

My Teachers

Junaidul Haque*

I was at St. Gregory's High School and Dhaka College before I came to the Department of English, University of Dhaka. At school I was in the Science group. I had, however, great love for literature and read all English and Bangla books that I came across. Brother Hobart, eccentric and iconoclastic, and Nalinikanta Sarkar, a vegetarian and an idealist, were my favourite English and Bangla teachers at school. I remember that as a boy I loved Tagore's short stories and memoirs, Dickens' and Saratchandra's novels and the poetry of Kazi Nazrul Islam and Shamsur Rahman. From twelve I started to write for *The Young Observer*, the teenager's page of the then reputed English daily *The Pakistan Observer* (later *The Bangladesh Observer*), where Kaiser Haq, five years my senior at school, was writing wonderful English prose.

It was in Dhaka College, a couple of years after our Independence, that I was bitten by the bug of serious literature. I got myself introduced to Baudelaire and Rimbaud, Kafka and Camus, Rilke and Lorca, and, of course, T. S. Eliot. I was attracted to the Bangla giants of the 1930s – Jibananda Das and Sudhin Dutta, Amiyo Chakraborty and Buddhadev Bose, and Bishnu Dey. In fact the critical essays of T. S. Eliot and Buddhadev Bose taught me what literature should be. As I grew up I differed with them a little but they were my gurus during my critical late teenage. Dhaka College had Abdullah Abu Saeed in those days. We liked him a lot but my favourite was Mohammad Rafiq, the poet who taught us English. He had a passionate love for the subject and his wide reading of the literature of continental Europe appealed to me. The romantic melancholy in literature engulfed my heart and I felt that if ever I studied anything, it was to be English literature at Dhaka University. So no BUET or DMCH for me! Another fact also influenced me. My boyhood hero, Kaiser Hamidul Haq, had also left the Science group for English. My scribbles for the *Young Observer* had brought me some popularity. Old readers of *The Bangladesh Observer* remember me even after all these years.

So I was in my favourite place, Department of English, in 1975. Bangabandhu and his family, except his two daughters, had been cruelly killed and the country was under martial law. I did well in my written admission test and Sadrul Amin was presiding the viva voce in place of Professor Kabir Chowdhury who had left for an important appointment. Mr. Amin's associates were Imtiaz Hasan Habib and Syed Manzoorul Islam, then a young lecturer of twenty five. Mr. Habib was perhaps a year older. Sadrul Sir was kind to me, asking me very little. Manzoor Sir made me very happy and proud by saying, "Are you the Junaidul who writes frequently for *The Observer*?" He himself used to write essays on literature and painting for *The Observer* in those days. But I never even dreamt that he would notice my articles. So all the sleepless nights I had spent writing for *The Young Observer* had paid! Syed Manzoorul Islam is one of our best writers of fiction

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now and a leading intellectual of the country. I am an ardent admirer of his post-modern fiction. But on that day he couldn't save me from the wrath, so to say, of Imtiaz Habib. My only fault was that I claimed reading D. H. Lawrence and E. M. Forster regularly. "Dropping names to impress us?" roared Mr. Habib like a Royal Bengal Tiger. I answered some of his questions but failed to answer a few difficult ones. Suddenly he said, "Tell us about the other Lawrence. Yes, there is another Lawrence in literature. Only then we shall take you." I was a shy adolescent and couldn't tell him that my passionate love for the subject should auto-qualify me. Thank God! A few days back I had read a special 'Adda' issue of the Kolkata weekly *Desh*, where I had learned a lot about Sudhin Dutta's *Porichoy* adda and T. E. Lawrence. So my elementary knowledge of T E Lawrence and 'Seven Pillars of Wisdom' saved me and ensured my admission! A rare happy smile swept across the face of Mr. Habib. Now he was sure that I sincerely loved literature. Later on, when he taught us the metaphysical poets, we admired him a lot. His brilliant oratory and his generous heart impressed us. He always encouraged serious students and, like all my teachers, was a perfect gentleman.

I did my tutorials with Kaiser Haq Sir in the second year. He was very friendly and affectionate. Very talented himself, he judged the merit of his students well. I was very comfortable with him. So were my tutorial mates, Ruhi and Mohsena, young ladies with dignity. Only occasionally they would give me a deadly threat, "Stop mentioning Jibanananda Das and Sudhin Dutta with Kaiser Sir or get killed by us!" They were indeed very elegant and affectionate terrorists!

Kaiser Sir wrote brilliant poems and essays. Soon we understood that he was our best English language poet. I admired my boyhood hero so much that I always wanted to write on him. At a certain stage we sadly felt that he was more popular abroad than in his own country. In 1999 and 2000 I wrote five essays on him, one of nearly 5000 words. I write fiction and essays. Writing gives me great pleasure. Manzoor Sir and Fakrul Sir encourage me. SIC Sir asks me to go on writing. What more can I ask for? I hope to write till my last day. Kaiser Sir was given the Bangla Academy award in translation. He could very well get it for his poetry. He has been a valiant freedom fighter in 1971.

