the one making remarks.’

‘Well, I am influenced by your company.’

Babar laughs, ‘The man asked for another thing this time around.’

‘What did he ask for?’

‘No, not herself.’

‘Oh, come on.’

‘He asked, ‘When you become the queen and give birth to a son, you will have to hand him over to me.’ The poor girl agreed. If you think about it, it’s tough for a mother to give away her son, still she agreed. This is what is called a woman’s wit.’

‘What did you just say?’

‘Nothing. The girl then got married. A year passed. She gave birth to a son. One day, she was putting her son to sleep in a swing. The one and a half hand long man appeared at that time and said, ‘Give me your son.’

‘What happened next?’ asks Jaheda.

‘The girl started crying, ‘I will give you all the riches in the world, but don’t take my son away.’ Just wonder! She is offering riches to a man who can turn hay into gold.’

‘Happens in fairy tales. Continue.’

‘The man’s heart softened seeing tears in her eyes. He said, ‘Alright, I won’t take away your son if you can tell me my name. I will give you three chances. If you fail, your son will be mine.’ The girl agreed. Then she sent for spies all around the country—a one and a half hand long man, who can perform magic, who can tell his name?’

Babar continues, ‘The spies returned with information after seven days and seven nights, ‘Yes, your highness, we have found out his name.’

‘What was it?’ asks Jaheda.

Babar replies, ‘The ferry has arrived. Let’s get on the ferry first.’

They get down from the car after getting on the ferry. Babar inclines on a railing at the backside of the ferry. Jaheda stands beside him. Jaheda’s black shadow has fallen on the water. The ripples of the water distorts her shadow. Babar leans slightly forward and touches her shadow, Jaheda’s shadow. Babar looks at her shadow intently. He diverts his eyes and notices that Jaheda’s dress is sticking to her thighs because of the wind—it has created the shape of a Y. Her chubby thighs look alluring. Babar imagines placing his mouth on her thighs, brushing against them like a cat.

Jaheda says, ‘What about the story?’

Babar snaps out of his imagination. He looks at Jaheda and smiles.

‘I will tell you after we reach. Let’s enjoy the view of the river.’

Jaheda looks at the river and realises that her shadow is mingling with Babar’s shadow. Then she looks at the sky. Babar notices flawless red veins underneath her chin. The sunlight is making her neck look translucent, as if Babar could see everything inside.

Her hair keeps fluttering. Jaheda brings a handkerchief from the car and ties it around her hair. Her locks fall straight over her forehead. Jaheda looks different in this new look.

Babar says, ‘This black dress does not suit you.’

‘It suits me.’

‘It was looking good in the morning. But not anymore. Blue suits you better.’

‘I have it in my suitcase.’

‘Is it so? When I told you the same thing the day before yesterday, you acted like you did not even know me.’

‘I found it out later in my hostel.’

‘Did your Hostel Super doubt anything?’

‘Why?’

‘What if you were caught?’

‘My father would have killed me.’

‘What if I steal you?’

‘Stealing me is not that easy, mister.’

‘You trust me that much?’

‘Don’t you think I do?’

Jaheda pierces Babar with a sharp stare, with an attempt to make him out.

Babar smiles and says, ‘Listen to the story.’ On the eighth day, the one and a half hand long man appeared again, ‘Tell me my name. I will give you three chances.’ The girl knew his name already. Even then she said, ‘your name is Girisringa’ showing her girlish nature. ‘You are wrong.’ ‘Udbhatbartul, then?’ ‘You are wrong again.’ ‘Your name is Der Angla.’ The man replies, ‘Yes, you are correct.’ Suddenly, he became very sad and fell dead.

‘What!’

‘Yes.’

‘I think the man had fallen in love with her.’

‘That you can say. Listen to what happens next. Let’s get down first.’

Babar holds Jaheda’s hands and brings her to the car. They remain silent until the car hits the road. Babar speeds up the car and continues, ‘One day, the king said, ‘Queen, you don’t make gold these days.’ The girl replied, ‘I was not the one who made gold. It was the work of a one and a half hand long man.’ Then she explained everything to the king. The king got furious. He held the queen by a fistful of hair and said, ‘Do you mean to say that you have spent three nights with an unknown man? He has asked for your son after a year. And even then you are trying to tell me that this is not his son, but mine? Do you think I am a fool?’

