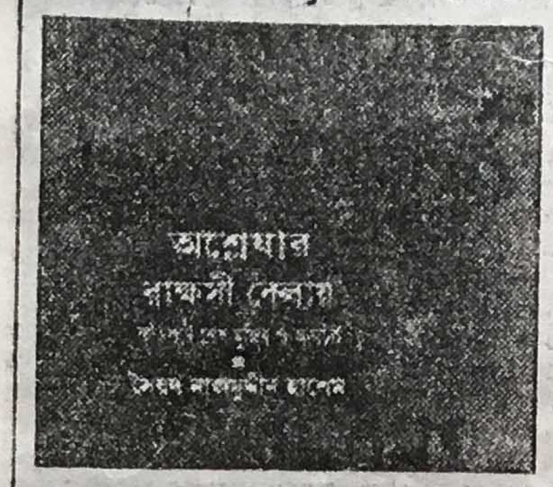
books

Ashleshar Rakshasi Belai

This is the first installment of translated excerpts from Syed Najmuddin Hashim's book *Ashleshar Rakshasi Belai* — a book of remembrances of personalities the author pays homage to.

Translated by Sonia Nishat Amin



Syed Waliullah: Images

I first met Syed Waliullah in Calcutta in the year 1945. I was a student then at Presidency College, and an apprentice in journalism at The Morning News office. He had just taken up his appointment as sub-editor with The Statesman. Dawn had just broken; the water supply trucks of the City Corporation had started the day's work; the trams had not started plying for the day. Our meeting was unpre-planned, sudden.

The smell of post-war gunpowder still hung in the air of Calcutta. Trenches and baffle-walls were the uneasy retreat of insects, snakes and moss. American G.Is and British Tommies had long since left; some had left this earth forever perhaps in distant Burma — some had been lucky to return home. The Anglo-Indian quarters off Ripon and Eliott Streets, were suddenly quiet and empty. The air resounded with rallies, processions, protests, banners bearing the words - withdraw case against Netaji — or with strains from 'kadam, kadam barhaye jai khushike geet gaye ja; 'Chalo chalo Delhi chalo; And therefore, in our sessions at the College Street Coffee House retreat, the clandestine lovers' exchanges of sweet nothings over plates of cashew nuts and cups of steaming tea — were superseded by talk of Plekhanov, Kuusinin, Manabendra Ray, Trotsky, Lenin, Rosa Luxembourg, Bukharin, and Stalin. To these were added discourses on Sartre, Mayakovsky, Dostoyevsky, Gorky, the dialectics of existentialism, and socialism. Closer to home we had Bishnu De, Samar Sen, Sudhin Dutta, Jibananda, Sukanta, Subhash. There we were splitting hairs. In the words of the poet Wordsworth: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive ..."

Early one morning, in the aftermath of some such unresolved hair-splitting, I clicked the heels of my half-torn sandals down a Park Circus lane disturbing the sleep of neighbours no doubt, and knocked on a door. It was answered by a good looking, young man - tall and of noble mien - his face intelligent, his eyes keen. I remember his yellow shell-rimmed glasses — the steaming cup in hand, the burgundy coloured dressing gown worn over paisley print pyjamas — I remember these like a portrait framed, to this day. He shared his flat with Ahmedul Kabir better known as Monu, who has feared for his sharp tongue, ruthless logic, and arrogant manners. He had recently joined a bank and was

us-but what drew our small coterie of iconoclasts to him was his unbending manner and sharpness.

Waliullah and Kabir, I soon discovered addressed each other as 'Mister' (Sahib) — this adherence to genteel Lucknow behaviour took me by surprise. Later the three of us would have a good laugh over this in other times, other cities — Dhaka, Karachi.

Many considered Waliullah a proud, snobbish, taciturn loner. But every individual's assessment is circumscribed by the moment of interaction. I remember the attraction I felt over cups of tea, on that strange but beautiful morning. Monu, bless him, confined himself all throughout to the pages of the Statesman, and joined us for tea and cigarettes only.

