

SHORT STORY

Anglo Indian Dialogue

SYED MUJTOBA ALI,
(translated by Asrar Chowdhury)

At home and abroad I've noticed time and time again that when it comes to questions by the English and French, Indians can't muster an honest reply. The chief reasons behind this are that (1) Indians aren't quite familiar with their own heritage and culture—our education system is mainly responsible for this; (2) ignorance about foreign customs—if they had that knowledge then they could have merely pointed their fingers back at the foreigners and shown them that whatever he was doing they were also did the same, albeit in a different way, or had done so some time in the past. The following dialogue will help establish this argument, and I also hope that it will benefit some Indians.

Foreigner: I invited you at the Firpo that day. You ran off under many pretexts. I heard that you went to the Amjadia Hotel to have your meal. The world famous French chef de cuisine cooks the food at the Firpo. Whose 'jungle-like' cooking did you go to eat neglecting that chef?

Indian: Before judging other specialities of your cooking, I'm drawing your attention to a very simple matter. I don't know whether you've noticed, but in your cooking three flavours are absent—the bitter, sour and the spicy. In other words, out of six flavours half is absent. You do add a little bit of spice, but you confine it in a bottle and keep it on your table because your fear and suspicion towards this flavour hasn't totally evaporated. Therefore, even though one may not have tasted your food, one can easily say that whatever other qualities your cooking may possess, there won't be any

variety. Just salt and sweet, exactly what music do you think you'd be able to fry from only the two notes of 'Do' and 'Re'? Do you think you can put up a two-string *dotara* against a *veena*? This is why even Amjadia's jungle-stuff can easily lay low your chef. Secondly, there's no difference between your dining table and kitchen. On the table you keep a basket, a bottle made of broken glass you call a *cruet*. At an extreme, if somebody fails to swallow something dry, boiled or fire-burned, then that person has to pretend to be an expert chef at the table. To add fat you pour olive oil, to make things strong a layer of mustard, and to make things sharp you sprinkle pepper—again, since the mouth of the bottle is sealed, therefore it's inevitable that there will be such a fuss that it will result in simultaneous loss of your bones and patience—at the same time the cook living in fear of his sahib has applied very little salt—have you noticed that eighty percent of the people sprinkle salt before tasting their soup? Therefore apply salt. In spite of all this, when you have noticed that your meal is still tasteless then you sprinkle a weird liquid called *sauce*. If you do have the blood of a chef in your body, you may be able to sprinkle layers of doses of medicine according to the doctor's prescription, but I, my friend, am the son of a gentleman, and in our house my mother and aunts finish all this in the kitchen while they're cooking. Shouldn't there be a difference between the dining room and the kitchen?

Englishman: There's so much capriciousness because there's difference in taste.

Indian: Don't make those elder brother arguments with me. If that is so, then why don't you boil meat lighting a fire in the dining room? Why don't you roast kebabs

on a grill? Some like it half done, others like it well done. There's difference in taste even there; in that case why don't you let the cook do that job? The bottom-line argument is that there is this difference in taste; admitting this, the chef seeks an intermediate solution that's acceptable to many and the righteous admits it only to travel to a

thrilled in the creation of literature.

Englishman: Let's forget all this. However, you ate the food at the Amjadia with your hands; there's no arrangement of knives and forks there.

Indian: No, there is such an arrangement. In your company, the Indian sub-



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continent is becoming so barbaric day by day that Indians are also trying to use knives and forks. I can't fathom the need for such filthiness.

Englishman: Filthiness, good heavens?

Indian: Obviously. There's your knife,

fork and spoon; and there's the napkin. You rub it and see how much filth comes out. And whatever won't come out will enter your stomach without your notice. And now, let me rub my finger; see how much filth comes out. And if my fingers do become dirty, then I'll go to the restroom and make my fingers crystal clean. If you chase me with your knife and fork, then the manager will call the police thinking that you've just received an apprenticeship in the art of theft. And listen to this final issue; I'm putting my own finger in my own mouth; whereas, the fork and spoon that you're putting in your very own mouth, heaven knows how many hundreds and thousands of lips and stomachs of pyorrhoea-laden patients it has travelled. Do you know any track of this? The Chinese are cleaner compared to you folks. They enter a hotel carrying their own chopsticks.

Englishman: All right. Let's forget all this (*smoke*).

Indian: Yes, the whole discussion is heart-breaking for me as well. A Bengali Christian friend of mine once ate a *Hilsa* with a knife and fork—a pucca sahib he was—such that he swallowed the bones of the *Hilsa* so awkwardly and improperly that all the bones of his body have now made a permanent settlement in the graveyard (*in tears*).

