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THE EMERGING LITERATURE OF BANGLADESH: THE FICTION OF HASAN AZIZUL HUQ

David Kopf

This article is an analysis of five stories selected by Hasan Azizul Huq as his best stories and translated into English by myself with the author's approval at the Institute of Bangladesh Studies, Rajshahi University, in 1976. They represent the author's composite view of Bengal: the people, society, culture and history during the last 12 years. How far they also express the attitudes of other Bangladeshi writers I cannot say. I can say that Huq is extremely popular in Bangladesh today and is considered by some critics as the finest prose writer in Bengali among all the living writers in his country. In 1968 he was awarded the Adamji Prize for his second volume of short stories, which were considered the best creative prose writing of that year. In 1971, the Bangla Academy awarded him their prize for the best contribution to Bengali prose literature, and in 1974 the Bangladesh Writers' Camp chose him as recipient for the Humayun Kabir Memorial Prize.

Not much is yet known in the United States about contemporary Bangladeshi literature nor about the writers themselves. Because the writers are mostly Muslim, do they adopt an Islamic point of view? Because writers like Huq openly acknowledge their debt to the literature and ideas of the largely Hindi-oriented Bengal renaissance, is the Bangladeshi literary movement simply an extension of that of West Bengal? Is the Bengali Muslim intelligentsia of which Huq is a member simply an offshoot in the diffusion of the Calcutta bhadralok (urban elite) subculture? Why is the influence which is largely Hindu or Brahmo evidently greater than that of Pakistan, which is largely Islamic? And
what is, perhaps, most intriguing of all is that writers like Huq are more chauvinistic about the Bengali language in relation to the nation state of Bangladesh than are West Bengali writers, who seem to have reconciled themselves to Bengali as a provincial language in the Hindu-oriented nation of India. Could it be that the Bangladeshis are rapidly becoming more Bengali than the West Bengalis?

While these questions are intriguing, I cannot address them in this article. Instead, I propose to illuminate at least one Bangladesh writer's idea of Bengal. I approach my subject with my own historical consciousness which emphasizes flux and process, conflict and change, either overtly in the behavior of people or inwardly in the minds or consciousness of people. Obviously, this approach betrays my own attitudes about the culture of Bengal and about cultures per se, attitudes which, fortunately, I believe I share with Huq. In fact, my ideological kinship with Huq has reinforced my conviction about the value of comparative cultural analysis, such as I attempt here, which utilizes literature to move from the surface of an alleged cultural system to a more profound realization of the universal human condition.

To set the record straight, the inter-cultural communication between Huq and me may be explained as a consequence of my sympathy for his work and vision, and not because we might share a common Westernized view of Bengal and the world. Hasan Azizul Huq was not educated abroad, nor was he ever invited to the University of Chicago as a visiting professor of Bengali. In point of fact, I do not think he has ever been outside of South Asia. He was born in Jabagram in the district of Burdwan, West Bengal 42 years ago. His education right through high school was in his native village. His B.A. and M.A. degrees were achieved in East Pakistan, where he migrated in 1954. And for the last 16 years Huq has been professing philosophy at Rajshahi Uni-
versity. Everything he has ever published has been in Bengali; his daily attire is native dress with a preference for the Santineketan style of Punjabi and pajama; his favorite food is fish and the bonier the better; he enjoys adda (endless gossiping and intellectualizing), and he has an excellent sense of humor; he prefers Rabindra sangit to those of Nazrul Islam, but enjoys both to the accompaniment of the harmonium; and he looks upon Rabindranath Tagore as the bridge between the two Bengals.

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One of the most significant aspects of Huq’s work which he probably shares with other Bangladeshi writers is that he has never written a single story about urban life and not a single one of his characters fits the Calcutta or Dacca bhadralok (elite) type. His heroes and heroines are the chotolok (common people) of agrarian Bengal, but they are not logical abstractions of rural folk performing their everyday acts of normality, stability, and solidarity within village society. On the contrary, they are uprooted by war, oppressed by a socioeconomic system they do not understand, victimized by natural catastrophes—all of which they struggle against in impotent defiance.

