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BY OSMAN JAMAL

Abstract
In the early 1950s Jaisimuddm, a poet and an older contemporary, remembered Fazlul Huq in an
autobiography as 'the greatest short story writer of Muslim Bengal'. Yet it was not until 1985 that a
posthumous volume of three of Huq's short stories was published in Dhaka with an introduction by Shaukat
Osman and Shamsur Rahman. A fourth story, 'Haran's Death', was subsequently discovered and added to the
three in a later edition. Jaisimuddm's accolade, if it were to be based on four short stories, originally published
in 1944-45, would appear to be excessive. Nevertheless the quality of these stories do point to a promise
which was cut short.
In the early 1950s Jasimuddin, a poet and an older contemporary, remembered Fazlul Huq in an autobiography as ‘the greatest short story writer of Muslim Bengal’. Yet it was not until 1985 that a posthumous volume of three of Huq’s short stories was published in Dhaka with an introduction by Shaukat Osman and Shamsur Rahman. A fourth story, ‘Haran’s Death’, was subsequently discovered and added to the three in a later edition. Jasimuddin’s accolade, if it were to be based on four short stories, originally published in 1944-45, would appear to be excessive. Nevertheless the quality of these stories do point to a promise which was cut short.

Fazlul Huq was born in 1917 in the Kishoregunj district of East Bengal (now Bangladesh). After his matriculation, he was sent to Calcutta to continue his studies at Presidency College. In choosing to read philosophy as an undergraduate, and, later, for his Masters degree at Calcutta University, he was probably influenced by Abu Sayeed Ayub. Ten years older than Huq, Ayub was a polymath. A physicist by training, he had turned to philosophy (which he taught at Calcutta University) and literature (on the state of which he passed magisterial judgement); he also attracted some of the best minds of India to his Wellesley Street apartment. Ayub’s friendship with Huq was, no doubt, an important element in Huq’s life.

From 1933 to 1945 Huq lived in the YMCA hostel on College Street. This period coincided with one of the most creative periods in the history of Bengali literature. Huq stood close to the centre of this literary ferment. Yet it is difficult to say if he saw himself as a writer (his father wanted him to enter the ICS, which he rejected for presumably political reasons). Professor Pritish Dutta, a lifelong friend, thinks he was more interested in reading (he had a large library of modern Western literature and thought), and notes that, though an introvert, he shone on account of his erudition and razor-sharp logic when he spoke at friendly gatherings. Perhaps it was the 1943 famine which impelled Huq to write the longest of his stories, about a village schoolteacher’s conversion to socialism. This was published in the prestigious left-leaning literary magazine, Parichay, then edited by Sudhin Dutta. ‘Fishing’ and ‘Grandmother’ were published in Chaturanga and ‘Haran’s Death’ in a magazine edited by Kazi Nazrul Islam.
Following the partition of India in 1947, Huq was persuaded to migrate to East Pakistan. This severed him from his social and intellectual milieu (Ayub stayed on in Calcutta). Towards the end of 1949 he took his own life. ‘Haran’s Death’ intimates his profound pessimism about human nature, and his absorption with suicide.

Huq, according to his younger brother, Dr Mozammel Huq (to whose memory I would like to dedicate the translation), completed a novel he had worked on since 1946. The novel has not been traced.

**HARAN’S DEATH**

I stepped out of the house the moment I heard the news. I had always known Haran to be a self-possessed, mild mannered man; how could he do something so terrible? Weighty question; and its pressure so benumbed my mind I had no strength left to look for an answer. Nor did I expect there was one.

I came to my senses at the sight of old Bhattacharya. He was racing away. ‘Hell-dweller!’ he cried, meaning Haran. ‘Great sinner!’ He rushed off as if fleeing from the outstretched arms of hell. The old man infuriated me. Was religion devised to make man inhuman?

People from the neighbouring villages had already gathered at the place of incident when I got there. A small group formed around me. Rashid said, ‘Have you ever heard such a story? Just like a milkman!’ I had heard any number of stories, including the seven parts of the Ramayana, but I had no clue about Haran’s. I couldn’t grasp Rashid’s innuendo, but that others did was obvious from their laughter.

How low an act had Haran committed, I wondered, that even by dying he could not command the sympathy of his fellowmen?

I would have preferred not to describe the conditions in which I found Haran, but the story wouldn’t pass if I leave it out altogether. Haran was hanging at the end of a cow-rope from the branch of a mountain pine. The branch had cracked and swung to the right. Haran’s tongue had come out and his teeth were clenched hard on it. Blood and saliva had oozed out of the corners of his mouth and of his eyes too. Most terrifying were his eyes—raised upward the eyeballs seemed to be bursting out of their sockets. I didn’t have the courage to look at them a second time.

The police station was one and a half miles away. The village watchman had gone there with the news. Haran would have to hang until the police sub-inspector completed his investigation. There was no way of telling when he would arrive. It would take some time if he came by boat; if he came on his bike, he would probably come sooner. Until then people would loiter in little clusters on the edge of the fields of Kailamfula, on the country road and in front of Haran’s hut. It wouldn’t do to leave the hanged man alone. People were not content with cursing him. They were
seized with a frustrated aggression as if Haran had got off too easily, had cheated them. Only if his broken neck had snapped more severely and the clotted blood in his body had turned into leeches to inflict further pain, would Haran be considered to have expiated adequately for his imbecility.

Haran’s wife, Bindi, had come out of the hut and walked up to the mound. Seeing her husband hanging from the tree, she hurled herself on to the ground and howled. ‘Look at the whore’s act,’ Sattar, Rashid and some others sarcastically called out in a chorus. Haran’s relatives promptly flung her back into the hut.