Englishman: Aha! In that case, better not to eat *Hilsa*.

Indian: Then as an Englishman, better not to eat bacon and eggs; as a Frenchman, better not to drink champagne; as a German, better not to eat sausages; as a Bengali, better not to eat *Hilsa*; better to die from starvation; better to commit suicide. Don't you feel ashamed to say all this? You want to set up a committee called '*British Tradition in Danger*' if you fail to get your

tinned bacon from back home while living on the soil of Bengal, and why should I not eat the *Hilsa* of the Ganges sitting on the banks of the Ganges? Astonishing talk!

Englishman: Let's forget all this (*smoke*). But you just mentioned that your womenfolk cook; do they only cook? Why do they follow this brutal ritual of the purdah?

Indian: That's what they do follow; when you meet them, you can ask them yourself.

Englishman: There's no way of meeting them at all.

Indian: That is our extreme good fortune.

Englishman: (*in deep thought*). Don't you think what you just said is a bit too harsh? Are we that bad?

Indian: Sahib, I'm not judging what's good or bad. However, in 1757 when we entered into wedlock with you, it's not that all of our poison was adulterated, but that having lost the *gamcha* of self-rule, and as a result having been submerged for two hundred wintry years in indescribable poverty, there's no way we can crawl back on to land. Since the men are in such a state, it's no wonder the women in the *andarmahal* have quit you.

Englishman: These are all exterior matters; your heritage, culture—

Indian: That discussion is for another day. I now have to go to the streets to sing *Quit India* right now.

Syed Mujtoba Ali (1904-74) is regarded as one of the finest humorists of Bangla literature. The above article was written in December 1945. Asrar Chowdhury teaches Economics at Jahangirnagar University

Book Review A Robust Voice

Kaiser Huq

Collected Poems 1970 - 2005 by Keki N. Daruwalla; New Delhi: Penguin India; 2006; 355 pp.

The lone puff on the back cover of this handsome collection misquotes a beguiling comment from Nissim Ezekiel's review of the second verse collections of Daruwalla and A.K. Ramanujan: "Daruwalla has the energy of the lion. Ramanujan has the cunning of the fox." Ezekiel had actually written "guile of the fox", so the difference is only in the number of syllables, not the meaning. It's an illuminating contrast, as long as one doesn't rush to Aesop for elucidation. Ezekiel wasn't alluding to anything, and meant precisely what he said. Ramanujan is sly, subtle, ironic; Daruwalla brash, hard-hitting, full-throated.

Daruwalla's debut collection, *Under Orion*, came out in 1970 and including the present volume he has nine to his credit, a prolific outpouring of verse mostly drafted

and crafted in the course of a career in the Indian Police Service. Like George Orwell he has made effective use of his experience as a police officer, as when he sketches with clinical precision the horror of mob violence:

There is nothing much to distinguish one lathi blow from another; the same inverted back, the same arc through the air the curve consummated on the cowering body and beneath the raining blows a swarm of limbs twisting like tentacles. ("Death by Burial")

A more recent poem, "District Law Courts", gives a cynical view of the institution that deals with crime, introducing us to "a hacksaw left/ by a fleeing intruder/ a pipe gun, a projectile,/ sealed envelopes bigger than/ headstones on a grave--/ exhibits all" and the rundown courthouse where "A ceiling fan creaks/ around its arthritic bolts", and ending with a dispiriting snapshot of the guardians of the law:

Black-jacketed lawyers and a black-robed judge munch away at the body of the law.

More generally, Daruwalla consistently records his critical responses to the unsavoury aspects of the human condition,

ranging from bitter satire to anguished protest. Among the New Poems that open the book are responses to the Gujrat holocaust of 2002, to Palestine and to the Osama phenomenon. But topicality is only one of many facets of Daruwalla's verse. He can delve with equal facility into engaging historical themes. The second poem in the book is a fictional account of the Galileo affair from the perspective of Pope Urban VIII. Once friendly with the maverick scientist, Urban used to enjoy kenneing the heavens through the latter's spectacular invention, 'the Galilean refractor':

...all that astral phenomena lit into our ken—not just star and planet, but the fiery vapour of comets and the patina of scabs on the sun. ('Urban VIII Confesses')

But the relationship steadily slips into one of unavoidable confrontation over the question of the Copernican theory, resulting in Galileo's recantation. Daruwalla's historical interests are eclectic and wide-ranging: Mohenjodaro, Buddha's Fire Sermon, the Poseidonians, the transatlantic slave trade, admired writers like Borges, Lorca, Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam, all these and many more feature in Daruwalla's pages.