I have forgotten — after the lapse of so many years — what we talked about that morning — but I must have true to my nature, held forth on everything. One of the topics we liked to dwell upon was the battalion of awe-inspiring professors at Presidency College — Susobhan Sarkar, Tearaknath Sen, Sri Kumar Banerji, Somnath Maitra, Tarapada Mukherjee, Bishnu De, Kudrat-e-Khuda, A.K. Chanda, Ahmed Ali, and the editor of The Statesman, erstwhile principal of Presidency — Wordsworth. Sudhendranath Datta was Waliullah's friend — not to mention Abdur Rahman Siddiki of Khilafat Movement fame. When the besotted followers hailed Mohammad Ali Jinnah as Qaid-e-Azam, Siddiki would comment derisively. "That matriculate barrister!" I was sort of an apprentice to Siddiki and one morning he pointed to his cook and said "He has threatened to quit because I call his 'leader' names. Now, I say — why don't you retaliate but don't disturb your culinary operations!" This versatile person was one day, years later, appointed the Governor of East Pakistan at the behest of his friend Ghulam Mohammad.

After that morning, Waliullah and I ran into each other now and then. His first anthology of short stories *'Nayan chara'* had been published and *'The Story of a Tulsi Tree'* created quite a stir among the Bengali middle class. The two of us organised the first ever painting exhibition of Muslim artists in Calcutta. This was inaugurated by the noted art critic Shahed Suhrawardy. Zainul Abedin had already in the meantime earned quite a name in the wake of his now famous famine sketches which were printed in the communist party mouthpiece 'Janajuddha' However artists such as Qamrul Hasan, Shafiuddin Ahmed and Anwarul Huq received ample publicity through our exhibition. Professor Ahmed Ali and Syed Waliullah, were trying their hand at literary criticism, at the time.

.... To be continued

About the writer: Dr. Sonia N Amin is Associate Professor of History at the University of Dhaka.

** (Ashleshar rakshasi belai — A line from a poem by Sudhindranath Datta. 'Ashleshar - an ill omened*

STAR Literature

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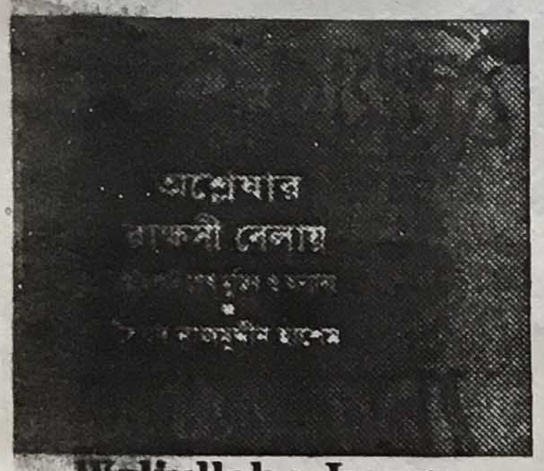
Ashleshar Rakshashi Belai (II)

Translated by Sonia Nishat Amin



Waliullah : Images

ALTHOUGH I WAS endeared by the warmth and hospitality of our good teacher Ahmed Ali, the feudal, north Indian gentleness he cultivated always struck me as over done and empty. As such his dilettantish, shallow art criticism made me quite impatient. I told him so, one day at his residence in the aristocratic quarter of town : "You will never be able to emulate Bishnu De. So rather than hanker after fame in unfamiliar territory, why not be content with the (dim!) glow of your Penny publication "Elliot's Penny World of Dreams."

When I told Wali Bhai what I had said, he agreed, but reprimanded me affectionately, for such behaviour towards a teacher. He said provocatively — "Do you have the same opinion of me as a painter and art-critic?" (Waliullah used to paint book covers). "Your expressionist paintings may be suitable for book covers, but as an art-critic you will go far, I believe. Consider your comment on Shaifuddin's painting *Parabat* — .... 'the painting is seeped in a melancholy remoteness that draws the viewer'. Now, that speaks of your deep, penetrating eye."