My analytical design follows the author’s own expectation that the intelligent reader will understand each story on three levels: the parochial level or locale, speech dialect, immediate geocultural and ethnographic situation; the cognitive level or how each character perceives his or her own situation; and the rational level, or the author’s commentary and explanation, the detached, omniscient role of the writer who explains events, experiences and phenomena through natural causes.

The first story, “Shakun” (“The Vulture”), is about the chase, torture and death of a blind and wounded vulture. The locale is the author’s village in Burdwan,
the principal characters a gang of boys obsessed by their hate of a large, foul-smelling bird which they pursue at great cost, capture and finally destroy. There is very little here of ethnographic Bengal. The dialect and idiom are rustic Muslim Bengali which, I am told by his colleagues, the author captures well in dialogue. It is the natural setting which reminds one of Bengal: the "patches of thick darkness through the branches of the tamarind tree," "the howling of jackals in the dead of night and the grating sound of hedge crickets."

The self-perception of the boys about their own unceasing rage and anger at the vulture is explained partly as a desire to escape from the dreary routine of their household tasks, and partly from a sadistic impulse to inflict pain on a predatory beast which feeds on the flesh of others. The boys also observe the difference between their own meager diet and that of the vulture which greedily devours everything in sight. Thus at one point the boys stuff whatever they find available into the mouth of the protesting bird:

"Come, let's make it swallow," Rafique said.
"Give me your stick."
"And you keep the beak open like that."
The vulture made a broken sound of protest. And the boys forced pieces of stubble into its mouth.
"Eat and eat unto death."

At some point the boys tire of their ritual and free the bird. The next morning they find it dead with a cluster of other vultures around it. Before dying it had vomited some flesh and liquid. The boys wonder why the other vultures are there since they do not eat their own kind. They see a new born baby lying on the ground and instantly realize why Zamiruddin and the widowed sister of Kazu Shaikh had met there secretly in the dead of night. A crowd of villagers had gathered to watch the vultures. All at once the vultures cover the infant and begin to devour it. The boys realize that the first feeble wound on the dead baby's body must have been inflicted by the dead vulture. The story concludes in the following way:
Gradually the crowd of men and women became thick. Only Kazu Shaikh’s widowed sister was not there. She was ill. But in the sparkling light of day she looked as pale as the dead vulture.

Clearly the vulture is a symbol as much for the boys as for the author. In this story, the boys perceive the vulture in the context of their own situation as rural children in a poor society. There is nothing to suggest a special cultural context. As for the author, the vulture is Shylock, the money lender, symbol of the greedy parasites of society, those who devour the resources of the world for the sake of devouring.

* * * * *

The second story, “Nagini,” which the author asked me to translate as “Enchantress,” is again an attempt to use a symbol to say something meaningful about the conditions of Bengali rural life. According to Huq, this is his only love story, Bengali style; it revolves around the unrequited love of a village girl for a village boy. In contrast to “The Vulture,” this story is quite rich in cultural detail. In Sadhu’s herculean efforts to win Hamida as his bride, we are introduced to rural courtship and marital customs, relations between a Bengali mother and her son, the sociology of Bengali wrestling, and the means by which serious crimes such as rape and seduction are handled by the village panchayat (council). Bengali culture is seen as community values imposed upon Saddhu in a series of humiliating events. These culminate in the supreme act of public scorn, when the panchayat decides to have him beaten by a shoe ten times as a gesture of punishment and shame.

But the way the characters perceive their own behavior does not correspond to the values of the community. Saddhu and Hamida react to one another as individuals guided by emotion and self-interest. Saddhu loves Hamida desperately but she is, at best, ambivalent about his love. It is her ambivalence which ultimately gives shape to the image of Hamida as a cobra-
like woman, serpentine in her twisting body beneath the sari, as an enchantress or she-devil who arouses Sadhu sexually but who leaves him frustrated. She encourages him to kill a wrestler but then turns from him in disgust when he breaks the man’s spine. She says she will marry him because she loves him but then marries a man from another village whom she does not love. She invites him to her hut for a rendezvous but then awakens the village with her terrifying screams of rape.