Whatever the subject, Daruwalla's poems are notations and meditations on what Louis McNiece startlingly described as 'the drunkenness of things being various':

Morning: islands, like somnambulists which had walked out on the mainland and woke up to find themselves waist-deep in the seas. ('Mandwa')

Daruwalla is one of the most fluent of Indian English poets; he is never at a loss for words as his omnivorous sensibility digests varied experiences in all their boredom and horror. If glory, the third quality in the Eliotesque series, isn't much in evidence the fault lies in the world, not in the observer. Daruwalla's strength can be interpreted as a weakness: readers have complained of wordiness, and not without reason; but the charge is applicable to all poets who go for amplitude rather than lapidary concentration, even a great poet like Whitman.

Daruwalla's poetic career is a love affair with a 'half-caste' mistress, whose 'genealogical tree' features 'a Muslim midwife and a Goan cook' and, happily mixing metaphors, 'Down the genetic lane, babus/and professors of English' who have 'made their one-night contributions'. His 'love for her survives from night to night/even though each time/I have to wrestle with her in bed'....She is Indian English, the language that I use. ('The Mistress')

May he wrestle on with her with undiminished vigour and keep adding to their lusty, streetwise progeny.

Kaiser Huq is professor of English at Dhaka University.

Bhat De public

RUBANA AHMED

We bleed and breed democracy. We rape and bring bastards to the world We violate and create Deny and grant

Repress and liberate All in a day's work in Bangladesh. All in the same song with no *alapa*, *bistar*, or *dhrupad*. Somewhat like the endless aggression of a player in an open court after years of break. Somewhat like the peaking shots of the opposition and position Siding with Rule and Misrule Standing opposed to the *Bhat de public*, We, the *Bhat de public*, Hunchbacks of 2006, Burdened with regrets, Burnt with promises and piling regrets.

We, more in number, better in quality With a '71, '75, '91 portfolio Having dealt with caretakers, advisors, guards and gurus of "*tantra*" And now flung amidst the Nobel and the nobodies, We, the *bhat de public* are currently being tested for our tolerance of a catch 22 plot The swing's being rocked too fast The chains are being tried to the limits Loosening with every push Leading to the sure crash on the ground But...*bhat de*'s haven't given in to the mass funeral plot *Bhat de public*'s getting ready for a role reversal this second By pushing the same players, By planning a coup d'etat By promising a higher ride to the same bastards Who crash and meet the ashes.

Ahhhh...time ...for a freedom song, Ripe and roasted Tight and toasted In the fire of the feast at the early hours of 2007 Electing Morality Evicting Money Evading Rhetoric Forever ...here in this land of the *Bhat de Public*

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BOOKNOTES

Dhaka's Little Magazines

Khademul Islam

The lifeblood of Dhaka's literary life, an indispensable part of its literary scene, are its little magazines. While the main standard bearers are indeed published regularly and have acquired, against convention and grain, an air of solidity, most of the others stick to the little magazine's well-established pattern of capricious publication schedules and eccentric individualism, with the humming of recondite bees in their bonnets.

Nirantar

Editor Naeem Hasan (Sixth issue)

Poet Naeem Hasan is steadily acquiring a name for himself by bringing out the quality, if irregular, literary magazine *Nirantar*. Here it must be mentioned that the volume before this had been notable for the publication of some

letters and selections from eleven diaries of the late writer Akhtazuzzaman Ilyas. The diaries ranged from the year 1968 to 1995 and were scrupulously sorted and edited by the writer Shahaduzzaman. The diaries had been kept intermittently, and with its mix of details of daily life (accounts of visits to relatives, bouts of hospitalization towards the end), and the record of a writer's inner life (newspaper items, despondency that our war of liberation had come to naught, poems

and quotations from Marx, Huxley, Yeats, the Ramayana, passage of political events, introspective asides) were a fascinating revelation of a deeply humane, cultivated and engaged sensibility.