‘Oh dear! What was that?’

‘ This is a fairytale, my dear. Now, you tell me who is the father of the boy?’

‘How would I know?’

‘Just tell me. The man visited the girl for three nights and nothing happened? Was he happy with the necklace and ring only?’

‘Look, Look, there is a big bridge ahead.’ Jaheda tries to change the topic.

‘I want to know your thoughts.’

‘Are we going to Aricha next?’

‘Yes, you know what I think? The king is not that foolish. Der Angla is the father of the boy.’

Jaheda enjoys the outside view intently. Babar says in his mind, ‘You are also going with me for three days.’ In his imagination, he could clearly see himself lying over Jaheda, kissing her breathlessly.

Chapter 22

Babar lifts Jaheda and takes her in his arms after entering their room. As he drops her on the bed, she thuds like a ripe summer-fruit. Her back hurts. But she feels powerless before Babar. It seems to her that she had never known this man.

Babar moves like a scientist, getting ready to use the alembic for a chemical experimentation. Or, like a doctor, getting ready for operating on a body. Or a robber, eying the loot.

Babar unbuttons his sleeves and rolls them up like a player does before setting foot in the field. He unbuttons his shirt and sits beside Jaheda. He flips Jaheda over and she lies with her face downwards.

Jaheda wants to protest, but she is stunned by her own silence. She is preparing to die against her will, like a hypnotised fawn before the fiery laughing eyes of a python.

Babar flips over Jaheda and unbuttons her upper garment. The moles on her back form the constellation of Ursa Major. Babar traces his fingers over her moles. Then he makes her sit with the support of his shoulder and takes off her dress. Jaheda covers her chest with her hands and lowers down her face. Babar stands up and takes off his shirt. He throws his shirt over Jaheda's dress on the floor. Babar pulls Jaheda's legs up very quickly. Jaheda falls flat on her back abruptly. She quickly turns over to cover her chest. He pulls off her pyjamas like skin is pulled off from chicken thighs. Then he unhooks her bra, frees her from the straps and takes off his trousers. His blue underpants are visible now; one of his friends brought them from the UK. His friend comes to mind, but only for a moment. Babar throws the underpants over his bed.

'Jaheda'.

Jaheda does not respond.

‘Jaheda’.

Jaheda is lying on her chest, hiding her face with the pillow.

‘Jaheda’.

Babar turns Jaheda over her back. Jaheda spreads her legs like a pair of scissors. She is hiding her eyes—the triangle of her elbow placed between her eyebrows.

‘Look at me, Jaheda’.

Babar waits..

‘Look at me’.

Babar awaits her response.

‘Look at me’.

Babar does not wait anymore. He removes the white triangle of her elbow to open her view.

Jaheda closes her eyes.

Babar places his hand over her chest.

‘You are getting goosebumps.’

Babar caresses Jaheda from the chest to the left thigh once. Her skin becomes reddish with his touch. Babar gazes at the reddish spot waiting for it to disappear.

The reddishness disappears. Babar lies over his chest with Jaheda underneath him.

‘Don’t act stone-cold, Jaheda.’

All Jaheda can hear is the dripping sound of water from the bathroom. Babar’s voice does not reach her ears and her body benumbs.

Babar says, ‘Good girl.’

Then he enters Jaheda and says, ‘We will not go anywhere tonight or this afternoon, we will only make love. He enters deep into Jaheda and says with a sigh of relief, ‘We will leave for Dhaka tomorrow. Tomorrow, early in the morning.’

Chapter 23

Both of them keep silent during the journey. The crunching of tires on the asphalt road, the swishing of wind, the burbling of water and the noise of people in the bazaar drowns them.

The silence was nonchalant. But it intensifies as they reach closer to Dhaka.

They crossed Noyar Haat by ferry.

'No more ferries left. This was the last one. Now we will drive straight to Dhaka.'

His wristwatch reads quarter past five. Winter days are short. The daylight has started dimming. The fields are covered with smoke and fog in places. The trees afar look hazily sombre.

Babar actually did not leave the dak bungalow last evening, not even his room. The watchman brought dinner for them. Mr Pranab visited them once. Babar made him leave quickly. Mr Pranab said,

'I was passing by this place, so I thought of paying you a visit.