The author probes both characters’ understanding of their predicament through revealing dialogue. It soon becomes clear that Saddhu and Hamida are two very different people. He is a lover and she is a materialist. Neither is capable of appreciating the other’s point of view. The following exchange between the two exposes the conflict of personal values:

“If you love me and do not love him,” said Saddhu, “we should get married.”
“After that, then what?” Hamida asked.
“Nothing after that. You shall work, I shall work and so we shall spend our lives together somehow.”
“Oh, you are my great lover!” she said swaying her hips, her eyes full of angry sarcasm. “Do you know what presents I shall get from them at the marriage ceremony? How many ornaments I shall get? How many saris? And what shall I get from you? Maybe today’s meal? But what about tomorrow’s? You are a man who will always suffer from want. Is it your idea that I shall spend my life as your mother’s maidservant?”

The author’s own conception of the situation is not far removed from Hamida’s. To Huq, Saddhu’s image of Hamida as an enchantress represents a hysterical man’s use of supernatural imagery to conceal the cruel realization that love and marriage are luxuries which abysmally poor men like himself are not fated to enjoy. Hamida, though she is a living being, whose body can be touched and hair stroked, remains the elusive sex fantasy for Saddhu’s class of rootless, landless proletarians. The following interaction between Saddhu and his mother is revealing in this context:
Sadhu thought how little he had given to his mother to relieve the burden of her long suffering. He could never feed her properly. Arriving home late that night he found her fast asleep. He awakened her gently and asked, "Have you eaten, mother?"

"Yes, son, I have. Now you take your food."

"No, you are lying to me. No food has been eaten by you."

His mother responded by beating her forehead out of desperation. "Oh, God!" she cried. "Please let me die! Your father left us one-third of an acre of land when he decided to join his ancestors in heaven."

Next she turned on her son, swearing at him less from anger than from a deep, painful suffering. Then at last she restrained herself and said, "Why don't you eat first and then make your inquiry?" Resigning himself, Saddhu ate the meal which was not even enough for one person, then lay down on his tattered mattress in the dark hut. He could see fragments of the sky between the cracks in the thatched roof, through which some sleepless stars seemed to be gazing at him with a melancholy look. The sky reminded him of a sari he had promised Hamida, sparkling with stars and silky. How he longed to see Hamida dressed like an angel. Suddenly, his gaze shifted downwards where rats raced along the mud walls of the hut. Saddhu turned over on his left side and tried to sleep. He did not know when at night he awoke to the touch of his mother's rough-skinned hand on his brow. He saw the ghost-like appearance in the dim light of the lamp she held in her left hand.

"My son, why are you not sleeping?"

"Mother, you aren’t supposed to know."

"Do you want to get married?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"No. Please leave me alone."

* * * * *

"Amrittya Ajiban" or "Through Life to Death" is Hasan Azizul Huq’s longest, most powerful and most popular piece of creative fiction. I know of no other work in contemporary Bengali literature which so masterfully integrates the life and mind of a Bengali peasant with the natural surroundings and agrarian system which is Bangladesh. Huq’s descriptions of the golden countryside, of the cloud formations before and after a monsoon rain, of the world in and around the
Bengali swamp or bhil, of the Bengali village during the twilight of a summer day, capture a composite image of Bengal which is refreshingly unsentimental but loving, brutally realistic but intensely poetic. In one scene, Koramali, the hero, stands in the field watching the sky darken and wonders when the rain will fall. Then suddenly he feels the drops on his back and in an instant the downpour is so hard that the villages disappear and he can no longer see his son working nearby. Writes Huq:

From the blinding rain which made him an island in the grass, this Bangladesh of countless, mighty rivers—Padma, Meghna, Brahmaputra—and her 1000 years of bitter struggle to survive against natural calamity seemed to fall with the wet rain and pelt his body like a subtle and lyrical music.

