TLC Showcase

Neamat Imam

Introduction to *The Black Coat* 2

Extract: *The Black Coat* 3

About the Writer 13

Introduction

TLC Reader Kavita Bhanot on *The Black Coat*

Neamat first came through TLC in July 2011 and had an editorial assessment by Kavita Bhanot, who has worked as an editor with India's first Literary Agency and is the editor of the short story collection Too Asian, Not Asian Enough (Tindal Street Press, 2011).

Kavita writes, "I was deeply impressed by Neamat Imam's novel, which I found to be urgent and powerful. I can't think of many contemporary novels that have an ambitious canvas, that make political, social commentary, but also touch your heart because they are written with compassion, experience, wisdom and psychological depth."

Introduction to *The Black Coat*

This is a story set during the fall of Sheikh Mujib, the man who freed Bangladesh from Pakistan in a bloody war in 1971. Two years after the war, as Bangladesh's Prime Minister, he did exactly what the Pakistanis did: rule the country with repression and terror.

When Bangladesh becomes an independent nation, thousands pour into Dhaka from all over the country, looking for food and shelter. Amongst them is Nur Hussain, an uneducated young man from a remote village, who is only good at mimicking a famous speech of the prime minister's. He turns up at journalist Khaleque Biswas's doorstep, seeking employment. He is initially a burden for Khaleque, but then Khaleque, who has recently lost his job, has the idea of turning Nur into a fake Sheikh Mujib. With the blessings of the political establishment, he starts cashing in

on the nationalist fervour of the city's poorest. But even as the money rolls in, the tension between the two men increases and reaches a violent climax when Nur refuses to stick to the script.

Extract: *The Black Coat*

Excerpted with permission from Penguin Books India

from ***The Black Coat*** by **Neamat Imam**

1

At the Front, Not at the Front

In 1971 I was a staff writer with the *Freedom Fighter*. It was a weekly paper published in the old part of the city of Dhaka during the Bangladesh liberation war. It printed reports of the progress of the *Muktibahini*—Freedom Fighters—against Pakistani military assaults. A broadsheet of only four pages, it quickly became a hit with readers because of its inspiring writing. Lutfuzzaman Babul, its editor and publisher, said it was regularly being smuggled into Bengali refugee camps in various Indian territories, where the Muktibahini received guerrilla training before moving to the front. He said members of the Bangladesh government in exile who were based in India read every word of it. In the absence of Sheikh Mujib, leader of the liberation struggle, who was imprisoned in West Pakistan for treason, it was considered one of the most important nationalist voices in the country

I believed him. I believed in the vision of the paper. That's why, although it was published by a small media company with limited and irregular income, I decided to stick with it. Sometimes I wanted to take a rifle and go to the front. But Lutfuzzaman Babul said I was already at the front; reporting during such a primitive war was not an easy task, it was a fight in itself. He was sure the *Freedom Fighter* would accomplish more than what killing a bunch of Pakistani soldiers would; it would redefine the entire ruling class of Pakistan by rousing their conscience against genocide. He told me to write with passion, to fill my columns with love for our people, so that every Bangladeshi upon reading my words would be imbued with an enormous sense of patriotism.

In all my articles, I attacked and insulted the Pakistani rulers—present and past. I ridiculed them, invented stories about them, misspelt their names and designations to make them seem eccentric

and trivial. They were cockroaches. Tikka Khan, the army commander in East Pakistan, should be massaged with fourteen spices and marinated for three nights before being roasted for hungry dogs on Pakistan's national day. We published Pakistan's flag with a Nazi swastika logo instead of the traditional crescent and star; superimposed mammoth, bloody, terrorizing horns on Pakistan's President Yahya Khan's head. In emotionally charged language, I narrated how Pakistanis had jumped upon us like beasts with sharp claws and teeth and would not give up until they had sucked the last drop of our blood and turned our country into a wasteland.

In article after article I wrote against those who collaborated with Pakistan and smuggled out valuable security intelligence. 'Hang Them Twice', I titled one of my articles, which argued these traitors should be hanged along with our enemies because of their misdeeds, and then hanged again for betraying us while being a part of us. Bangladesh would never forgive them, I said; they were not sons of our motherland, they were aliens, Bedouins, Jews, agents of the CIA. They were the damned, awaiting severe punishment for their actions in the people's court. When the country would be free, we would find them; we would find all those zombies even if they hid under the rubble, in the bed of the silent seas, above the clouds, and in the shadow of Iqbal, and hang them one by one in public squares. Traitors! We would dance in their blood.