Waliullah would blush, when he felt pleased. I remember that finely etched face — Waliullah sitting atop a tomb in the Christian Cemetery at Park Circus where we would often meet, under the setting sun.

A few days before partition (1947), Chief Minister of Bengal Shahid Suhrawardy, and secular Congress leaders Sarat Chandra Bose and Kiranshankar Ray, were all eager to counter the suicidal path of dividing Bengal, undertaken by Jinnah and Nehru.

The counter 'greater Bengal' movement struck me as too little too late. I saw Wali Bhai agitated and disturbed by the Jinnah-Nehru stance, for the first and last time in my life. I felt this last moment dash to counter Jinnah-Nehru — was amateurish. When Miah, Bibi Razi Keya Karega Kazi — Miah being the British, the Bibis being Muslim League, and Congress — all were agreed to barter home and house, land and property — then what was the use of last moment counter-moves, I argued. Wali Bhai, idealist that he was, could not take my criticism of Suhrawardy though his reason told him the integrity of such leaders was questionable. I reminded Wali Bhai that Suhrawady had engineered through his Deputy Commissioner of Police Mr Doha, the infamous Hindu -Muslim riot in Calcutta a few months back, to step up the Pakistan Movement. And here he was, participating in the greater Bengal Movement too! Waliullah was also at a loss to refute my contention that the escalation of terror in the mind of the Hindu middle class in Calcutta and Noakhali following communal riots, had made partition inevitable.

Still, I accompanied him to a political meeting a few days later, at his request. I remember being deeply impressed by Monu Kabir's address that day. In simple words Monu's argument ran thus : If the port of Calcutta and East Bengal are separated from each other — Calcutta/West Bengal would pass into the hands of Marwaris and East Bengal would become dominated by Memon-Punjabi predators. The exogenous predators would have an underhand understanding and agenda of exploiting Bengal despite apparent political animosity. History has proved Monu right.

Wali Bhai, excited had exclaimed that day — "Gokhales comment is true, my dear. What Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow."

Unmoved, I threw damp water on this and replied "Far truer is historian Kettelby's statement : When Bengal sneezes India catches cold. The malaise that has been deliberately produced by injecting the germ of communalism in our social body — will torment us all — the innocent as well as the guilty !" I saw my words bear bitter fruit once more in 1971.

India was partitioned. At Zainul Abedin's entreaty Waliullah moved to Dhaka and took up a job with the news section of the Radio service. He set up abode in a small room on the upper floor of the office at Nimtali. He would hand over his inadequate salary each month to his Chaprasi 'Chhote Khan' who would then dispense therefrom chapati, curry, daal, and cigarettes, per requirement. I was posted in Chittagong with the Daily Azad as News reporter. Syed Nuruddin was the Dhaka correspondent for the Calcutta based "Ittehad," Zahur Hussain Chowdhury hand in hand with the scintillating Shishir Bhadhuri, somewhere in old Dhaka; Monu Kabir manager of State Bank in Chittagong ; the duo AKM Ahsan and Al Mamun Sanaul Huq had put up with Monu in his colonial hilltop bungalow, swotting for the Civil Service exam night and day. Shawkat Osman was undisputed lord over a small ring of Chittagong intellectuals and litterateurs; Kalim Sharafi was busy trying to reproduce the Calcutta theatre and arts movement there; in Dhaka Abul Hussain and Ahsan Habib, Syed Ali Ahsan and Farrukh Ahmed were engaged in whipping up the Bangali versus Pakistani discourse debate, through mutually exclusive streams of poetry. Munir Chowhdury was at his peak as dramatist, Professor Mozaffar Ahmed Chowdhury, still green then, barely had time to look up from his tomes on political economy in his small university office room. It was all glorious confusion and clamour.

In the midst of which I would seek refuge, on occasion, in Waliullah's small room.

He was like a skilled, tireless diver hunting for pearls forever in the endless depths of the ocean of knowledge and art.