This is not simply the story of a peasant's struggle to survive the cruelties of nature, of fellow men and man's fate, it contains a poor man's reflections on the human condition to transcend his marginal existence. Again, Huq presents us with a cobra as a symbol of all the monstrous malevolence a tenant farmer of Bengal encounters in his daily routine. Why, Koramali ponders, must he feel guilt everytime he sees his 75 year old mother commit herself to hard work with her swollen rheumatic knee? Why does he own less land than his father and his father less than his father? Why was life so precarious that he could not guarantee his son an inheritance of even a single bigha of land? Why had his wife grown so old so fast that, when she stood naked before him as she dried her sari that day, he could feel nothing for her? Why did a man labor so hard if, in the end, what he produced was not sufficient to survive? Often, Koramali's mind tires of these questions and he succumbs to fantasies which made him feel better and inspired him with hope. On one occasion:

Koromali gave way to day dreaming and saw before his plot blossoming into cultivated land, weedless and productive... In this way he could imagine the land emerging from the blood and sweat of himself and of his son. He could see the rice coming out of the rich dark soil. The dream ended. He ordered Rohomali to
collect the weeds cut the day before. And taking the hoe in his own hand, Koromali started to destroy a thick patch of impene-
trable bush which had grown around the coconut tree.

At this point he first encounters the snake. His anxiety returns and he senses that this snake is no ordinary animal. He is shocked to learn that he can read his fate in the pale, cold eyes of the snake. The cobra's hood begins to weave upwards and downwards "binding tightly the threads of Koromali's past, present and fu-
ture." Just then, the ducks in the bhil quack, the dogs bark, the jungle is alive with bird calls and there is a flash of lightning as the wet young trees are momentar-
ily ablaze with light. The sight which Koromali then witnesses convinces him that there is no point in struggling against his fate:

The cobra's head shot up and could be seen above the distant village tops. The hood grew as large as the bhil while the hoof mark in the middle of the hood seemed as stainless as the life Koromali wished to lead. So Koromali was completely over-
shadowed by all his hopes and desires. From a distance he could see the snake's mouth open, exposing dark, horrible teeth and with its jaws it devoured not only Koromali's own hopes and aspirations but the village and the greater human society as well.

When Koromali returns home and finds his mother wailing uncontrollably and his wife raving like a mad-
woman, he realizes that catastrophe has already struck him and sealed his fate. In the cowshed he finds his young, white and strong bullock lying on the ground as still as stone. It had been bitten by a snake, and lies dying. At first he is calm in the face of disaster, but suddenly he collapses before the weight of the awful truth:

The black future full of starvation loomed before him. He could think of the prospect of having no land to cultivate. He said aloud, "I do not have enough arable land of my own. My land is hardly sufficient to support me and my family. Because I had a bullock I could farm the land of others and get half of what I produced. Now that my Dhala has died what in Allah's name am I to do?
The snake is not only Koromali’s private symbol of a malevolent nature but the village’s as well. They realize that the snake aims to devour them all. Feeling remorse for Koromali and cursing their own fate, the villagers organize a collective snake hunt in a promethean struggle to rise above what appears to be the will of the supernatural. They fail, a man dies of snake bite, and all they share for their efforts is to look despairingly at the four inches of the cobra’s tail. In the story’s conclusion, Koromali mortgages his land to a landowner for 300 takas in order to buy another bullock. Hope rises again in his mind though he curses himself for surrendering what is rightfully his son’s inheritance. How else will he and his family have bread to chew in their mouths for the rest of the year? As the rain begins to fall on the soggy path back to his home, Koromali mutters to himself, “My son, my son, don’t get angry. Really, I have not given up my land. In February, I shall pay it back and I shall give you the land.” But at that moment, as Koromali reaches the pile of straw under the coconut tree, there before his son’s eyes a bolt of lightning followed by thunder as explosive as an erupting mountain strikes him down. The story closes with Koromali slumped against the stacked straw, his hair, beard, and eyelashes gone—burned to a crisp. His son lifts his father’s corpse with tearless eyes, and heads back to the hut as the night descends and the rain continues to fall.

In this story, the author does not carry his own rational outlook very far beyond Koromali’s personal vision. One wonders whether a change in land distribution through Stalinoid, Maoist or AID machineries can really alter the course of Bengal’s tragic rural history. In the farmer’s conversation with the landowner, Huq has a marvelous opportunity to show how the system is at fault. But the owner himself seems to be a victim. He is a small owner, only relatively better off than Koromali. There is no villain other than the snake, nature and supernature combined. And if the snake is merely a
symbol of the owner class, then how do we account for its defeat of "the organized peasants with weapons in their hands." After all, Huq is not an apologist for the landowning elite.

