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Story of a Hand with Six Fingers

While visiting a junior talented writer who was hospitalized, a senior well-respected Bangladeshi writer once said, “You have to get well soon, because you are not an ordinary man. An ordinary person has five fingers, but you have six in your right hand because you are a writer. The sixth finger is your pen. Get well soon, you have to transform our dreams!”

Look, I have six fingers in my hand-- I must be destined to be a writer! Next time when I come here, I will show you a newer version of this magic; I will demonstrate a laptop hanging out of my hand, defying gravity! I am getting the invite for next year, right?

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In his famous essay, “Why I Write” (1946), George Orwell correctly identifies four great motives for writing:

- 1) Sheer egotism: Desire to seem clever, be talked about, be remembered after death, etc.
- 2) Aesthetic enthusiasm: Perception of beauty in the external world, or, on the other hand, in words and their right arrangement.
- 3) Historical impulse: Desire to see things as they are, to find out facts and store them up for the use of posterity.
- 4) Political purpose: Using the word ‘political’ in the widest possible sense. Desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other peoples’ idea of the kind of society that they should strive after.

I have no choice but to fully agree with him. All these motives drive me, but I place emphasis on number one -- “SHEER EGOTISM”-- and it’s likely that the other three motivations described by Orwell either support or cover up number one. I would look damn selfish without these three other motivations, he probably thought to himself.

3

I left my home in the early eighties to study civil engineering in the capital city of Bangladesh. Back then there Martial Law was imposed in the country. All of us joined the student movement to restore democracy. In those days, we went to the demonstrations, joined processions, chanted slogans. Police often opened fire. I saw young students fall on the street with bullet injuries. I wrote poetry, and the recitation-artists read them aloud in rallies and at meetings. I joined a weekly magazine, started writing a column against the autocratic rulers when I was a student. My columns also became popular, our democratic movement triumphed, and I felt proud to be part of it. The military government resigned and we had a free and fair election. That was in 1990. After graduating from the university with a major in civil engineering, I continued my career as a journalist and a writer. I joined a daily newspaper and there I met a female journalist. I fell for her immediately and proposed. She said her parents would not give

her consent to marry a journalist; rather they would prefer an engineer. Therefore, I appeared in the competitive public service examination, passed the examination, and joined the railway department as an engineer. However, as soon as I got married, I left engineering for good and came back to my newspaper to stay involved in creative writing.

4.

Let me tell you a tale of a tale. Azad was the only son of his parents. Azad's father married again, and in protest, Azad's mother left her rich husband's house with her 12 year-old son. She went through great hardship to raise him. Azad got his master's degree in 1971, in the very year that the war of independence in Bangladesh broke out.

And the students at the university
Asleep at night quite peacefully
The soldiers came and shot them in their beds
And terror took the dorm awakening shrieks of dread
And silent frozen forms and pillows drenched in red

Bangladesh, Bangladesh
Bangladesh, Bangladesh
When the sun sinks in the west
Die a million people of the Bangladesh
(Joan Baez, Song of Bangladesh, Concert for Bangladesh, 1971)

Azad joined the war as a freedom fighter. Soon, the occupying Pakistani Army arrested him, and his mother went to visit him at a police station. She requested that Azad not disclose the name of his guerilla friends, and he fulfilled that request with his life. When his mother was visiting, Azad was starving and wanted some rice. The next day she went back to the police station with rice but she could not find him. Azad never came back and his mother, who lived for fourteen years beyond this incident, never touched rice (In Bangladesh, rice is the staple food; no Bangladeshi can imagine a day without it).

This is a true story. When I learned about it, I published an advertisement in the newspaper requesting more information about the family, and got some response. I interviewed many of Azad's family members and friends, researched and read all related papers and documents, and wrote a docu-fiction titled *Ma*, the Mother. This pretty much tells you about my writing style. My journalism career helps me a lot in choosing subjects and in investigating the subject matter that I choose.