There was but one problem and that was familial. The two brothers Nasrullah and Waliullah were both unmarried at the time. They were very close to each other. Now, Nasrullah was convinced that he was suffering from some incurable disease — and his brother believed in this as if it were gospel truth. Off Nasrullah would go to Calcutta for treatment, every other month — now for TB now for some deadly disease — trips which resulted in waste of time and money. The famed Calcutta physicians, including Dr. Moni De, were dismissed by the two brothers as quacks, for the unforgivable act of declaring Nasrullah totally healthy and free of disease !

Wali Bhai was coerced into a government job by wellwisher "Sputnik". I too, drifted along somehow, into the post of Assistant Editor in the Radio Department, around the close of 1948, thus taking leave of student politics and all that. The following year the Information desk of the Radio department was shifted to Karachi and thence we were headed.

In the jaws of an ill-starred time : Remembering Sheikh Mujib and Others by Syed Najimuddin Hashim

About the writer: Dr Sonia N Amin Associate Professor of history at Dhaka University.

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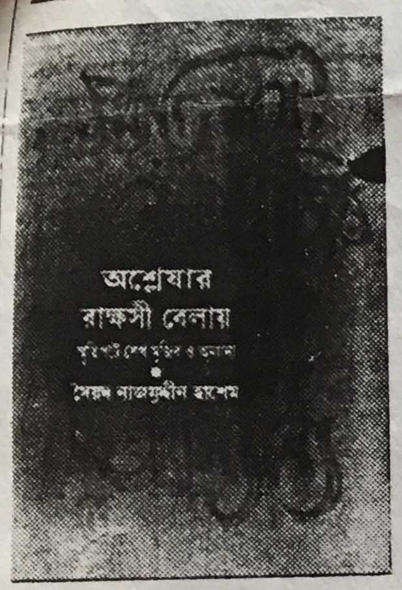
Ashleshar Rakshashi Belai* (III)

Translated by Sonia Nishat Amin



SO, TO KARACHI WE came. Wali *bhai* was very restless. He would stride up and down in the midst of our work at the news editor's room. No one could write English as well as he did. Soon, veteran British news reader Eric Warner, who too was a bachelor, and Wali *bhai* became fast friends. Eric was one of the countless refugees who had marched on foot from Burma to India during the Second World War.

Waliullah's innate chivalry towards women put him in a tight spot now and then, and rescued him from these, as well. Fun-loving Kalimullah, in order to embarrass him, in collaboration with a few others, spread harmless rumours about Wali *bhai* linking his name with Anise Mandiwala — beautiful newscaster from Christian College; Jahanara Syed from Hyderabad; the fiery Anita Ghulam Ali daughter of the famous judge from Sind; and Fatema Mansuri of the Gujrati service (in the Radio Department). At the time we were all staying in a hall at the YMCA and would stop over at the Hotel Palmgrove (then owned by a Hindu) or at 'Mexicano', for a change from our usual fare. Our sessions would be joined by persons such as Ismail Ibrahim Allu — son of the Bombay millionaire, but renowned for his elegant poetry in English; the painter whose real name is now forever lost behind his *takhallus* (pen-name) Ibn Isha — and the beautiful, aristocratic writer Qurratul Ain Hyder. Qurratul Ain had published her *'Aag Ka Dariya'* (River of Fire) — a novel dating back to prehistoric times. The author in her work had resorted to the doctrine of 'reincarnation' which offended, I suppose, the sentiment of the powers that be in Pakistan. Qurratul sought asylum in India where she was honoured with the highest literary award (According to Kalimullah, the Wali-Qurratul romance had reached, though unbeknownst to all, the heights of the famed Devdas-Parbati!). Ibrahim Jalis — author of *'Chalis Karore Bhikhari'* — was also a regular at our small gatherings.

After observing all austerities of the Christian Hostel, Waliullah sought refuge in a small, secluded flat where he could pursue his library endeavours in peace. It was as a devotee of the literary muse that Miss Casabianca, cultural attache of the Italian embassy, dropped in on Wali one day. Instantly self-styled guardians and well-wishers rushed in to hold at bay the consequences of this "unfortunate" infatuation, which soon came to a close, however.