I specifically criticized the poet Iqbal because Pakistanis regarded him as their wisest man. They called him Allama, the Scholar. He dreamt of a unified homeland for all Muslims in the subcontinent, thus opposing the concept of the separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan. By talking about an integrated Pakistan, he only wanted to immortalize Bangladesh as West Pakistan's peaceful colony. I said that, although I knew even Gandhi had sung his song *Saare jahan se achchha—Better than the entire world*—to express his love for the subcontinent. Iqbal died long before the British rule came to an end; nonetheless, I attacked him as if he were alive today, alive and well and advising Pakistan's generals on homeland integration affairs, sitting in some fortified palace inside the Karachi cantonment. Because he was their precious poet, we needed to bully him, the way they bullied our precious leader Sheikh Mujib.

In September 1971, Lutfuzzaman Babul called a meeting in his office. We—all eleven reporters, proofreaders and administrators—gathered around his table. From four thousand copies in April, the circulation of the paper had grown to twelve thousand in six months; four pages had become eight. He told us there would be no scarcity of investment to take the paper to the next level once the country was liberated. By the next level he meant to give it an institutional shape, to make it a real business venture so that all its employees had a permanent job in the new country. It would not be surprising if Sheikh Mujib's government wanted to acquire it for its communication department. In that case, we would all automatically be turned into public servants. We loved our country and becoming public servants was the best thing that could happen to us. He advised us to redouble our efforts in inspiring our people to kill Pakistani forces wherever they were found. Kill, kill, kill—that was the message; kill them; eat them alive.

We published a victory issue of the paper following Pakistan's surrender on 16 December 1971, ending the nine-month war. Including supplements, it was sixteen pages. We printed patriotic poems and stories, pictures of children running down the street waving flags, female students of Dhaka University singing 'Our country has plenty of grains and riches'; noted intellectuals contributed essays on the themes of nationalism and the Bengali psyche, the evolution of the Bengali cultural tradition, and the history of the Bengali renaissance in the twentieth century; a professor analysed ideas of rebellion in our folk literature.

But the main attraction was the picture of a smiling Sheikh Mujib, wearing a heap of garlands around his neck. The article that followed praised him for his determination, conscientiousness and towering social influence. He was one leader who ardently stated he did not want to be the prime minister of Pakistan, and instead wanted to see Bangladesh free. We printed details of his political career along with several pages of pictures.

Sheikh Mujib was more popular with Bangladeshis than Mohammad the prophet; he was supported by people of all religions and creeds. On 10 January 1972, he returned to Dhaka to form a government, after being released from Pakistani custody. 'There is

not another leader like him in the world,' people said. 'There won't be another leader like him in the future.' A new cabinet was sworn in immediately. Military and border security forces, police and other institutions were created and organized as quickly and adequately as possible. Mass graves were discovered in different parts of the country. The buried were exhumed and reburied. Roads were cleansed. Walls were washed to make room for new graffiti. Pakistani tanks, weapon carriers, personnel carriers, ambulances, helicopters and supply trucks—burnt out, blood-spattered and broken—were removed from the streets. Offices and marketplaces hoisted new flags. Educational institutes and courts opened. Government documents published in Urdu, the language of Pakistan, and Urdu–Bengali dictionaries were gathered together and set ablaze in the national park. Muktibahini members returned from the front, wept for deceased fellow fighters, got married, and joined in victory parades in every city, town and village. The smell of loss gradually began to fade.

Sheikh Mujib delivered a special message to the *Freedom Fighter* shortly after he came to power. He was such a busy person; the whole country was waiting for his directions; Russian president Brezhnev was waiting to meet him; British foreign secretary Sir Alec Douglas-Home was waiting. But he made time to take pen in hand to write a few lines on his newly printed letterhead in his most direct language. 'My brothers,' he wrote, 'the enemy is gone. It is your country now. Forget your differences. Transform your hate into action. Build this nation. *Joy Bangla*.'

The message was recognition of our hard work, Lutfuzzaman Babul said. It was an inspiration for us as well as for every man and woman in the country. Now that the country was free, he did not speak about the *Freedom Fighter* becoming the government's mouthpiece. I knew him; I had no doubt he believed a paper must be free even in a free country—particularly in a free country.

2

Assessing the Ash

It was now time to take a good look at the country, to record the scope of the devastation. It was time to find the ones who were still alive and to mourn for those who were lost forever. Those who were wounded or injured needed care. Those who had lost everything needed help to heal their pain. There were the stressed, the psychologically traumatized and the homeless, who needed a moment of calm. But above all, and despite all this, we needed to celebrate the heroism of our people.

I went from district to district, village to village, to understand how individuals had coped with the horrors of the war and how they now felt about living in a liberated country. I spoke with hundreds of people who were displaced during the war, who had lived in slums for months, but now expected something better. I submitted my reports with statistics and pictures; they were duly printed.

