

Classic Poetry Series

**Shamsur Rahman**  
**- poems -**

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# Shamsur Rahman(23 October 1929 – 17 August 2006)

Shamsur Rahman was a Bangladeshi poet, columnist and journalist. Rahman, who emerged in the latter half of the 20th century, wrote more than sixty books of poetry and is considered a key figure in Bengali literature. He was regarded the unofficial poet laureate of Bangladesh. Major themes in his poetry and writings include liberal humanism, human relations, romanticised rebellion of youth, the emergence of and consequent events in Bangladesh, and opposition to religious fundamentalism.

## <b>Early Life and Education</b>

Shamsur Rahman was born in his grandfather's house 46 no. Mahut-Tuli, Dhaka. His paternal home is situated on the bank of the river Meghna, a village named Pahartoli, near the Raipura thana of Narshingdi district. He was the fourth of thirteen children. He studied at Pogos High School from where he passed matriculation in 1945. Later he took his I.A. as a student of the Dhaka College. Shamsur Rahman started writing poetry at the age of eighteen, just after graduating from the Dhaka College. He studied English literature at the Dhaka University for three years but did not take the examination. After a break of three years he got admitted to the B.A. pass course and received his B.A. in 1953. He also received his M.A. in the same subject where he stood second in second division.

In his leisure after the matriculation, he read the Golpo Guccho of Rabindranath Tagore. He told that this book took him into the extra ordinary world and transformed him into an altogether different personality. In 1949, his poem Unissho Unoponchash was published in Sonar Bangla which was then edited by Nalinikishor Guho.

He had a long career as a journalist and served as the editor of a national daily, Dainik Bangla and the weekly Bichitra in the 1980s. A shy person by nature, he became an outspoken liberal intellectual in the 1990s against religious fundamentalism and reactionary nationalism in Bangladesh. As a consequence, he became a frequent target of the politically conservative as well as Islamists of the country. This culminated in the January 1999 attack on his life by the militant Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami. He survived the attempt.

## <b>Poetry</b>

Shamsur Rahman's first book of poetry, *Prothom Gaan Dwityo Mrittyur Agey* (First Song Before the Second Death) was published in 1960. He had to go through the political turbulence of 60's and 70's which also reflected in his poems clearly. He wrote his famous poem *Asader Shirt* which was written with respect to the mass uprising of 1969 led by Maulana Bhasani. During the Bangladesh Liberation War he wrote a number of extra ordinary poems based on the war. These poems were so inspiring that they were recited at the camps of freedom fighters. Later these poems were published in *Bondi Shibir Theke* (From Confinement in Enemy Territory) in 1972. Later he continued writing poems in the independent Bangladesh and remained as the poet whose poems reflect the history of the nation. During the historical movement against Ershad he published his book *Buk Tar Bangladesher Hridoy* indicating the great sacrifice of Nur Hossain.

### <b>Poetic Diction</b>

Shamsur Rahman wrote most of his poems in free verse, often with the rhythm style known as *Poyaar* or *Okhshorbritto*. It is popularly known that he followed this pattern from poet *Jibanananda Das*. He also wrote poems in two other major patterns of Bengali rhythmic style, namely, *Matrabritto* and *Shwarobritto*.

### <b>Career in Journalism </b>

Shamsur Rahman started his professional career as a co-editor in the English daily *Morning News* in 1957. Later he left this job and went to the Dhaka center of the then *Radio Pakistan*. But he returned back to his own rank at *Morning News* in 1960 and was there till 1964. After the liberation of Bangladesh he wrote columns in the daily *Dainik Bangla*. In 1977 he became the editor of this daily. He also jointly worked as the editor of *Bichitra*, a weekly published since 1973. During the period of President Ershad he got involved with internal turbulence in the *Dainik Bangla*. A rank 'Chief Editor' was created to take away his position as the top executive and rip him off all executive powers. In 1987 he left the daily as a protest against this injustice. He also worked as the editor of monthly literary magazine *Adhuna* for two years since 1986 and as the main editor of the weekly *Muldhara* in 1989. He worked as one of the editors of *Kobikantha*, an irregular poetry magazine, in 1956.