'Jaheda is not feeling well'.

Babar lied. Mr Pranab replied, 'Is that so? I can send Sushma for help.'

'No, no, please don't bother.'

'No way, mister! She has fallen sick after coming to our place and nobody will attend to! This can't happen.'

'Thanks a lot. Please don't worry about it. Visit us tomorrow, we will swap stories.

Babar knew well enough that he would leave for Dhaka the next day. He recalled Mr Pranab while crossing Bogra today. But Sushma's face was more prominent in his memory. Babar has already distanced himself from Jaheda by now. His heart is craving for a new

adventure, for someone like Sushma. He liked Sushma. Sushma has been on his mind the entire day. Babar kept whistling all along the way.

Dropping Jaheda to her hostel will set him free now.

Thank goodness that Jaheda is quiet. Babar has no interest in talking. He is feeling like the lorry drivers who deliver goods from district to district. He sits on the ferry like them, he chews betel leaf, puffs on cheap cigarettes. Manure filled sacks and piled up boxes, covered by tarpaulin are burning under the sun. He has no emotions and no sense of accountability: just pick and throw. Huh.

Jaheda's prolong quietness has started irritating Babar now. What is she thinking?

Babar squints at Jaheda once. No, he cannot understand her anymore. The girl he brought was a different person.

Has she really fallen in love with him? Is she thinking about marriage! All my lectures have become useless.

Babar cannot deal with it anymore. He breaks the silence, 'Hey, why are you so quiet?'

Jaheda gets startled and looks back at him. After this long, his words were the claps that caused the pigeons to fly away.

'I urged you repeatedly, but you refused to eat anything on the way. Is something wrong?'

Jaheda remains quiet.

'Very well, keep silent.'

Babar tilts his neck and keeps driving. He tries to whistle, but fails. He gets irritated.

Jaheda is wearing a pair of black pyjamas and a white dress. Probably, that is making her face look pale. Babar feels a tinge of sympathy for Jaheda for once. But he brushes off this

feeling immediately. He needs to meet Babli after reaching Dhaka. Babli is annoyed, but not to the state of a rigid Himalayan that does not melt.

Suddenly, Jaheda calls him, 'Listen'

'Are you calling me?'

'Yes'

'What is it?'

'Where are you taking me?'

'Why, to Dhaka. We are almost there. We will reach Dhaka in an hour or so. Then I'll drop you to your hostel. When will the gate close?'

'No.'

'What, no?'

'I won't go to the hostel.'

Babar smirks, 'What do you mean?'

Jaheda does not answer his question.

'Where will you go then?' Babar asks again, 'Should I drop you at your friend's house? Give me the address.'

'No.'

'What, no? No, you won't tell me the address? Or no, you won't go to your friend's house?'

'I won't go to anyone's house.'

'Are you kidding?'

'No.'

'Are you serious?'

‘Yes.’

‘Where do you want to go then?’

‘To your house’,

‘My house!’

‘Yes, to your house’ Jaheda firmly replied

‘You are being childish!’

‘Why?’

‘How will you go to my house?’

‘The same way I went to Rangpur with you.’

Jaheda looks straight into Babar's eyes. The gaze lacks firmness, it quivers—seemingly ready to recede.

Babar has never faced anything like this before. But hardly anything surprises him. Babar bides his time with laughter before responding.

‘We went to Rangpur by car. We can also return to my house by car. But is returning the same as rewinding?’

‘I don’t understand any of it.’

Jaheda shakes her head in disapproval adamantly.

‘I simply don’t understand.’

‘You are still young.’

‘Why don’t you want to take me to your house?’

‘That’s not the case, you can anytime. But now you will return to your hostel.’

‘No.’

‘I am taking you to the hostel.’

‘No’

‘Yes’

‘No’

‘It is evening already. Go back to your room and sleep like a good girl. And if you want Chinese food, we can stop by.’

‘No.’

‘Why are you repeatedly saying ‘No’?

‘You are leaving me behind.’

Jaheda fails to hold herself together. She lowers her head. Her body jerks with sobs and she bursts into tears. With each passing moment, her weeping gets more intense.

Babar keeps on driving. They have just crossed Savar Bazar. Like hopping objects, the exposed lights of the shops run backwards.