I didn't know Fakrul Alam Sir before I became his student. He turned out to be the friendliest of teachers. I thoroughly enjoyed my tutorial classes with him. He was very fond of his students. My friend Farhad Bani Idris and myself received a lot of affection from him. Farhad later did an MA from the USA and joined the department. Now he is with the University of Frostburg, Maryland. Fakrul Sir wrote wonderful essays. Over the years he became a superb editor and a brilliant translator of Rabindranath Tagore and Jibanananda Das. He has bagged the Bangla Academy award for translation.

Kashinath Roy Sir was a great favourite with us. When in the right mood, he gave an excellent lecture in the classroom. He taught us Thomas Hardy. His tutorial classes enlightened us too. Twice he was my tutorial teacher, in my First Year Honours and during my MA. A gifted man, he was the perfect introvert. A poet and a writer of fiction, he didn't write much but wrote so well. His recent death caused us great sorrow.

Mr. Nizamul Huq died young and in tragic circumstances. He was the victim of a road accident. I haven't seen a nicer gentleman. He always greeted his students before we could greet him. His wife had taught me English at Dhaka College. She was as nice and as soft-spoken as her husband.

Khondakar Ashraf Hossain Sir also left us early, when he was the Vice-chancellor of Trishal Kobi Nazrul University. He was a very good teacher, a noted Bangla poet and an excellent essayist. *Ekobingsho* was a wonderful little magazine edited by him.

Professor Shawkat Hussain couldn't teach us as he was doing his PhD in Canada. Like Kaiser Sir, he is also from my school. I admired the witty writer in him. Between 2010 and 2022, a few of us had the great honour to be his adda mates. He is very friendly, very learned and very affectionate. He edited a wonderful literary magazine in the mid-1980s named *Form*. Sad that it didn't have a long life.

A few words about the brilliant ladies who taught me. I admired Professor Husniara Huq, Professor Nadera Begum, Dr. Razia Khan Amin, Professor Niaz Zaman and Professor Suraiya Khanam. Bot Professor Huq and Professor Begum were language movement activists. The latter was the younger sister of Professor Kabir Chowdhury and Shaheed Professor Munier Chowdhury. Her son Bikal, a couple of years younger, became a good friend later. She was a classmate of poet Shamsur Rahman and Zillur Rahman Siddiqui. I did my tutorials with Mrs. Huq in my second year and slowly won her heart. She was known as a very strict lady. My unassuming nature and my love for literature made her fond of me. One day she called me gifted and rebuked me for being lazy. I never got to do tutorials with Mrs. Amin but always admired her. One day in the classroom she was very happy that I could name Laura, Petrarch's sweetheart. Years later I met her in her Gulshan residence and she was very surprised and happy that I remembered her classes so well. Mrs. Suraiya Khanam was prettier than her students. She looked stunning without any make up. She had a Tripos from Cambridge and was a good poet. Outsiders called her eccentric but we found her very affectionate and considerate. Sadly all of them have left us for their heavenly abode. Professor Niaz Zaman is a very active teacher-writer-editor now. I love to translate stories for her anthologies. She is very affectionate to me. The woman writers of Bangladesh simply adore her.

Professor Ahsanul Haque was always with the people. Most of us are perhaps not aware that he was taken to the Dhaka cantonment by the Pakistan army in 1971. He was tortured but fortunately not killed. He was the ideal teacher – very devoted to teaching, very fond of his students and very learned. I always wanted to do tutorials with him but never got a chance to. I shall never forget Sir's courage when he publicly denounced the brutal killing of Bangabandhu and his family in a TSC meeting arranged a week or two after August 15, 1975 in honour of Professor Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta and Professor G C Dev, martyrs of 1971. Professor Munim taught us well and was very fond of Shakespeare, Plato and Shelley.

I think in my third year Honours I got Professor Kabir Chowdhury as my tutor. We had our classes in his Chairman's room. I began with an A and the A continued. One day I was standing in the porch when an affectionate hand fell on my shoulders and a

beaming Professor Chowdhury said, “Junaid, how are you?” He did not say anything but patted my back several times. My intuition told me that he wanted to say that he was very fond of me. He was an affectionate man and doted on his daughters. The handsome Professor was always well-dressed. Occasionally he gave brilliant lectures on the Greek tragedies or on American literature. I always kept in touch with him by reading his essays and translations. He was a great teacher and a wonderful person.

Our admiration for Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury knows no bounds. All his students admired his brilliant lectures and his simple life. I shall always remember the pin-drop silence in his classes and how much I enjoyed listening to him. He taught us Shakespeare, Keats and Francis Bacon. Learning Shakespeare with him was an unforgettable experience. I always wanted to be his tutorial student but never got a chance. I got an M. Phil. scholarship and he gladly agreed to guide me on D. H. Lawrence. Laziness and indecision made me let the scholarship go. He was very unhappy and rebuked me one day in his Dean’s room. I was very happy that he cared to rebuke me! Whenever I met SIC Sir, be it in the English Department corridor or elsewhere, I looked at him as long as he was visible.

I am proud that I belonged to the Department of English. If I am born again, I shall study nothing but English literature at DU. Next time I shall be a more disciplined and energetic student.