The present sixth issue, at 428 immaculately-printed pages a hefty tome, came out in February of this year after a considerable hiatus, as underlined by the editor's own admission "This issue of *Nirantar* has spent most of its time in the birthing room." Reflecting the journal's determination to highlight some of the lesser-known issues and names in Bengali literature/culture, the volume has been dedicated to the Baul-devotee and poet Jalal Khan, with Sudhir Chakraborty contributing the lead article on 'Jalal giti'. There is a substantial article on Qamrul Hasan, as well as essays on various subjects, poems (including previously unpublished ones by Azizul Huq) and three short stories. Of the latter 'Idur-Bilal Khela' by Shahidul Zahir is definitely worth reading.

Price: Taka 100.00.

Gandeeb

Editor Tapan Barua



Each volume of *Gandeeb* reflects the individuality of its editor Tapan Barua, who begins his foreword with:

ও বনী ভূই বাস কী? পাখা ভাত চাস কি? পাখা আমি বাই না পুঁট মাছ পাই না একটা যদি পাই

This particular issue has two outstanding pieces. The first, labeled tongue-in-cheek as 'Audio-Visual Presentation' by Nurul Alam Atiq, is a selection of carefully and diligently researched pieces from various personal accounts, narratives and histories, along with pictorial representation, of Mogh depredations and Portuguese slave trade in Bengal during the Middle Ages. There is also a list of Bengali loan words from Portuguese, no doubt due to the interaction during this oppressive trade: *kajubadam*, *baranda*, *chabiskool*, *jua*, *chabi*, *mistri*, etc.

The second is a short story set in 1971, titled 'Punjabi Punjabi' by the editor himself, which in its stuttering, effective design, time lapses and sudden violence is quite unlike any other story about 1971 that one has read. Other contributions include poems by seven poets, four other short stories and a rather daring play adaptation of a story by Mario Vargas Lhosa.

Price: Taka 50.00.

Lyric

Editor Izaz Yusuf

Lyric is a long-standing little magazine which has earned itself a dedicated following. This issue is dedicated to Akhtazuzzaman Ilyas. It focuses on a subject the younger of Dhaka's literati seems to be inordinately fond of discussing and which has among them both its champions and detractors: postmodernism. As the editor

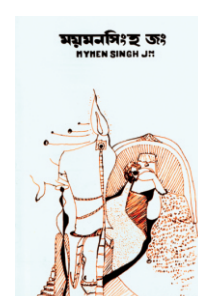


reminds us, it was the 1993 issue of *Lyric* that first brought postmodernism to the attention of those in the city who follow literary trends and subjects, and this volume is a recap of both the original 1993 papers/articles as well as the various debates and responses that subsequently ensued. This recapping has ensured that the volume does not have a dated air, and the volume does have a certain value in terms of local literary history since quite a few of our leading literary lights took part in the exchange. The sequencing of papers, arguments and counter-arguments has been done carefully and readers can follow the various lines of argument quite clearly.

Price: Taka 150.00.

Mymesingh Jong

Editor Sarkar Aziz



This issue of *Mymesingh Jong* came out in February of this year. It contains eight prose pieces, six stories and a translation piece. There is a long poem by Ashik Akbar

besides works by 14 other poets. The notable thing about *Mymesingh Jong* is its short story selection, where previously it has given space to some new and unusual works. In this issue too there are some very short stories which tend to be, in theme and language, somewhat different than the ones usually published elsewhere.

Price: Taka 30.00.

Boitha

Editor Shihab Shahriyar



illustrious group of writers the editor has cajoled into writing pieces for him: Shamsur Rahman, Selina Hossain, Syed Shamsul Huq, Rabiul Husain, Humayun Ahmed, Borhanuddin Khan Jahangir. Bangladesh, or Bengali literature, perhaps has to be the only possible place/site left in our determinedly unsentimental age where its literati can still unashamedly wax lyrical about moonlit nights. One of the few who, however, refuses to do so is Belal Chowdhury, whose dashed-off contribution 'Chondrohoto ek raat ei', about one weird trip out of Kolkata's

Coffeehouse environs into the borderless countryside, manages to be both funny and a mini-memoir of some good bohemian times. The editor in his preface had added that all those desirous of reading this volume on the internet can go to www.parbon.com.

Price: Taka 60.00.

Baas

Editor Rabiul Karim

Baas is an irregular, idiosyncratic publication that does not merely proclaim itself in favour of the odd and the experimental—it actually goes ahead and publishes them.. It is not surprising therefore that this issue contains no poems (the editors will probably gleefully claim none were good enough to publish) and contains an interesting mix of short stories and essays. Notable among the short stories is Mahmudul Hossain's 'Michilay na-jawa manusher golpo,' done entirely, a la one of Philip Roth's novels, as a dialogue between speakers.

Price: Taka 30.00