In 1951 Waliullah left for Australia as press attache to our diplomatic mission there. I met him at Sydney the following year when my younger colleague at the Radio Office Zia Mohiuddin and I arrived in Australia for a training programme under the Colombo Plan. I introduced Wali *bhai* to our friend Anne-Marie Thibault, Fullbright scholar to Australia from Paris. Wali *bhai* I think paid more attention that night to the critics and patrons of art, on that evening of his first meeting with Anne. I do not know the history of the intervening years. We met again in Karachi, in 1953 where one evening the three of us — Dirky, Malek and I — gathered at a flat in Elphinstone Street to celebrate Anne-Marie and Waliullah's wedding. Shortly after the couple left for Indonesia. I learnt from their letter that a belated honeymoon was spent among the coral reefs off the island of Bali.

We did not see each other for a long time after this. When we did meet it was 1968, and I had arrived in Paris to take over from Syed Waliullah as First Secretary at the Embassy, and he was off to join UNESCO. We were like one big family, in Paris. We travelled to Versailles or Fontainbleau in Wali *bhai's* luxurious car — or spent the day picnicking in the garden of Bois-de-Bologne. Anne Marie and my wife became fast friends; their children Semeen and Iraj were inseparable from our Snighdo and Tanmay.

I remember the long hours the two of us spent walking in the woods and talking of everything under the sun. The issue of China was a bone of contention between us. China was in the throes of the 'Cultural Revolution' — the heritage bestowed by centuries of achievement in art, literature and philosophy, was being trampled under foot in the name of some ill-conceived amateurish 'revolution'. This utter disregard of the teachings of Marx and Lenin and the mass hysteria that had seized that nation, pained me. Wali *bhai*, however, was stoical about it. He felt that the attempt on part of the younger breed — the 'Red Guards' to dislodge the old and experienced leaders, would have some positive far-reaching as well as immediate consequences. This would (so he felt), be conducive to the state of permanent revolution envisaged by Trotsky! I must admit, the fact that despite arguing over everything day in and day out, there was no crack in our friendship, was due to Wali *bhai's* innate cordiality and tolerance. We were bound together by our deepest philosophy of life, literature and art, the tremors in remote China could not touch our friendship there.

We shared another bond. France was then in the throes of the 'May Revolution' drawn along the lines of Russia's October upheaval. The brave new generation of France in defiance of the older one, had taken over the reins for a couple of days. We were both ardent admirers of President de Gaulle — specially his independent foreign policy which was aimed at distancing France from the US military alliance — network. The dauntless courage and spirit of the young also evoked our profound sympathy.

I had written a report analysing the concurrence of facts that had led to the explosive events in France, right before our eyes, so to speak. For its title I had borrowed from Lenin's pamphlet on the abortive revolution of 1905.

After reading it Wali *bhai* agreed with me on several counts: the smouldering embers left by the constrictive legacy of the Code Napoleon, finally caught fire — but to this must be added the revolutionary ideas of Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Ho Chi Minh, Mao Tse Tung, Lenin, Trotsky, philosopher Herbert Marcuse, Nechayev, the Russian nihilist, Algerian theorist Frantz Fanon, and the father of Nihilism Prince Kropotkin.

* *In the Jaws of an Ill-starred Time Remembering Sheikh Mujib and Others.* by Najmuddin Hashim

About the writer: Dr Sonia N Amin Associate Professor of History at Dhaka University.

My dear Anne-Marie, October 27, 1971.

I was about to send you the press clippings on Syed Waliullah when I got your cable. The difficulty is that here in Pindi I do not have all the clippings which are mostly from Dacca papers which means that most of the cli[illegible] are in Bengali which have to be rendered in[illegible] for your perusal.