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The two other stories by Huq deal with the war of 1971 and its aftermath. His major themes are the liberation struggle and the impact of communalism. These again are stories about survival, but not against poverty or natural calamity as much as against the inhumanity of men. Huq's integrity as a creative artist is nowhere more apparent than in these stories which are totally free of political propaganda. The stress of war has left few illusions for the principal characters; nevertheless they cling to life, to hope, to self-respect.

The first story, "Krishna Pakhsher Din", "Days of the Dark of the Moon," is about five young Bengali guerillas who cross a vast bhil in order to elude capture by the Pak army. Once more, Bengal is seen largely through nature imagery rather than through special reference to idiosyncratic cultural descriptions. Huq, by the way, is a very good hunter, which may explain his Hemingway-like sensitivity to nature. Though Huq does not admit to having been influenced by Hemingway, the comparison is apt when one considers that his narrative and dialogues of men at war is far less wordy and pretentious than the usual Bengali style of writing. Moreover, Huq has departed from his general technique of distinguishing what his characters think and feel from the omniscient rationality of the author. I believe that Huq has, in this story, identified with one of the characters, Zamil, the leader of the guerilla band. Zamil's leadership rests on precisely those qualities of clear-headedness and pragmatism which the author interjects by means of his own commentary into most of his other stories.

Revenge, not heroism, has brought the five together.
Zamil, son of a pious muslim with a long beard, watched Pak troops shoot and bayonet the old man; Rahaman and Matiur had similar experiences. Sahit was a student at Dacca University who narrowly escaped the army’s genocidal campaign against the academic community. Ehkram is the youngest, a 14 year old boy who can barely carry the captured Chinese rifles on his shoulder. Killing and the art of avoiding death has erased their former individualities and transformed them into a fighting unit. But at the point when the story begins, each of them has grown weary at being pursued and feels helpless against a large, well trained and well equipped army. Should they surrender and face certain torture and probable execution? Or stand and fight? Should they flee across the bhil and take refuge in a nearby village?

The rapid blast of fire from a 303 rifle behind them compels Zamil to make a hasty decision. They enter the swamp and retreat to the village. He has convinced them that they have no choice but to try to get away, recoup their strength and fight again another day. Matiur, the former day laborer with enormous chest muscles and powerful arms, volunteers to carry two rifles. Zamil is the first to step into the water:

He felt it hot on the surface but cold underneath. Then he could feel the mud give way as he sank up to his ankle and then he was knee deep in mud. A bullet raced by and snapped a twig off the banyan tree where they had stood a moment before. It fell into the water. He recalled how when the rains start, the bhil fills up with water, and the water turns yellow from the soil. Then the rotting grass and leaves begin to stink...

Ehkram refuses to join them. Zamil reasons with him, then changes his expression and tone and threatens to shoot him. "You'll talk and tell them all about us," he says. Removing his revolver from his waist belt, Zamil roars at the boy: "I can't stay here all day. Now get off your ass!" Realizing his helplessness, the boy wipes his eyes, removes his shoes and steps into the water:

The five advanced splashing awkwardly like drunks through the
mud. The hot sun burned their flesh, the slimy mud cooled their feet while drops of hot, dirty bhil water left a stinging sensation in their eyes. Though they felt a cool breeze against their skin it brought no relief. Sounds of distant gunfire intensified the fear of a stray bullet in the back.

Huq sustains the tension of men under fire throughout the story. The meaning is existential and in no way political or ideological. The extreme situation draws each man outside himself revealing the human being underneath. Only once does Zamil make a speech with a positive revolutionary idea to offset the meaninglessness of all the endless violence. Squeezing the locked trigger of his rifle, Zamil says:

> We finally have the opportunity to take weapons in our hands. I don't know how others will make use of this opportunity but I know I am not fighting to establish another government to oppress us. We shall destroy these sons of bitches. We live to smash their skulls in. Then maybe this country will belong to the people.

