

Birth pangs

Freedom's Mother

By Anisul Hoque

Translated from the Bengali by Falguni Ray

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It cannot be easy to write about a mother and her son. The subject seems to carry on its back a load of tales, some elevating, some bitter, some full of laughter sparkling like autumn rain, others as delicate and keen as a miniature. Mothers suffer in their son's glory, as Mary did, or are quietly left behind, like Yashoda was. Or they become, in the anxious yearning of their love, part of their son's wars, as did the Mother in Maxim Gorky's eponymous novel, or rise above tears to call down blessings on everyone when all sons are lost, as Maurya did in JM Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. The stories seem to seep secretly into one another across cultures and eras, each mysteriously absorbing the memory of others, without definition, as if unsure whether the echoes come from literature or history, from myths or from life. That seems to happen, too, in Anisul Hoque's story of a mother and her son, *Maa*, published in 2003, and now translated into English by Falguni Ray as *Freedom's Mother*, which is set in the heady but costly struggle leading up to the formation of Bangladesh in 1971,

Hoque's sensitively crafted narrative begins with the mother's burial in 1985, weaves in and out of a patchwork of memories of 1971 called up chiefly by freedom fighters and their friends, occasionally penetrating further into the past of the mother's early life, and of the son's. Its pace conceals the merging of history, memory, official and informal documentation, reconstruction, passionate sympathy and the tragic imagination of which it is constituted. The reader's sense of closeness to the narrative in a translated work must also be credited to the translation. Apart from a couple of awkwardnesses – for example, 'winded' instead of 'wound', with reference to a watch on page 78 – the translation gives the impression of transparency, of not being there at all.

As he studied the events of 1971, Hoque came across the story of Safia Begum, who did not eat rice for 14 years while she searched for her son whom the Pakistan army had arrested. She also slept on the floor, for her son "never had a bed to sleep on in the police stations of Ramna and Tejgaon...certainly not in the army torture cells in the MP hostel near the Tejgaon drum factory" (p 2). These actions become symbolic of the pain, love and determination of suffering motherhood, defining Safia Begum, the quiet centre of *Freedom's Mother*, while also identifying her with those mothers "who had lost their sons in the war", of whom the writer says: "Hundreds of such women faded away without complaint. They never protested, made no demands. Their searing stories were all muted by the passage of time". (p 341)

It is not as though Safia was always used to sleeping on the floor. The daughter of a well-to-do boatswain, she was married to the clever Yunus Chowdhury, who left his job in India after Partition to become one of the richest businessmen in Dhaka. Azad, Safia's son, was born in Kanpur a year before the formation of Pakistan, and named after freedom in response to the aspiration of a subcontinent.

Chowdhury's "massive" Eskaton villa in Dhaka and the beautiful Farashganj house were all in Safia's name. Jahanara Imam, her contemporary, a teacher, activist and writer, who, at the end of Hoque's narrative sits down to write "[a] collective memory of their life in the children's war", remembers the Safia of the early years when Jahanara's son, Rumi, now lost as well, would go to play in Azad's house: "...golden complexion, jewellery gleaming from ears, neck and arms, graceful in a wide-bordered exquisite sari... and the bunch of keys stressing her authority over the household...the very image of a Bengali housewife." (p 140)

This contented housewife simply leaves her husband when he marries again. Taking Azad with her, she first lives in the Farashganj house with her sister, but is later thrown out. After her sister's sudden death she seems to grow in stature, bringing up her sister's young family and Azad by slowly selling her gold, navigating her brood through many travails, focusing Azad's mind on studies, moving to ever poorer houses while Azad studies in Karachi, while all the time turning her back on her husband's threats and blandishments. But Hoque's is far from a domestic tale. As Safia fights her personal battle, East Pakistan is simmering and Dhaka is growing more rebellious.

Azad feels like a foreigner in Karachi till he decides to return. Hoque holds firmly on to history, describing each event in Dhaka as the skies darken from 1969 to 1971, as Sheikh Mujibur Rahman moves from the Awami League's charter of demands to the call for independence, as Yahya Khan's postponement of the National Assembly causes the city to erupt, as violence is unleashed and teachers and students are shot, as young people secretly cross the border to train as guerilla fighters and return to fight their oppressors with reckless daring.

