MY LIFE
PLUS MINUS

MOHIT UL ALAM

Gripper Mark

Dedicated to my sons

Gafur Ul Wadud Alam (Ripon)
Nasih Ul Wadud Alam (Paolo)
Aquib Ul Wadud Alam (Avra)

PREFACE

A humble life calls for a humble telling. This narrative about my life is written with no great ambition but to put on record the life I have lived so far. Writing an autobiography is difficult because of the possibility of creating enemies rather than friends. I have allowed my thoughts to flow like a river coursing during a full monsoon season, when it may inundate many an acre of dry land, which it would typically not do at other times. In this flow of continuous reminiscing, I did not consciously edit, omit, or add anything that the flow of thoughts did not call for. I mean to say that, though I was writing an autobiography, I felt a storyline developing around my life of its own accord. I gave liberty to this essential aspect of storytelling — the narrative flow — to shape the structure. That is why some people I knew or have known have occupied larger spaces than others. And then, many people who have crossed paths with me have not even been mentioned. The same is true about the events recorded here. Some events may have been emphasized more than they deserve, while some more deserving ones have been muted.

No autobiographical narrative can claim to represent life in full. There are missing links, and these are inevitable. I bridged them with fictional but logical connections when memory faltered. This bridging had to occur occasionally in what follows because I have written the entire narrative from memory, as I never kept a diary. However, fortunately, many significant events in my life are etched in my mind with perfect remembrance of dates and years. This retention has become possible because I have been fascinated with dates and events since childhood. I have described all events as truthfully as I recall them, and constructed some conversations from memory, which may not have reproduced the lines spoken exactly. But they retain, in essence, what was spoken.

This narrative unfolds my life into three phases: from my childhood to adolescence (Chapters 1-6), from adolescence to marriage (Chapters 7-12), and my professional and personal life (Chapters 13-20).

I have situated my personal life within the broader socio-political context of my times—a process known as autoethnography. Moreover, it can be classified as a bildungsroman, as it traces my growth from childhood through adulthood and into my present phase.

This pattern was shaped by my second reading of the oversized Dickensian masterpiece, *David Copperfield*, which I first read during the Liberation War in 1971, and again just before I started writing this memoir. Dickens's protagonist, David, grows nicely from pristine innocence into a challenging adulthood. I dare to say that I have, though very distantly, lived through a similar journey in my life. A second book that I think stirred me to write

this narrative is the popular novel *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger. Like Dickens's novel, here also we find a high degree of self-effacing tendencies, but the way Salinger had stuck to the style of intimating his readers with his narrative in a very personalized form is what I tried to retain in my prose. The third book that inspired me is a memoir I read long ago, Khushbant Sing's *Truth, Love & a Little Malice.* The candid nature of his descriptions, occasionally reasonably ribald, I have not shied away from following.

I have also discovered that English at the creative level is fathomously more challenging than English at the professional level. A non-native speaker surely misses the nuances of a native speaker. My language is marked throughout by this struggle to achieve something closer to native fluency, and how it continued to elude me. Nothing doing.

The narrative spans roughly sixty-four years, beginning in 1959, when I was seven years old and first began to form lasting memories, and ending in 2023, at seventy-one, having witnessed my youngest son's marriage. In the continuous flow of the narrative, I have avoided flashbacks as much as possible, though I could not omit them entirely. I also tried not to overshadow my reflections at a given phase in my earlier life with the more mature feelings of a later time. I have also tried to retain the culture-specific Bengali terms as they are used and pronounced.

And since no life is separable from its time and place, I did not alter the socio-political realities I witnessed, experienced, and felt through. I let them be described as I

knew or observed them from my perspective, which may be right or wrong, but which is honestly and neutrally rendered.

I shared the first draft of this manuscript with numerous relatives, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances, seeking their feedback and factual corrections. I am grateful to my friends Morshed Shafiul Hasan, Shafiuddin Harun, and Golam Kibria Bhuiyan for their valuable responses. I would especially like to thank Professor Fakrul Alam (Fakrul Bhai), whose suggestions led to several critical linguistic refinements.