But this is peripheral to Huq's apparent intention of using man's inhumanity, which reaches its apex in war, to generate its antithesis, the humanity, which lies embedded in the soul of every man and woman. This accounts for the most powerful scene in the story—the butchering and genocide of a village which the five men must witness quietly, from bhil. Each man sees his own private atrocity. Zamil, for example, watches two soldiers strip a woman nude. The sight of her long thighs brings out a sense of compassion which in battle is a luxury no soldier can afford. He strains to see her face and the expression in her eyes, but she is concealed by her long black hair. Zamil watches a soldier push her into the dry drainage canal at the side of the road and then jump on her. He could see the soldier jerking his head from one side to another, and he could hear her hysterical screams against the man's boisterous laughter.

Later, when the slaughter has ended and the Pak troops depart, the guerillas climb on shore. Matiur is carrying Ehkram who has died from a stray bullet in his
head. He wants to bury his fallen comrade, but there is no space. Then he notices Zamil pacing up and down the avenues of the dead closing their eyelids. Zamil stops suddenly at the irrigation ditch:

He had found the body of the raped woman whose face he had strained to see but could not. She was dead and raped twice: first by the usual way through the hole between her legs and then by bayonet thrusts all over her body. They had ripped the clothes off her but she had still tried to shield her modesty with her long black hair. There she lay shrouded by her hair, though he could see the long thighs exposed between the silky strands. He could also see her broad hips. He saw too where she had been bayonetted and the alternating patches of red and white flesh. He got on his knees and silently closed the eyes in the face he had longed to see. Then suddenly a large darkness closed in around him. He had lost his eyesight.

Nearby, Matiur is clearing away a pile of dead bodies to make room for space in which to bury his dead comrade. Then in the tangle of human bodies a pair of eyes look straight into his face. Pulling away the corpses, he finds an old man who is not quite dead. "What do you want, uncle?" he asks. The sounds from the old man's lips are inaudible. Matiur bends over, placing his ear on the mouth of the old man until he is able to hear the inhuman voice say, "Please kill me, my son. If you do, God will bless you."

By the time the guerillas reach the other side of the bhil, each man has found himself, his soul, his humanity. Earlier their attitude had been summed up by Rahaman who cried, "I joined the liberation struggle to die, not to live. Who says I've got to live? I spit on my life!" Now death has reaffirmed the will to live. But Huq, possibly influenced by existential philosophy, ends the story in Camus-like fashion. They are caught by the Pak army and brought again to the edge of the bhil for execution. Then one by one they are shot, the first three with stern indifference to life and not a living sign of protest. Having regained the will to live, they had promptly lost it. But Matiur reaffirms life with a piercing shout before they shoot him. Zamil does more
than shout: he kicks a soldier in the belly and runs for his life into the murky waters, while bullets swish over his head.

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The second story about the war and its impact, "Ghargerasthan" ("The Household") deals with a Hindu couple who return from India after the 1971 war to reclaim their home and property. Here Huq deliberately underplays the Hindu-Muslim differences between Bengalis, partly out of revulsion for the excesses of communal hatred and strife and partly out of his own artistic credo that literary attention should be given to the unity of suffering humanity rather than to the superficial religious and cultural differences between people. It is surprising that Huq makes no effort to reinforce the official line at the time the story was written, that a common Bengali identity is the true basis of Bangladeshi unity. Here Huq seeks the human experience of two refugees returning to their home.

The story opens with Ramaharon, his wife, Bhanumati, their three children and all their earthly possessions on the embankment of a river somewhere in Bangladesh. They have just left a launch which had taken them from an Indian border crossing. They are poor, marginal persons without kin and friendless, propelled by only one hope: the desire to see their home again and reestablish a household. They are totally alienated and physically used up. Huq sums up their hopeless situation in the person of the mother grimacing in pain as her baby sucks at the dry nipple of her breast, while the father helplessly standing by consoles himself in the bitter thought that the child will soon die.