I [illegible]

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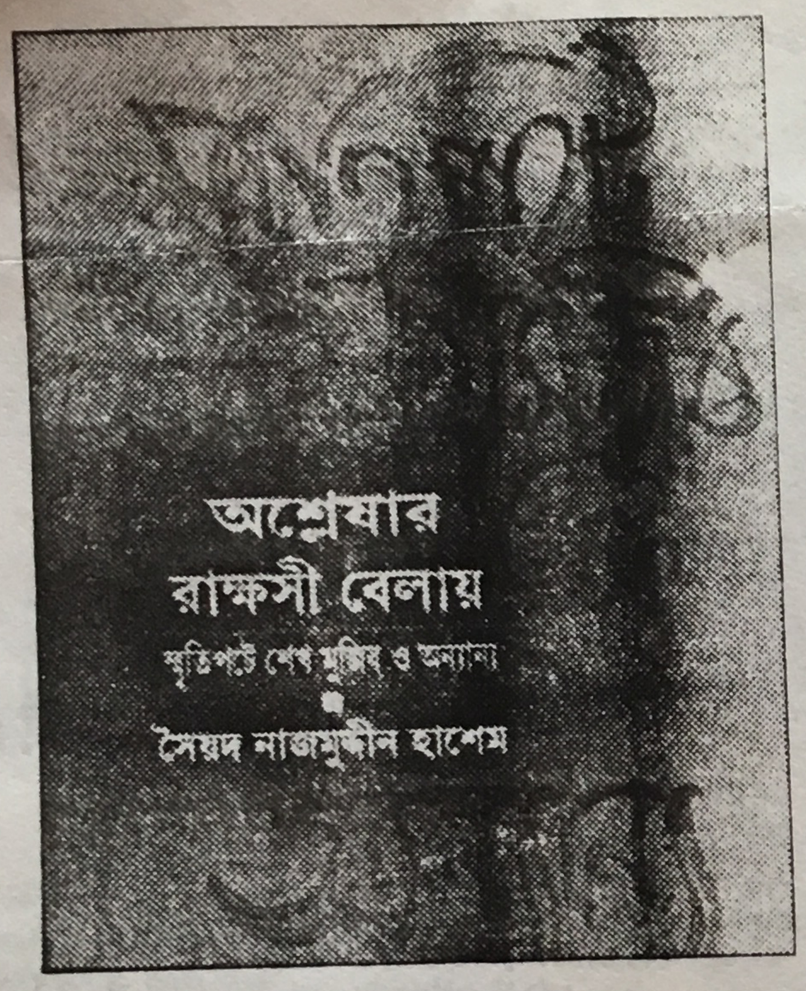
Ashleshar Rakshashi Belai — IV

Translated by Sonia Nishat Amin



Syed Waliullah

AMONG THOSE INTELLECTUALS and writers who had fanned the fire of unrest in the sixties were French poet Paul Nizan, and father of Marxian structuralist thought, Claude Levi-Strauss, holding forth at Nantiees near Paris. Waliullah's eyes lit up at the mention of these two. He derived an immense, quiet satisfaction from the knowledge that the pen had still the power to move the world. And then our conversation would move on to the revolutions in France, Russia, China or Cuba — their ideologies and genesis; our arguments would branch off into diverse zones. Waliullah's erudition, his power of analysis and intensity of feeling never failed to amaze me. He was always concerned with the plight of Bengalees, their enslavement, and struggle for rights/autonomy. The vision of a free 'Bangladesh' — the kind of polity the Bengalees could claim as a homeland — were concerns even at that early date. He had doubts about the opportunist character of the Bengali middle-class. This also produced some anxiety about the particular brand of Bengali nationalism professed by that class. He was preoccupied with the quick and effective spread of education which could only come under a socialist agenda. He was convinced of this because he felt any change in the status-quo could be achieved not under a selfish, opportunist, rhetoric-prone leadership, but through the alternative development of rural, subaltern cadres. I could not agree with him fully that day, when a startling resistance was beginning to grow against.

I had the opportunity to work with Wali bhai on account of my assignment as Country Representative to the Sub-commission on Communications at UNESCO while its General Conference was in progress. Waliullah was [illegible] representing the Secretariat seated on the dais. His indulgence allowed me that year to make assertions and push my arguments through, forcefully.