Besides, many other readers deserve acknowledgment, but for space, I would like to mention only a few who were very positive that the memoir should be published—my colleagues at DELL, Sadat Zaman Khan, Syed Jashim Uddin, Md. Rafiqul Islam, Ghazi Shahadat Hossain, Mohammad Solaiman Chowdhury, Dr. Abdur Rahim, Shahnaz Parvin, Kohinoor Akther, Rumana Chowdhury, Shahidul Alam Chowdhury, Syeda Salma Akter, Sumit Chowdhury, Shantanu Das, Mahadi Rahman Niskash, J. D. Milton, Sarah Ishita, and my former colleagues at CU, Professor Jahangir-bin Sarwar, Professor Mah-e-Noor Qudsi Islam, were all ardent supporters of having this memoir published sooner rather than later. Professor Dr. Harun-Ur-Rashid Askari, former Vice-Chancellor of the International Islamic University often showed interest in the memoir's publication. Besides, Dr. Shah Ahmed Ripon, Dr. Abul Hosain (Suomn Hayat), Amzad Hossain, and Raselul Kader always inspired me to write my autobiography—hearty thanks to them.

Many friends and relatives also desired the publication of this memoir, but by naming a few, I will

only do injustice to others I have not mentioned. My friend Golam Ferdous Kashem provided me with some essential factual corrections, and my second daughter-in-law, Jainab Tabassum Banu Sonali, a PhD candidate in English at North Dakota State University in Fargo, offered me some insightful feedback. My thanks to them. My wife, Aliya Suraiya Khanam (Khuku), bore a pleasant attitude while I was shaping and reshaping the draft—hearty thanks to her.

Lastly, my publisher, Grippermark Publication, deserves sincere thanks for agreeing to publish it and thus establishing a lifelong bond with me.

Between completing this manuscript and preparing it for publication, our country experienced a historic revolution. On August 5, 2024, the previous autocratic regime was overthrown through a mass uprising of students and citizens, in which more than fifteen hundred people were martyred. Then, on 8 August, an Interim Government was formed under Professor Dr. Muhammad Yunus, Bangladesh's only Nobel Laureate, as Chief Adviser.

I offer my most profound homage to those who lost their lives and pray to Allah for their eternal peace, for the recovery of the wounded, and for the tremendous success of the present government. These events are not included in this volume, as they occurred after I had finished writing the manuscript. Hopefully, I will write about them in a second volume.

Whatever tone different readers may find in this memoir, from my side, I would love to declare that I have written the autobiography with love and with malice towards none.

There may be factual inaccuracies or unintended offense made, all of which may be corrected in the next edition, if it ever so happens.

I want to apologize to everyone for any errors or infringements I may have inadvertently made in the text.

May Allah be with me always.

Mohit Ul Alam
Chittagong
1 July 2025

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I

THE CHILD THAT I WAS

My mother[1] slept in the same bed as we five younger siblings did. The room was big, but it always felt vapid during hot days. The elder siblings slept in separate beds. The third senior brother, Moyeen[2] Bhai[3], had married Nargis[4] Bhabi[5], the third daughter of my youngest uncle, poet Wahid Ul Alam[6], a little before I began remembering things. Or I could hazily remember the occasion. Moyeen Bhai occupied the corner room in

1 Rahela Khatun (1915?-2007), my mother, had given birth to eleven children.

2 Moyeen Ul Alam (1937-2018), the third son of my parents, later became a prominent journalist in Bangladesh. He was a versatile genius and a cornerstone of the Alam Family.

3 'Bhai' in Bengali means elder brother; the word is used for family members and any respectful person.

4 Nargis Ul Alam (1942-), the third daughter of my Uncle Wahid Ul Alam, was married to Moyeen Bhai.

5 'Bhabi' is the Bengali word for an elder brother's wife. Like 'Bhai', it is also very generatively used.

6 Wahidul Alam (1911-1998) was my father's youngest brother of four. He was an accomplished poet and served as an assistant teacher at Chittagong Collegiate School for a long period.

the eastern part of the house. The fourth brother, Sabih Bhai[7], attended a night college. He was always late for dinner. My mother would not take her meal until he was back home.

My mother was never in a hurry. She moved in slow motion, doing the household chores. After Sabih Bhai finished his night meal, my mother would offer her *esha* (night) prayer, which continued late into the night. Then she would come to bed silently, lifting the mosquito net only a little to sneak herself into her place in bed, not allowing a single mosquito to enter the net. While she lay on the extreme side of the bed, our youngest sibling, Sazed[8], slept beside her. I, slightly older than him, slept beside him. On my right, three of my immediate elder sisters slept in a row. The youngest of them, Nazu[9] Apa[10], was two and a half years older than I, and junior to the next sister, Safayat Apa, by two years. Meanwhile, Madina Apa, the eldest of our five younger siblings, occupied the opposite end of the bed. The remaining seven senior children, two brothers and five sisters, were married and lived in different places in Chittagong.[11]

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7 Sabih Ul Alam (1940-) later became a prominent artist and designer and the founding principal of Chittagong Art College.