Their trip to the village is an odyssey between recollections of an idealized past and thoughts of a future of ambivalent hope. Ramaharon desperately tries to cling to illusions, to maintain a qualified optimism, whereas Bhanumati who has suffered too much sees past,
present and future as one package of horrendous nightmare. Each time he dares to hope, she pulls him back to grim reality. He speaks of family, but discovers that the only way he can calculate the total years of their married life is through the deaths of their children. He tries to recall the good life in the village, but is forced to remember that he was ousted from his home a year ago by Muslim neighbors. His Hindu friend, Bidoy Charan had been burned to ashes in his own haystack. They had come into Ramaharon’s house while he ate his midday meal, waited impatiently for him to finish his chillies and rice, then snatched the brass plate from his hand and threw him and his family out of their own household. And yet there are moments when Bhanumati’s savage pessimism is tempered by a soft though ironic outburst of thanksgiving, as when she tells her husband that “God has been merciful to divide our children evenly between the dead and the living.” And once, when Ramaharon is willing to admit that they may find nothing of their house standing, he still refuses to admit that all is lost. “If the tree still lives,” he says “then it can still bear fruit.” And swept away by his rationalization, she gives way to a rare fantasy:

She pictured their new house. She saw three clean rooms on the north, east and west surrounding a central courtyard. In one room would live the husband and wife; in another their son would live with his wife; and the third room would remain vacant for their daughter and her husband. Bhanumati is a good Bengali housewife. She knows how to arrange a family. She has a rich fund of experience. Does she not know how to bring happiness to the family? In her mind’s eye she conjured up pictures of a cowshed, a milking cow, a plow and bullocks, arable land, a pond full of fish, and a full granary.

Finally they reach the village, or what had been a village. Everything has been reduced to rubble while cooking utensils, bamboo baskets and earthen ovens have been burned or destroyed. They cannot find their own house. Once the lanes and bylanes of the village had been lined with gardens and ponds, but all these things are gone. Half out of his mind, Ramaharon begins
to move from side to side shouting desperately, "Is this my house? Or is this my house? No, this is my house!"

Bhanumati, who had been predicting this all the while, gives her own assessment of the situation:

Why persist in the folly of searching for what doesn’t exist? Did you expect them to make the beds for us? All the rubble is the same for us. There is no one disputing our right to this property.

That night Arundhoti, their youngest daughter with the beautiful name dies, though she has eaten fully of rice. In his mind, Ramaharon hopes his wife will not insist that they throw away the rice as was the custom after a death in the family. Otherwise they might all lie alongside the dead child. When Bhanumati asks that he burn the corpse, Ramaharon refuses, exclaiming that it is useless because there is no god. He suggests burying it to discourage the jackals from eating it. In deciding what to do next, he realizes that there are no longer any large trees with the musical sound of leaves whistling in the wind. They are in a wasteland. Totally defeated, he says:

"What I see is going to India to save our lives, spending nine months there as beasts, and coming back to a free country and again feeling like a dog or some other beast." His voice seemed charged electrically. "What is freedom, ha! I don’t get food. My children starve, I starve, I beg from door to door . . ."

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If Huq is in any way representative of Bangladeshi writers today, then a rather new kind of literature is being created which, though written largely by Muslims, is not especially bhadralok, caste conscious, or in any way Bengali. It is an agrarian literature because Bangladesh is predominately agrarian. It favors the underdog, an English word which Huq used often in conversation with me. It is materialistic in philosophy, secular and humanistic. Undoubtedly, Huq has been influenced to some extent by marxism, but these stories in no way have been designed to convey a preconceived ideology. Huq is a sophisticated, yet not especially
Westernized writer from a very poor country, who has chosen to write honestly about the agony experienced by many of his people. Countries like Bangladesh are not confronted simply by problems of underdevelopment, but by severe cases of unparalleled suffering. This suffering is rooted in the culture, to be sure, but it is fixed equally by Bangladesh’s geography and her historical conditions.

Huq has a tragic vision of human life which he shares with many writers the world over. He is wary of panaceas, possibly because of the low esteem for politicians and politics in his country. He is a universalist because he, like others of the Bangladeshi intelligentsia, is culturally alienated, a fact which may explain their acute perception of human nature. Nor are writers like Huq necessarily pro-American, pro-English, pro-Russian or pro-Western. Ironically, outside of the Bengali language about which Huq is chauvinistic, Bangladesh may lack the cultural basis for a national identity. But in the context of an emerging literature of Bangladesh, Huq’s estrangement may have freed him from the limited perspective of national cultural trappings in order to pursue the themes of great world literature. This is the direction in which he is moving, and with proper translation his work has the potential of widening his appeal, and he of becoming a writer of considerable international reputation.

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