

Our Lost Seasons of Literary Delight

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It was in a season of happy monsoon that those of us who had emerged successful at our Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examinations applied for admission to the Department of English. And then the season swiftly mutated into darkness by the time we commenced classes in the department, for when we entered the department, the country was in grief. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had been assassinated by renegade soldiers a month earlier. Unmitigated sadness was in the air when, in one of the earliest classes we had in the department, Professor Razia Khan Amin ruminated over the tragedy. We listened, in all the heartbreak that consumed us, that laid us low.

It was 1975. We had applied for admission in July. Our classes commenced in September. It is the memories of that early phase which come alive all these decades after we left the university, in the belief that we were able to internalize the knowledge our teachers imparted to us. The headlong rush for the seminar library, to get hold of a reference book in light of a lecture we had just gone through, the desire to feel that certain element of rising scholarship in us as we traversed the field of English literature were predominant in the mind. In the nearly six years we studied in the department (those session jams disturbed our altogether four-year course), that growing desire – to comprehend the nuances of literature, to know what T. S. Eliot meant to convey in his modernist poetry, to travel into the mind of John Keats, to re-imagine the world Shakespeare lived and breathed in – was our happy preoccupation.

And, yes, there was that secret goal, that ambition, in some of us – my friends Junaidul Haque, Shafiqul Islam and yours truly – to be teachers in the department once we graduated. We read, we devoured the texts and the works of literary criticism, we debated the finer points of intellectualism in authors over tea and shingaras at the IBA cafeteria and sometimes in Madhu's canteen. Those were the days when we redefined life for ourselves, when we did not miss a single lecture, looked forward to our tutorial classes, waited for the future to happen. In the event, the future shaped by our dreams eluded all three of us. Junaid veered away into the airline industry; Shafiq went on to serve in government and I drifted off to journalism. I have often wondered why we could not teach in the department. Was it fate? Or were there impediments we did not see, did not foresee? The sadness has remained, deep in the soul.

These instances of sadness apart, it is my belief that those years of education in literature – in the classics, in modern literature – have shaped the sensibilities of many of us. It is only proper that the tribute for the shaping of our collective personality go to our teachers. And many of these teachers have gone the way of all flesh in these past many years, the scholars it was a joy to learn from. Professor Imtiaz Habib's discourses on Metaphysical Poetry have remained an integral component of our understanding of John Donne and Andrew Marvell. The informality which Professor Kashinath Roy, attired in

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white kurta, brought into his lectures, interspersing them with Bengali, is an image that has remained ingrained in the mind. Professor Kabir Chowdhury, that smile ubiquitous and lighting up the class, took us by the hand down the cobbled paths of Greek tragedy. Professor Khandaker Ashraf Hossain, stern yet kind, let the thought flow into us that literature was serious business, that literary criticism was essential in an understanding of writers.

The mind flashes back to Professor Shamsuddoha's deliberations on Jonathan Swift, to the young Syed Khwaja Moinul Hassan as he, a romantic himself, dwelt on the Romantics. Professor KMA Munim, the elderly teacher it was warming to be with, often teased us with questions we did not have responses to. What is the best sentence in all literature? That was his query. Innocent, lamb-like, almost sheepish, we dared not look at him, for we did not know how to answer that question. 'Jesus wept', he exclaimed. That was the answer. For us, it was a biblical moment he gave us in that two-word sentence, from his Mount Sinai.

With Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury, lectures were resplendent for the wisdom that came with every sentence he pronounced in class. We had pen and notebook before us, and we plunged into action with his very first word in the classroom. There was Professor Khandakar Rezaur Rahman leading us through the complexities of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*; and there was Professor Syed Anwarul Haq. Both were a joy to be with, as it was a joy to be in the tutorial classes with Professor Nadera Begum. And then there were the late afternoon tutorials with Professor Ahsanul Haque, the rays of the sun caressing the leaves on the trees beyond the window, giving rise to a perfect literary ambience. And we have not forgotten Professor Nizamul Haq and Professor Suraiya Khanam. Professor Sadrul Amin, in retirement today, was a vibrant presence, emitting optimism in his manners and in his bearings.

There were the young teachers Syed Manzoorul Islam, Fakrul Alam and Shawkat Hussain. The first two taught us before leaving for higher studies abroad. With the last mentioned, we did not have any classes but were fortunate enough to be advised by him on certain literary issues. He too left the country in pursuit of higher studies abroad. When I was informed in my third year honours that Professor Kaiser Haq would be my tutorial teacher, I certainly stumbled into a state of fear. He was serious, looked serious, with that no-nonsense attitude about him. My very first assignment with him was a term paper on the works of Thomas Hardy. Imagine my unbounded joy when he gave me an A-plus on it. I look back on the day, on the sheer delight that infused my being. I have never stopped loving, and re-reading, Hardy since.