Sometimes it happened that I spent hour upon hour speaking with freedom fighters who had gone to the front. I wanted to know what had motivated them so elementally that they had not feared for their lives. It was an old question, but I asked it every time as if it were new. Every person faced that question in his own way, in his own time, and every person must have his own answer. I wanted to know what their answers were.

They all believed in the leadership of Sheikh Mujib. All of them believed that if the country were not free now, under his direction, it would never be free. Some said they did not go to war for the country; they went for him. They did not know what they were doing; he said they must go and they did. One old man, whom I met on a ferry on the Buriganga, gave me an absolute answer. 'If he calls upon you, you can't just say no, or say you're afraid to die,' he said. 'It is impossible. Are you an animal? Is there no shame in you? You say:

I'm here and I'm ready. You say: I am grateful that I lived in Bangladesh and I lived during the time of war. You thank Sheikh Mujib for seeking your help.' He asked me if I had gone to the front. I had not, I said, suddenly unprepared. His sharp, penetrating eyes filled with overwhelming contempt. 'I don't speak to you,' he said, as he slowly moved to the other end of the ferry, holding firmly to his underarm crutches. 'Whoever you are, you're not a Bengali; you're not Sheikh Mujib's man. I don't speak to you.'

Some of them gave me beaten rice and cups of milk to recover my energy; some invited me to join them for a lunch of pumpkin curry and roti. During these meals, I tired them with my relentless curiosity, and they baffled me with the details of their narratives. They wanted to speak, most of them, and while speaking, they got excited, as if they were still at the front, still in the war with 303s on their shoulders, and crossing mountains and submerged rice fields.

In Mymensingh, I met a middle-aged gentleman who introduced himself simply as the Commander. He had an excellent sense of geography. He drew a small map in the yard with a stick and gave me a visual description of where they had fought, where they had faced the most horrendous resistance, and where they had swum a raging river on a stormy night to rescue their fallen comrades. He told me he had heard the voice of Sheikh Mujib in the fall of the waves and in the sound of the thunder; that helped him overcome his fear during the battle.

It was obviously an exaggeration. I looked at the Commander. He was a strong man with short hair, a cobra tattoo on his back, and a clean-shaven face with heavily aromatic aftershave—quite the opposite to the sort of bearded village elder with a copy of the Koran clutched to his chest who might believe in superstition. I left the yard, confused and lost, and stood on the path facing the open south. One of the Commander's disciples followed me there. He knew I did not believe him, he said; but it did not matter now because the war was over. He said he also heard Mujib's voice several times during the war. 'You may not believe me either,' he said, 'but you may believe in God. At this moment I can only tell you that if you believe in God you must believe in Sheikh Mujib.'

In early 1973, I was assigned to visit Gangasagar in Akhaura to write a piece on Mostafa Kamal. He was a martyr of the war. When he and his fellow fighters came under heavy attack from the Pakistani air force, he decided to give his men the opportunity to escape. Pakistani soldiers shot him and then bayoneted him to death.

Raihan Talukder, whose brother Wahab Talukder was also killed in the Gangasagar assault, offered me a bed for the night in his hut. Having an eight-hour return journey before me, I decided to accept his hospitality. He took me around the village, introduced me to his neighbours respectfully. 'Khaleque Biswas, eminent journalist from Dhaka,' he told people, 'and very close to Sheikh Mujib.' I did not know what prompted him to introduce me like that; probably he thought everyone interested in history and politics and living in the capital was close to Sheikh Mujib. I remained silent. If the invisible presence of the prime minister made my life easier in a remote village, who was I to complain? In the evening, I worked on my report by the light of a hurricane lamp. Raihan Talukder went to sleep in the inner room, but he got up every few minutes to enquire if I needed another glass of water or perhaps a cup of tea, if the hurricane lamp had enough kerosene and finally, if he should tell me the stories of Gangasagar once again to make sure I had all the necessary information for my assignment.

I asked him if he was aware that the Bangladesh Army was preparing to decorate Mostafa Kamal with the title *Bir Sreshtha*. 'Are they?' he said. I asked him if he knew what that title meant. He looked at me with wonder.

'Mostafa Kamal is one of the seven great heroes of our liberation,' I explained. '*Bir Sreshtha* is the army's highest recognition of bravery.' Still it did not seem to make much sense to him.

'There are more than seven great heroes in the Gangasagar area alone,' he said. 'What about those who died with him? Did they die any less than he?'