Meanwhile I heard the circumstances of Haran’s suicide. When the crowd which had gathered round me felt that I was in the dark, they were all eager to tell me. Finally Sattar stopped the rest of them so that he might tell the story from the beginning to the end. His story did not stop at the rope that hanged Haran; in a mosaic of words Bindi’s whole future stood clearly revealed before the lustful eyes of all. The lad had the gift of a storyteller.

I got up to go. I had seen with my own eyes that Haran had hanged himself and I had heard why he had done so; what was the point of hanging around? But Haran’s uncle, Madhu, held me importunately in his arms. Who knows what trouble the police sub-inspector might create; would I not be around when he arrived? If I went home now, could I not come back when I received word about the police sub-inspector’s arrival? ‘We’re ignorant people, Babu,’ he pleaded.

It was not necessary to plead with me. It hadn’t occurred to me that the police might create trouble; if it had I wouldn’t have mentioned anything about going. As I resumed my seat, I heard the gruff voice of Tamizuddin Bepari: ‘Now, Madhu, who knows when the police sub-inspector will get here. How about some tobacco...’ Of course, it was only to protect this family of dairy farmers that Tamizuddin Bepari sat around Haran’s body, basking in the winter sun of Kailamfula. Surely the dairy farmers must provide the tobacco for these people. Perhaps Haran’s mother herself should light the charcoal for the hookah!

The police inspector was coming – he had taken his time. The river was drying up; it flooded out again; faces shone with enthusiasm, liveliness. One couldn’t punish Haran for the crime he had committed, he was beyond all punishment. But if Haran was not there to receive punishment, his relations were. Let the police sub-inspector get at them – that would partially pacify the god of the people.

The police sub-inspector looked at the hanged man. The rope was shining where it cut against the neck. Observing it, he said, ‘Waxed. Good, good, the lad used his brains to kill himself.’

Then he turned into a proper Sherlock Holmes. ‘Candles aren’t commonly found in a dairy farmer’s home, are they? The lad spent money to hang himself, good, good.’

Madhu was summoned – he was the head of the family. Putting his
palms together, he looked on pathetically like a sacrificial cow. The police sub-inspector said, 'Do you think your nephew has hanged himself of his own will or do you suspect foul play?'

Madhu could not say a word in reply – he might as well have gone completely dumb. One or two people goaded him, 'Come on, say something.'

Madhu made an attempt to say something, it was not clear whether yes or no. But the sub-inspector laughed indulgently, 'Don't they say a milkman's son doesn't come of age until he's three-score years old?'

Laughter spread out all round at his remark. It was no longer possible for me to keep quiet. 'Even by the gentleman's estimate,' I said, 'Madhu is of age. He's long passed his sixtieth year.'

That was impertinence. The police sub-inspector rolled his eyes as if to say, Who's that impudent boy? But looking at me he refrained from making any comment, perhaps because I was nearer thirty and was clearly not a dairy farmer by caste.

The sub-inspector made out a report to the effect that Haran had committed suicide; he was released from the tree. His body would not be messed around, dissected, and nobody would be required to go to the town – a heavy weight was lifted off the chest of the dairy farmers. Haran's relations heaved a sigh of relief; the grief at Haran's violent death was hardly noticeable. I did not know at the time, but heard later, that Madhu's life-savings were exhausted to bribe the police sub-inspector and Tamizuddin Bepari (and his kind).

I was thinking of Haran. Sattar said Umesh had turned the whore's head, meaning Bindi, Haran's wife. Umesh, the son of the Talukdar, babu to the dairy farmers, went about in scented muslin shirts; he was fair, doe-eyed, his skin soft and smooth. It was quite possible for Umesh to turn Bindi's head. Shotgun in hand, Umesh walked about the dairy farmers' huts in search of birds - he'd had a sudden urge for shikar - as if all the doves in the world had come to the bamboo clumps behind the huts and to the trees around them. Madhu had once asked Umesh, 'How much do those cartridges cost, Babu?' Umesh told him.

'That much! What good is shooting doves, then?'

Umesh explained that Madhu would not understand the meaning of shooting for fun.

The meaning was not hard for anyone to understand, but who would stop Umesh? Within a few days of his wedding, in Sattar's words, Haran had become glued to his wife. He wouldn't go out of the hut if he could help it. When he did, it was only to look for scented oil, hair ribbons and such like. Perhaps he hadn't gone that far but he had undoubtedly fallen very much in love with his wife. Within five or six months of their wedding Umesh appeared on the scene. There was nothing new in it. There was never a law that the young women of the dairy farmers would not be available for Umesh's pleasure. It was said of Umesh's father that
when he entered Madhu’s hut, Madhu came out on to the courtyard and smoked his hookah. But Haran had become disoriented; it was his desperate condition which prompted Madhu to muster the courage to ask Umesh, ‘What good is shooting doves, Babu?’ It is not certain if Madhu had given Haran any advice, but Haran regained his composure. The dairy farmers were relieved, perhaps assuming that Haran had accepted the inevitable. Sattar said that the situation was entirely different. Bindi’s deception had set Haran’s mind at rest. Bindi had persuaded Haran that he was her all, husband and god; that going round the farmers’ huts, Umesh would only wear out his shoes. How could that harm Haran or Bindi? Then that evening Haran saw them – under the pomelo tree. Sattar described the scene in forceful language. Briefly, Umesh had no gun in his hand and Bindi had her arms round him.

Haran did not kill either his wife or Umesh; he put a rope round his own neck. For that he was showered with every abuse; all human contempt and hatred were heaped upon his hanged body, nothing spared. Everybody knew Haran loved his wife more than his life and Bindi herself had persuaded him that, if she was faithful, Umesh could do them no harm. Yet human hatred brooked no limits.