### <b>Death</b>

His health broke down towards the end of 1990s and on two occasions he received major cardiac surgery. He died of heart and kidney failure after having

been in a coma for 12 days. He was 77.

### <b>Critical Acclaim</b>

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui, a friend and critic, describes Shamsur Rahman as one who is "deeply rooted in his own tradition." In his opinion, Shamsur Rahman "still soaks the language of our times, transcending the limits of geography. In his range of sympathy, his catholicity, his urgent and immediate relevance for us, Shamsur Rahman is second to none."

Professor Syed Manzoorul Islam has similar praise for Rahman, "It is true he has built on the ground of the 30's poets, but he has developed the ground, explored into areas they thought too dark for exploration, has added new features to it, landscaped it and in the process left his footprints all over."

In the year 1993 renowned Bangladeshi writer Humayun Azad wrote a book about critical analysis of Shamsur Rahman's poetry titled Shmasur Rahman : Nisshongo Sherpa (A Lonely Climber).

However, it is often alleged that Shamsur Rahman revolved around his own poetic formula created in the 1960s and exhausted himself in the same fashion. He could not transcend himself during the next forty years of his poetic career.

### <b>Awards</b>

Adamjee Award (1962)

Bangla Academy Award (1969)

Ekushey Padak (1977)

Swadhinata Dibosh Award (1991)

Mitshubishi Award of Japan (1992)

Ananda Puroshker from India (1994).

TLM South Asian Literature Award for the Masters, 2006.

# An Ode To Freedom

Freedom, you're  
Tagore's timeless poetry and everlasting lyrics.

Freedom, you're  
Kazi Nazrul, the regally maned magnificent man,  
rapturous in creation, oh joy.

Freedom, you're  
the radiant gathering at Shahid Minar on Language Day.

Freedom, you're  
the flag-draped, slogan-serenaded boisterous procession.

Freedom, you're  
the farmer amidst his fields, beaming face.

Freedom, you're  
the village lass's lightsome swim in mid-day pond.

Freedom, you're  
the sinewy muscles on a skilled workman's sun-bronzed arms.

Freedom, you're  
the glint in the eyes of a freedom fighter scouting the darkened and deserted  
borders.

Freedom, you're  
the crisply-worded, scorching speech of a sprited scholar beneath the shade of a  
banyan tree.

Freedom, you're  
the tumult of chats in tea-shops, public gathering and the park.

Freedom, you're  
the roaring swoop of kal-boishakhi on the fiery horizon athwart.

Freedom, you're  
the Meghna's heart, swelling shores in the month of Sraban.

Freedom, you're  
the velvety touch, father's chivalrous prayer-mat.

Freedom, you're  
the ripples on mother's unadorned sari stretched in the yard.

Freedom, you're  
the hue of henna on sister's gentle hand.

Freedom, you're  
a vivid placard shimmering stars gripped by a friend.

Freedom, you're  
the wife's raven tresses, tempestuous in the untamed wind.

Freedom, you're:

The colorful kurta on a young boy.

The playful sunlight on a girl's supple cheeks.

Freedom, you're:

The home amidst a flower garden; the warble of koel-bird.

The twittering leaves of antediluvian banyan trees.

My notebook of poetry, to pen poems as I please.

[Translated from 'Shadinota Tumi' (Bengali) by Syed M. Islam.]

Shamsur Rahman

# Asad's Shirt

Like bunches of blood-red Oleander, Like flaming clouds at sunset  
Asad's shirt flutters  
In the gusty wind, in the limitless blue.  
To the brother's spotless shirt  
His sister had sown  
With the fine gold thread  
Of her heart's desire  
Buttons which shone like stars;  
How often had his ageing mother,  
With such tender care,  
Hung that shirt out to dry  
In her sunny courtyard.  
Now that self-same shirt  
Has deserted the mother's courtyard,  
Adorned by bright sunlight  
And the soft shadow'  
Cast by the pomegranate tree,  
Now it flutters  
On the city's main street,  
On top of the belching factory chimneys,  
In every nook and corner  
Of the echoing avenues,  
How it flutters  
With no respite  
In the sun-scorched stretches  
Of our parched hearts,  
At every muster of conscious people Uniting in a common purpose.  
Our weakness, our cowardice  
The stain of our guilt and shame-  
All are hidden from the public gaze  
By this pitiful piece of torn raiment Asad's shirt has become  
Our pulsating hearts' rebellious banner.