Jaheda’s tears do not stop.

Babar gets annoyed. He lights a cigarette and blows out the smoke in hisses. He wishes to leave Jaheda on the street.

No, he will not tolerate it. He has nobody. Nobody will ever be there for him. All sufferings are caused by these blind human ties.

Huh. Playboy.

He can clearly recall the scribble on the wall—carry on playboy.

This is his philosophy, his truth.

Jaheda suddenly makes a sobbing noise like she is being asphyxiated. Yes, she should die. No, he cannot deal with this anymore. Her sobs are getting ever sharper. Babar swiftly stops the car along the roadside.

There is a quiet field on one side of the road and a forest of jackfruit trees on the other side. Nobody is visible. It seems as if all the villagers left this place for some other destination. Babar has experienced something similar in his past—once he walked through a quiet field like this one.

Babar squishes the cigarette and asks, 'Now tell me, why are you crying?'

Jaheda bobs her head, not as a response but as an effect of her sobbing.

'Very well, keep crying. Tell me when you're done. I'll drop you.'

'You don't need to drop me anywhere.'

Jaheda suddenly opens the door and gets down.

'Hey, watch out, cars might come from behind.'

Jaheda has already crossed the road by then. Babar has an impulse to leave Jaheda behind. This is an impossible idea, he thinks. But he still ponders upon the thought.

Babar gets down from the car. He is more driven to pass water than to look for Jaheda. He crosses the road, walks into the jackfruit forest and selects a tree for passing water. Then, he notices Jaheda standing by a tree, leaning her head on its bark.

Babar goes near her, 'I don't like it when girls make these heroine-like, damsel-in-distress gestures.'

'What did you just say?' Jaheda looks back at Babar. There are no tears in her eyes, maybe her tears have dried or she has wiped them. Her face resembles a red coal in the twilight. 'Do you want to hear the truth?', asks Babar. 'You are being way too childish.'

'Who has given you the right to call me childish time and again?'

Babar feels an urge to slap Jaheda on her face. Instead he laughs, ‘It’s not a matter of right. You are proving my point. Otherwise you wouldn't have said that I was leaving you behind and then storm out of the car like this.’

‘Do you think that I’m in trouble?’

‘No.’

‘Do you think that you've bought me?’

‘Not at all.’

‘Do you think that you are free to do anything with me?’

‘Have I indicated anything like that?’

‘Is everything alright, brother?’ A voice speaks from behind and Babar turns back to notice. He sees three men. They are holding long knives and a bunch of jackfruit leaves, probably for feeding the goats.

The young man in the middle asks again, ‘Is something wrong, brother?’

‘What do you want?’, asks Babar.

‘Nothing.’ The man on the left replied with a smile, ‘We thought we heard a quarrel. So we came here.’

‘It’s nothing. You can leave.’

The man on the right side speaks. ‘He probably took his girl to a picnic and wanted to do the deed on their way back.’

‘The chick’s not bad either.’

Babar realises that it is getting dark. Things at a distance are hardly visible. The call for evening prayer reaches his ears. The jackfruit leaves rustle from a flurry of air.

Babar asks Jaheda, ‘Will you leave or not?’

‘Seems like the girl doesn't want to leave.’ The man on the left says while poking the man in the middle.

‘Yeah, it seems so.’

The man on the right says, ‘Let’s get going. We couldn’t care less about the charades of city people.’

Babar tells Jaheda, ‘Let’s leave’

He approaches Jaheda with his hand. The man on the left abruptly pushes away Babar’s hand.

‘Where are you taking her? If needed, we can drop the girl off at her destination.’

All of a sudden, the man jumps at Babar. He starts beating Babar before he could make out the situation. The other man covers Jaheda’s mouth. Another man suggests, ‘Hold this bastard while we do the deed.’

By then, the man who was beating Babar sits on his chest. He asks the other man, ‘What about me? What is my fair share?’

‘We’ll take turns.’

They take away Jaheda like a goatling in their lap. Everything happens within half a minute or less, within the twinkle of an eye. Babar was not ready for this. Surprisingly, Babar does not feel sad or angry, it seems to him that this is befitting. He feels that he can finally get rid of Jaheda now. He gets an urge to laugh as he feels that the man is needlessly holding him so tightly. Even if the man lets go of Babar, he will neither scream nor fight back.