Exploring the world of English literature was for many of us an endless race to acquire as many good grades as we possibly could. There were the girls in our class who remained quiet, almost unobtrusive but then amazed us with the excellent grades they achieved in their tutorials. In the corridors of the department, some of us, the boys, compared notes, disagreed with one another on certain points and then went off for tea before the next class commenced. And, yes, some of us were incorrigible romantics penning poetry for some of the beautiful, talented women in our class. We did not show those poems to them, of course. We were young, bursting with idealism, bold in our appreciation of feminine graces but in the end lacking the courage necessary to express

our feelings to those wonderful, charming young women. We had absolutely no wish to be sent off to the guillotine on charges of unauthorized audacity. Life was too precious to be sacrificed on the altar of unilateral romance.

My love for the Department of English has been enduring. When after all these years I visit the department, for some reason or the other, it is the old images that flow back into the mind, like sea waves rushing to shore. It is the old peals of laughter I hear, the long-ago arguments I take part in, the mad rush to the seminar library to get hold of books, the frenzied search for reference works in the university library only to find that the chapters we needed to study had been torn off earlier by a student who had turned into a predator.

Memories of the Department of English bring forth images of the scholar Buddhadeva Basu, for he remains an embodiment of it in so many ways. It was not to be our good fortune to be taught by Professor Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta and Professor Rashidul Hasan, both of whom became martyrs to the cause of national liberation while we were yet in school. It pleases me to no end that my classmate and dear friend Rubina Khan is a teacher in the department and has served as chairperson, that my good friend Farhad Bani Idris, now teaching in the United States, has also been a teacher in the department.

In the woodlands of memory, the multiplicity of colours, those that illuminate the landscape of nostalgia, come alive. I walk through those woodlands, as page after page of the old story opens up before me. My father's desperate struggle to come by one hundred and thirty taka (that was the admission fee) to make sure I could take my place in the English department, the thrill of getting two thousand two hundred taka every three months (that had to do with those good results at the HSC), the joy of letting my friends know that I had begun to earn through giving tuitions to school children, the adventure that defined my intense readings in literature – these are among the pearls which hold the thread of the tale of my days in the department.

The books I read in the early hours of the day in the Public Library before classes began, the early moments in winter when I stood in the corridor waiting for my friends to turn up, for a chocolate cream woman to arrive, the magical minutes, in quotidian fashion, when I spotted a red car with its particular number plate because it belonged to a beautiful classmate whose polka-dot dress and cheery laughter drove me into poetry, the day when Professor Abu Rushd peppered me at my honours viva with eighteen questions on Dickens' *David Copperfield* (because I had said the book was my all-time favourite), the moment of embarrassment when at the viva for admission in the department I could not spell the word 'minutiae' – these are my lived experience.

Through the mists of memory, I seem to hear Professor Razia Khan Amin surprising me with compliments on my write-up on Raja Rao in a departmental journal. I imagine the times when Professor A.G. Stock, long before my generation opened its eyes to life, tutored future nationalist heroes like Munier Chowdhury in the department. The day when Professor Stock handed me the prize I had won in a debate at Notre Dame College endures in the mind. And the day, in our second year, when students of the

Masters class chose me to play Hamlet in the play, *Shakespeare's Gentlemen Get Together*, has remained embedded in the pores of my being.

The Department of English was – and always will be – a throbbing, living entity for me. It was as part of it that I educated myself on the concept of internationalism, as opposed to globalization, advanced by our eminently respected Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury. It is my pride, indeed the pride of every student of the department, that Professor Syed Manzoorul Islam is today a reputed writer and acclaimed public intellectual; that Professor Fakrul Alam has made his contribution to history through his translations of Bangabandhu's *Unfinished Memoirs* and *Prison Diaries*; that Professor Kaiser Haq's poetry is part of the global literary landscape; that Professor Niaz Zaman remains ardently devoted to the pursuit of literature on a South Asian scale and is the guiding spirit behind 'The Reading Circle'.

In the depths of a descending monsoon in Bangladesh, in the cold fury of winter in Britain, as the rising winds run riot across your courtyard and all over the ancient cemetery and through the little village where life and death have kept faith with each other for generations, it is literature you go back to – to explain the commotion in the heavens.

And we who have passed from ambitious youth to relentless ageing hear Eliot pounding away at the door: 'I grow old, I grow old / I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.'