On the eve of my departure from Paris (due to some difference of opinion with our ambassador there) I met the famed Tagore-singer Rajeswari Dutta, widow of poet Sudhindranath Dutta, at Waliullah and Anne Marie's residence. Rajeswari was known to us in our adolescence by her Punjabi surname

In the Jaws of an
by Syed Najm

'Basudeva'. After her husband's untimely demise, Rajeswari had gone into a phase of stony detachment from the world — no song escaped her lips. Wali bhai was recounting this incident to us. His voice shook slightly.

The first glimpse I caught of Rajeswari reminded me of the goddess Melancholy. I was somewhat inhibited. Though I craved to hear her sing I could not articulate the thought... There was a portable cassette-player on a table. While turning its knob, absent-mindedly, I recited those timeless lines from Sudhindranath Dutta: *Moder shakkhat holo ashleshar rakshashi be*

[illegible] is Professor of History at Dhaka University.

[illegible] She was [illegible]

January 18, 1997 রিভিউ, ১৪০৩ ॥

Ill-starred Time
uddin Hashem

Parting from our constant companion of two years — Waliullah and Anne-Marie Thibeaux, was painful. Our farewell dinner by candle-light, in their apartment, is still on the canvas of my mind like a still-life.

I met him briefly for the last time in 1970 at Rawalpindi. I was then the Executive Officer of the Pakistan Council. We were holding a reception in Waliullah's honour. The room was teeming with people. After my address, Kalimullah read excerpts from Wali bhai's *'Lal Shalu'* translated in Urdu. Others paid their tributes. Waliullah was visibly moved, and said "Will anyone remember me in my own land, after so long a lapse of time?"

Wali bhai had written a long letter on his return to Paris, describing the unprecedented, spontaneous, welcome and receptions accorded to him in Bangladesh (East Pakistan) during his visit that time. He mentioned Shawkat Osman, Sanaul Huq and Munir Chowdhury, specifically. The essence of his letter was:

"When one finds the likes of selfless, sincere people such as these in the ranks of the narrow, envious Bengali middle-class, my hope for that nation is renewed. I share your visions of the fate of eternal Bengal."

And then, I saw Waliullah for the last time, on my way from London to Rangoon, at the shady cemetery of Meudon, near Paris, in August 1980. The cemetery lying at the end of a gravel path — lined by trees which cast their shade all day on the grassy green. Flowers, the weekend's offerings were strewn over the stone covered graves. As I stood silently beside his grave, Sanaul Huq's lines (written for him) came to mind, "Why here, in a grave at Meudon, so far from Chattal?" Anne Marie had the same question. I told her "Perhaps this could be his epitaph — or his own lines 'He sleeps, because sleep is death'. But I prefer the first because that links us all — you, Wali, distant Bangladesh." But Anne was unresponsive. She was pained and puzzled by the callous behaviour of Wali's relatives and friends after his sudden demise. Her children Irej and Simin were disenchanted with Bengalis, too.

Waliullah was one of the visionaries who dreamt of the freedom of mankind; during our War of Liberation he had worked ceaselessly to mount public opinion in France in favour of the Bengalees' struggle. And yet the bureaucrats of independent Bangladesh had raised petty questions regarding Waliullah's nationality and deprived his widow and children of their rightful share. I found among Simin's papers, the condolence message sent by the then President of Bangladesh to Anne-Marie. It was written in April 1972, seven months after Waliullah's death. The message contains references to the friendship between the two of them; eulogies of Waliullah's works; the place he occupies in the generation of post-independent writers of Bangladesh. What is missing in the condolence letter is a categorical recognition of Waliullah's role in the nine months of Liberation War.

That is why I had no answer to Anne Marie's question that day at the cemetery at Meudon "What should be his epitaph?"

Rangoon, Burma, October 1980.

About the writer: Sonia Nishat Amin is Associate Professor of History at Dhaka University.