The young man strikes Babar twice. He is sitting on Babar’s chest as if he were riding a horse. He lifts himself up and drops his body on Babar with a blunt force. A groan comes out of

Babar. The man says, ‘You can’t just take a hot chick with you and fool around with her all by yourself. We will take our fair share of enjoyment too, you imbecile.’

He again punches Babar under his chin. He spits on him and says ‘If you make a sound, we’ll slaughter you. The chic is as pretty as film star Husna. We’re not letting her go, not less than seven times. Seven times from the front and back. All of the city dwellers are bastards, all you do is party around. While we rot cropping leaves for cattle.’

He again punches Babar on the collarbone. Then he ties Babar's mouth with the towel he had around his neck. Babar starts blacking out. He starts losing his sense of time and space. It seems to him as if he had been lying down on the cold ground of the dark jackfruit forest with a heavy stone on his chest since birth.

The darkness suffocates him with its engulfing presence. Seems the world is frozen, it is close, yet far away; inside, yet outside; the thumping heart of a life that is seen, yet unseen.

Suddenly, Jaheda's scream pierces through the silence of the darkness.

‘Ba-ba.’

Babar imagines that he clearly hears a girl clawing at the carnish of her timid life to avoid falling in deep gorges, desperately calling out for survival.

‘No-no.’

A surge of energy rushes through Babar. He pushes the man on his chest with a single thrust and runs to the screaming sound.

He runs and screams, ‘Hashnu, H-a-s-h-n-u!’

‘Da-da! A-a-a!’

‘Ha-shu. Don't be afraid, Hashu.’

His face, arms and shoulders get scratched by the lower branches of the trees. He still keeps running and howls while looking for his sister.

Babar will not return home without his sister ever again.

He has a home. He has a family. Yes, he has everything. Nothing can be snatched away from him.

Babar finds Jaheda. One of the men is covering Jaheda's mouth while the other is trying to force her. Babar jumps at them. He pushes them away with his elbows and pulls Jaheda by her hands, 'Ha-shu, Ha-shu, come.'

The two men counterattack him by that time and the other man joins them.

Babar screams frantically, 'Get away from here, Hashu, run, run. I'll save you, Hashu. Don't be afraid, Hashu.'

He senses a blaze of fire run down his spine. His body becomes numb as if chugging down a bottle of whiskey in one go.

Jaheda sees with widened eyes that Babar has been stabbed in the back. She screams and steps back once. Then rushes to hold Babar. She pulls out the knife. It stuns the men.

Babar grabs her hand and starts running. 'Let's go, Hashu. Let's leave this place.'

Jaheda faints. Babar drags her unconscious body, 'Come, Hashnu. Hashu, come.'

But the strength in his body keeps draining. His weak body is unable to pull Jaheda. So he lifts Jaheda into his arms. His weak knees keep on running while he kisses her on the cheek, 'Don't be afraid, Hashu. I am here now, Hashu, I am here.'

He finally reaches his car.

He opens the door, throws Jaheda's unconscious body into the car and starts the engine.

His vision is getting blurred.

Babar turns the key.

The engine awakens with a roar like a beast. The car rushes ahead with lighting speed.

Babar speaks in a daze, ‘Hashu, I have brought you back. No need to be afraid. We are home.’

Babar further speeds up his car while waiting eagerly for his own home to appear like a circling boat in a whirlpool before the pair of bright streaming beams of white light through the darkness.

He feels that his destination is to the twinkling stars in the sky while driving over the Karna bridge.

His car abruptly turns to the right after getting bumped into a pillar of the bridge. The car falls into the river–mirroring the twinkling sky–with Jaheda and Babar in it. There was someone else, Hashnu.

Conclusion

My discussion in the introduction and the translation of the selected chapters of Haq's novel should give a vivid description of his significance as a writer. Haq's *Khelaram Khele Ja* as a contribution to Bangladeshi fiction has helped in breaking taboos and adding a new dimension to the literary genre of partition novels. I intend to translate the novel in its entirety because, as a millennial Bangladeshi, I believe that introducing Syed Haq's body of work to the growing global anglophone readership is the need of the hour.

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