[Translated from Asader shirt (Asad's Shirt) by Syed Najmuddin Hashim]

Shamsur Rahman

# For A Few Lines Of Poetry

I go to a tree and say:  
Dear tree, can you give me a poem?  
The tree says: If you can pierce  
My bark and merge into my marrow,  
Perhaps you will get a poem.  
I whisper into the ears  
Of a decaying wall:  
Can you give me a poem?  
The old wall whispers back  
In its moss-thickened voice:  
If you can grind yourself  
Into the brick and mortar of my body,  
Perhaps you will get a poem.

I beg an old man  
Bending on my knees:  
Please give me a poem.  
Breaking the veil of silence,  
The voice of wisdom says:  
If you can carve the wrinkles  
Of my face onto your own,  
Perhaps you will get a poem.

Only for a few lines of poetry,  
How long must I wait before this tree,  
In front of the crumbling wall,  
And the old man?  
How long will I be bending on my knees?

[Translated from the Bengali by Syed Najmuddin Hashim]

Shamsur Rahman



# I Become Happy

When you come from a distant place  
And rest your feet in my backyard,  
I become happy.

When you sail your remembrance  
On the edge of your body and set a pair of pigeons free,  
I become happy.

When you melt yourself into a glass of water  
At the moment of quenching my thirst  
And stare at me with passion,  
I become happy.

When you make your face like a blooming rose  
And bring the dawn to my sight,  
I become happy.

When you take a nap in the afternoon  
Holding your hands crossed on your butterfly chest  
And let your misfortunes fade away from us,  
I become happy.

When you place your roses between my lips  
And call me with love,  
I become happy.

When you come to me toppling the obstacles  
And hold my flag up in the air,  
I become happy.

[Translated from the Bengali by Hassanal Abdullah]

Shamsur Rahman

# Mask

Shower me with petals,  
heap bouquets around me,  
I won't complain. Unable to move,  
I won't ask you to stop  
nor, if butterflies or swarms of flies  
settle on my nose, can I brush them away.

Indifferent to the scent of jasmine and benjamin,  
to rose-water and loud lament,  
I lie supine with sightless eyes  
while the man who will wash me  
scratches his ample behind.  
The youthfulness of the lissome maiden,  
her firm breasts untouched by grief,  
no longer inspires me to chant  
nonsense rhymes in praise of life.

You can cover me head to foot with flowers,  
my finger won't rise in admonishment.  
I will shortly board a truck  
for a visit to Banani.  
A light breeze will touch my lifeless bones.

I am the broken nest of a weaver-bird,  
dreamless and terribly lonely on the long verandah.  
If you wish to deck me up like a bridegroom  
go ahead, I won't say no  
Do as you please, only don't  
alter my face too much with collyrium  
or any embalming cosmetic. Just see that I am  
just as I am; don't let another face  
emerge through the lineaments of mine.  
Look! The old mask  
under whose pressure  
I passed my whole life,  
a wearisome handmaiden of anxiety,  
has peeled off at last.  
For God's sake don't  
fix on me another oppressive mask.

[Translated and Edited by Kaiser Haq from 'Selected Poems' of Shamsur Rahman.]

Not: Banani - An affluent suburb of Dhaka. It has a well known cemetery.

Shamsur Rahman

# Poems Journey

I'll soon be gone, quite alone  
And quietly, taking none of you along  
On this aimless journey. Useless  
To insist, I must leave you all behind.

No, I'll take nothing at all.  
On this solitary journey, you're stuffing  
My bags for nothing; don't squeeze my favorites books  
Into that beer-bellied suitcase.  
I won't ever turn their pages.  
And let the passport sleep on in the locked drawer.