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A few years ago, there was a survey in Bangladesh on what Bangladeshis read. They listed their ten most favorite novels. Eight of them were the classic textbook types, whose authors are not alive anymore. Only two novels were by living writers. One novel was by a writer from the West Bengal and the only novel by a living Bangladeshi writer was *Ma*.

A respected senior philosopher and writer Sardar Fazlul Karim wrote, “I have two mothers. One is Gorky’s Mother and another one is Anisul’s Mother.” Sarojini Sahoo, an Indian writer wrote on her blog, “*Ma* is one of the most important novels in this subcontinent.”

Bhaskor Roy, an Indian Novelist and journalist, once wrote to me, “The day I reached Dhaka I had in my bag Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall*. The brilliantly constructed historical novel about Cromwell’s life won the Booker Prize last year. That afternoon one more book made its way into my bag – your *Ma*. Unknowingly a rivalry began to build up in my mind – which one to read first? But it is the sheer intensity of Azad’s story that swayed me. I have not been so deeply moved by any work of fiction for quite some time. Honestly. At the end of the day my vote went to *Ma!*”

5

Why is the story of our liberation war so important to us? Because it defined our identity and gave us freedom. We wanted to free ourselves from communalism, military dictatorship, and religious interference from politics. We wanted to govern ourselves, to become a modern, developed, enlightened, poverty-free, and deprivation-free nation. We were a part of Pakistan only because of our religious identity. Now, the Wall Street Journal rightfully described us as “politically secular, religiously Muslim and culturally Bengali” (WSJ.com, September 29, 2010).

Because I am selfish, I do not want to call myself a selfish one. To hide that, I have to be in the middle of my people. I have to get myself associated with the fate of a country which has a land area of 56,000 square miles, exactly same as the state of Iowa. While Iowa has a population of 3 million, my country has 164 million people. In addition, Bangladesh is a delta, most vulnerable to the rise of sea level and climate change.

In 1982, in his Nobel Prize lecture, Gabriel Garcia Marquez said, “In spite of this, to oppression, plundering and abandonment, we respond with life. Neither floods nor plagues, famines nor cataclysms, nor even the eternal wars of century upon century, have been able to subdue the persistent advantage of life over death. An advantage that grows and quickens: every year, there are seventy-four million more births than deaths, a sufficient number of new lives to multiply, each year, the population of New York sevenfold.” He said, “On a day like today, my master William Faulkner said, ‘I decline to accept the end of man’.”

Marquez was talking about the reality of Latin America. I want to say the same about our reality. Three million people died in the war of liberation in 1971, and within 40 years from today, due to climate change, one third of the area of our country will be underwater, causing 60 million people to migrate. Even now, cyclones, floods, and droughts are more frequent than ever before. Therefore, like Marquez, like Faulkner, I must declare, “I decline to accept the end of man.”

In his poem about the task of a poet, Nobel laureate Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore writes, “I will give the world some sweet tunes, I will remove some thorns, then I will seek leave, the happiness and laughter will be brighter, the tears in the eyes will be more beautiful, and our sweet homes will be more intimate. I will add more honey to the

lips of beloved women, and there will be some more love in the mouth of babies like dew drops.”

I was born in a country like this and I find myself in the dream like this. I find this legacy to be selfish enough to not be selfish, to bind my fate with the people’s fate of the world’s most densely populated and most vulnerable country. We, the Bangladeshi writers, have this responsibility to keep the light of hope and dreams burning in the heart of 164 million people.

I know, as an artist, I am not successful, I know failure is my destiny, but I always recite from poet Miroslav Holub: “Although to be an artist is to fail and art is fidelity to failure, as Samuel Beckett says, a poem is not one of the last but one of the first things for man.” Here, to me, “man” means an individual and 164 million individuals. In addition, writing is my first priority and I write not with my sixth finger, but with the first one, my pen, the pen that I have been given to express the dreams and reality of millions.