I realized it would not be easy to make a philosophical point about death and heroism to him. Telling him that there were levels of valour, and there were many kinds of good deaths, even if all of them happened in the same place, at the same moment, triggered by the same hazard, would end in futility, because he had already accepted

death as the Great Leveller. The simple solution was to ask him if he thought there were differences between him and Sheikh Mujib, though both of them loved our country. There were, he said immediately, lots. 'What kind of a question is that?' I knew that would be his only response. 'Sheikh Mujib is not an average human being like us,' I said; 'he is special, superior and incomparable. The same way, there is something special about Mostafa Kamal that separates him from other martyrs.' Raihan Talukder accepted my point thoughtfully.

After he had left, I put out the hurricane lamp and tried to visualize the very moment when Mostafa Kamal decided to take charge of the situation. I wanted to enter his heart. I wanted to be a blood cell in his veins and see what his eyes saw in that enormous chaos. I wanted to experience how a simple moment—a moment in a small village and of horror and ferocity—defined a whole life and made everything else insignificant. I wanted to imagine I was he, a non-commissioned soldier, and I was telling my mates that I was their protector, their most dependable and dynamic guardian angel; I could bargain with death and successfully deny or postpone or defy it for them. Then I wanted to see how my end crept up on me, inch by inch, following my own decision: a decision that he had taken for me; a decision that I had taken for him.

I woke up early and silently, dreamily walked to the spot where he was killed. It must have been the place—a valley between prehistoric mountains—which had influenced him to take his decision, an influence he could not ignore. I walked around with my shoes soaked in the dew, and filled my chest with cold, translucent air. I walked from side to side, corner to corner, stepping on my footprints, looking around, looking for something I did not know existed but hoped would explain to me the very heart of the place. I found nothing. It was a place of nothing; it had been a place of nothing, for everyone, today and yesterday, and it would be a place of nothing for centuries. That was what I understood. I was not Mostafa Kamal, I thought, then, to satisfy myself, to cover up my truth. I did not have his eyes to see, his heart to feel, his moral stature to commit to serving the life force. Whatever I would see or feel would be mine, completely mine, not his. I felt a small vibration in my fingers, a mild

increase in my heartbeat, and my footsteps became slower and more lethargic and finally stopped. That was mine, I knew. It was not vast, definitely not as immense and overwhelming as Mostafa Kamal's feeling, but it gave me something.

The sun came out, making the surroundings luscious and flamboyant. Raihan Talukder joined me. I asked him what time of day it was when Mostafa Kamal was killed—if it was a morning like this or a dark cloudy day or an evening retiring fast into night. He did not answer, as if it was no longer necessary to know what time of the day it was. Mostafa Kamal would have made the same decision no matter what. Raihan Talukder sat at the foot of a bamboo clump; I sat beside him and we looked at the field before us as if something were happening there: the past was unravelling, and Mostafa Kamal was advancing towards the very moment of his non-existence like an oyster creates a pearl, little by little.

Back in Dhaka, I examined the entire liberation war from Mostafa Kamal's perspective. I considered his final moment as a long moment that lasted nine months, the entire course of the war. I believed it could last longer, until eternity—if need be, until all the dictators in the world fell and all discrimination came to an end. Together Mostafa Kamal and his fellow fighters constructed one large moment of truth. Their eyes did not see, their nerves did not feel, their rational faculties did not function, but their human spirit worked without fail. By engaging with that moment, they knew they were serving the most valuable and inevitable cause in human history: the cause of freedom.

I posted a copy of the article to Raihan Talukder. I was grateful to him for his hospitality and friendship, I wrote in a note. The first-hand information he had provided was absolutely invaluable. If he ever came to Dhaka, even for a day, he must see me; it would be a pleasure to buy him a cup of tea.

Life moved on. I did not hear back from him immediately, and I did not bother to send him another letter, because I had new stories to focus on, new assignments to complete. Until one morning a young man appeared at my door and gave me a letter.

About the Writer

Neamat Imam (born January 5, 1971) is a Bangladeshi-Canadian author of literary fiction.

He holds a PhD in theatre studies and has taught English at Chittagong University and Jahangirnagar University in Bangladesh before moving to Canada.

His first book, *Paravarty Drishwa* (1996), a play, was published by the Bangla Academy under its Young Writers Project. It was followed by two novellas, *Elephant Road* (1997) and *Boidik* (The Vedic Moment: 1999), and a collection of poetry, *Amaar Rashtro Amaar Nagorik* (My Country My Citizens: 2010), all published in Dhaka.

The Black Coat, his first novel, and his first book in English, was published by the Penguin Group (Penguin Books India) in May 2013. In a feature on 17 January 2013, Press Trust of India (PTI) considered the novel one of the "must read" books of 2013.

He lives in Edmonton with his wife He Wen Shu.

Photo Credit: He Wen Shu