The story of mother and son begins to merge with history as Azad is slowly absorbed into the freedom movement and events march towards the hideous night of March 25, 1971. Azad, who wishes he could write about his extraordinary mother, waits for her permission before actively entering the struggle. At first, Safia is terrified she will lose him, but she is gradually transformed into the woman who can tell him, when he is almost broken by torture in prison, never to divulge the names of his friends.

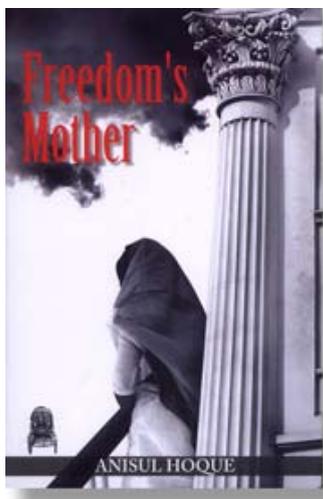
By then she has become mother to a host of young men who use her poor rooms as safe house, where she hides their weapons, feeds them and tries to keep them safe. Jewel and Bodi, Bashar, Shahadat Chowdhury and Khaled Mosharref, with many others, figure in history as in Hoque's

story. Although Hoque has written what Shahadat Chowdhury calls 'docu-fiction', and although the birth pangs of Bangladesh in 1971 may seem distant from the unrest in the Russian working classes on the eve of the 1905 revolution, Safia recalls here the fictional Mother of Gorky's novel, who feeds and hides her son's friends and carries on his struggle while he remains in jail.

Gorky's social realism poses problems of points of view that are better managed in Hoque's 'docu-fiction'. The writer breaks up the chronological flow, inserting stretches of connecting narrative between recollections, real and imagined, by characters in the tale. There are also documents, such as Azad's letters to his mother from Karachi that Zayed, Azad's devoted younger cousin whom Safia brings up, has preserved, as well as vivid descriptions, such as of the "Racecourse rally" or the bid to blow up the Siddhirganj power station. The emotional charge is often borne by songs and poems, from Tagore's and Shamsur Rahman's to George Harrison's, that the young fighters loved, all of this complicating the reality status of a story built up of numerous fragments of information imaginatively welded together. The death of Azad's mother, says the narrator, maybe Hoque, in the concluding chapter, "is an occasion to rediscover the guerilla fighters' past". "No, not rediscover," he continues, "but recover in some measure the years gone by." (p 349)

It is this register, as if of a work-in-progress, that gives the novel its immediacy and credibility, investing it simultaneously with the texture of life and the resonance of fiction. The characters in it also make it so. Jahanara is torn between her protectiveness as a mother and her ideals as a patriot when her teenage son, Rumi, wants to go to the "front". Exasperated, she says, "I sacrifice you for the cause of the land," words she repents forever after his disappearance. The internal conflict between the accomplished writer and the vulnerable mother is as much a part of Jahanara's pained memory after Safia's death as of Hoque's reconstruction of their story — with its unavoidable memory here of Tagore's *Debotaar Graash*. Zayed, whose recollections and love constitute much of the substance from which Safia is formed – through which she is "recovered" – handles the box of letters wistfully in a narrative that is also punctuated with them. He is a crucial witness in this history, existing, perhaps only with Jahanara Imam, almost equally on the multiple planes of the tale.

The only time Safia sees her son in custody, he asks her to bring him rice she has cooked. From the next day he is untraceable, and the victory a few months later leaves her empty. She waits for 14 years, sitting up on the cold floor "at every hint of a footstep, every rustle of wind outside the door" (p 2). A long way from the rich man's wife in a mansion where swans glided among fountains, Safia merges here with the thousands of mothers denied the pitying kindness of closure — in Kashmir and the Northeast, perhaps, in Sri Lanka and the Middle East, in villages and towns and islands, unknown and unsung in history. ■



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