8 Sazed Ul Alam (1956-) lives in Spain with his Spanish wife and children. He is a musician and the founder of the famous Souls Band.

9 Nazmatul Alam (1950-), the youngest daughter, ninth in serial. later married Mahmud Bhai, our cousin, the eldest son of Uncle Wahid Ul Alam. She made her name as a juvenile author.

10 'Apa' is the Bengali word for an elder sister.

11 Chittagong is now officially spelled as Chattogram, but I retain the older form.

I was the only one awake when my mother entered the mosquito net. She did not realize that I was awake. But with her presence, I felt somewhat reassured. My heart went out to her silently. But my mother simply pulled the wrapper over her head and sank into a deep sleep. I was awake. Now, I looked through the window. One part of its wooden sash was open. The night sky travelled silently. The buzzing sounds of the night rang loudly whenever my ears became conscious of them. Did I see a ghost peeping at us through the window? Was it a devil coming for the souls of the people? A few weeks ago, one of my playmates, Zakir, told me that people died as much as they were born. When Zakir told me such things, a cold shudder would run down my back. Everybody died. So, I would also die. Fear of death caught me like a fox in my fairy book catching a chicken. I was terrified by that thought. I looked up through the window every moment to see if anything moved! I looked to my left, then to my right. My siblings were all silent--sleeping creatures. I could hear the soft sound of their breaths and watch their bodies in corresponding motion.

Zakir lived with his family in a house just opposite ours. What a family it was! It was marked by a total absence of education. Zakir did not go to school, nor did any of his brothers or sisters. My father[12] had bought this

12 Mahbub-ul Alam (1898-1981), born in Chittagong, was a renowned author of the first generation of Muslim writers. He won Adamji prize, Bangla Academy prize, and Ekushey Padak (1978) for literature. A veteran of the First World War, he fought in Mesopotamia on behalf of the British against the Turkish army.

piece of land just after I was born, in the early 1950s. He built a bamboo house on it. A pond was dug in front of the house, where fish wriggled all the time to our great joy, and my mother's pet ducks swam gleefully. My father had ended his job at the sub-registration office. His last posting was in Sylhet. He became inspector of sub-registration just a week before his retirement. I was born on 13 December 1952. I calculated at a later point in my life that I was conceived in February of 1952, a great month in our country's history. So that our mother tongue, Bengali, could be recognized as one of the state languages of Pakistan, we conducted a movement, and on the fateful day of February 21, five of our heroes--Barkat, Salam, Jabbar, Rafique, and Shafi--lost their lives in police firing. These language martyrs are a part of our glorious history, and I also drew inspiration from the thought that my fetus was not separated from this great movement.

But to come back to my father. I question, even today, why he had to buy a plot in that obnoxious area of Chittagong, called Kazir Dewry. I can give you many reasons. Perhaps my father was short on cash. After all, he and my mother had seen the birth of almost one newborn baby every two years. Yet they had a long, happy married life. But my father could not have saved money to buy a plot in a more convenient area. My father believed in high thinking and simple living. But he was not an ordinary government official as I am trying to portray him. He was a renowned writer, a prize-winning one. From another angle, that is, if I had not said it, I would have said less. He was a soldier in the British Indian Army. He joined the 49th Bengal regiment in 1917,

crossed the Karachi bastion, and fought in Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq) for three years until the army was disbanded at the end of the First World War. He returned home in 1920, secured a job in the registration department, and was on official duty in many thanas until his retirement, when he came back to Chittagong, his birthplace. As a Muslim, he had fought against the Turkish Sultanate on behalf of the British army. This subtle discrepancy was never raised as a pertinent question because India was a British colony at the time.

His contemporary, Quazi Nazrul Islam, was from Churulia, Asansol, India, and had joined the war like my father. However, Nazrul was unable to go to the war front due to a lack of physical fitness. He spent time in Karachi as a Havildar, studied Persian and Arabic literature during his off-duty hours, and wrote poetry. He was a genius of a class by himself, and stirred the whole nation against the British with a revolutionary spirit that is yet unsurpassed. With the birth of Bangladesh in 1971 under the aegis of our Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Nazrul was brought to Bangladesh on May 24, 1972, on his 74th birthday. Later, he was made our National Poet.

Nazrul had a formal relationship with my father, but with my younger uncle, poet Didarul Alam, Nazrul had a solid friendship. This Uncle of mine was the tragic character of our family, like Keats and Shelley; he had died very young, at the age of twenty-six, a victim of tuberculosis. He died in December 1929. But Nazrul visited him at the beginning of the year. He came to our ancestral home at Fatehabad, Hathazari, on January 25,