Only let me have a look at the harvest  
From my ceaseless toil, the quietly ripening fruits  
Of my talent. But what on earth  
Are these wretched things you bring?  
Did I lie drunk with smugness in my little den  
At having produced this inert, unsightly crop?  
My soul screams in mute desolation  
At the thought of carrying this sight with me,  
I beg you, don't add to the burden of this journey.

[Translated by Kaiser Haq]

Shamsur Rahman

# Roar, O Freedom

What shall I do with the spring  
when I hear only the cuckoo moaning  
and cannot see gorgeous flowers blossom?  
What shall I do with the garden  
Where no birds ever pays a visit?  
Oh, how rough and stony is this earth!  
Skeletons of trees stand, row after row,  
like so many desolate ghosts.

What shall I do with the love  
that places on my head a crown of thorns  
and hands out to me the cup of hamlock?  
What purpose the road serve  
On which no one treads,  
Where vendors of coloured ice-cream  
Or waves of city-inundating processions  
are never seen?

I had called you, dearest  
When we started our journey  
With our face turned to the rising sun.

When the back-pull of bourgeois charm  
Kept from your ears the soaring sound  
of the people singing.  
You are still prisoner under the claws  
of a fierce eagle.  
you cannot yet walk on a road  
with the rainbow coloured carpet spread on it.  
Oh, how tough it is to keep going  
without you by my side!

A horrid monster comes, casting dark shadows  
all around;  
in a moment he crushes under his heels  
the foundation of new civilization,  
he hangs the full moon on the scaffold,  
declares unlawful the blossoming  
of the lotus and the rose.

He bans my poems, stanza by stanza,  
quietly, without any fanfare,  
he bans your breath,  
he bans the fragrance of your hair.

By the bent body of the young girl  
sitting on the lonely porch of old age.  
waiting for the dawn of happy days.  
By the long days and nights of Nelson Mandella  
spent behind the bars.

By the martyrdom of the heroic youth  
Noor Hossain,  
O Freedom, raise your head like Titan,  
give a sky shattering shout,  
tear off the chain around  
your wrists.  
Roar, Freedom, roar mightily!

[Translated by Kabir Chowdhury]

Shamsur Rahman

# Shudhangshu

From amidst the plundered temple  
And the burnt ashes of the homestead  
A disinterested voice reaches Sudhangshu -  
'Will you go then, in the end?'  
At the day's end  
Sudhangshu searches frantically  
Among the ashes  
For ownership deeds, broken glass bangles  
The inert box of a married woman's vermilion -  
The scattered beads of troubled memories.

The voice says, 'The looters have robbed you  
But haven't left, they are lurking around  
They are wrapped around your daily life.  
The animal-visaged executioner  
Bides his time  
Under the vampire-wings of terror.  
Even then, do not go Sudhangshu.'  
The sky's blue is not yet fled.  
The trees, with their gentle ways  
Still fly their flag of deepest green.  
The brimming river  
Still shakes her waist  
Like a wanton gypsy girl.  
Sudhangshu too will not go  
Leaving this sacred land  
Like a warrior defeated in battle  
For destinations unknown.

Shamsur Rahman

# The Postcard

It has been a few weeks that  
A dirt smudged postcard with bad handwriting  
Sitting in his shirt pocket.  
Wherever the young man goes  
The postcard goes with him.  
The incorrectly spelt and awfully worded letter falls asleep  
Close to the young man's chest  
With its smell of village flowers,  
Creepers and mimosa shrubs  
And the soft rippling sound of water  
On the edge of the pond.  
The postcard from his sister  
perturbs him at times.  
The unemployed youth  
Is helpless to support the family  
Without a patriarch.  
He stays out of harm's way  
and keeps a very little involvement.  
None has ever seen him in any political meetings or processions.  
He has rather been searching for a job relentlessly.  
Hunger and deep sighs are his constant companions.  
Yet, on a terrified noon,  
His chest was pierced by a sudden bullet.  
The youth did not even have a chance to comprehend  
Where the bullet was from.  
Was it the police or was it from a terrorist?  
The youth did not know.  
Only the postcard, he noticed, in his pocket  
Soaked up with his own blood.

[Translated from the Bengali by Zakeria Shirazi]

Shamsur Rahman