

LITERATURE

FROM the way the man had pulled at the rickshaw from behind. It was a wonder that he had not been thrown out of the vehicle and cast in different directions. Both the rickshaw puller and I were completely dumbfounded.

I had not yet seen the man's face. It would be hard to see anything sitting up on that seat — or so I believed. I thought I'd better get down and see what the matter was. Probably the rickshaw puller had the same thought. Passenger and puller both got down at exactly the same moment. Neither spoke a word though.

The rickshaw puller had a naturally gloomy face. Being totally baffled, he now appeared to be devoid of all spirit. Under unforeseen circumstances we both had come very close mentally — at least it seemed so for a little while. It bothered me to see the pitiful state of the rickshaw puller. So I laughed forcefully in order to give him courage. But I laughed without any noise as I was filled with apprehension.

As soon as I got down from the rickshaw, the man who had pulled at it from behind came forward, stood directly in front of me, and scanned me from head to toe. From the way he had pulled, I knew that there was more of unrelenting determination in him.

When I saw him face to face, my assumption was reinforced. What he wanted I did not know, but I knew that he was strongly inclined to fiddle around rather than put forth his demands. And what a face he had! Being preoccupied with anxiety, I did not let out a shriek of horror at seeing him. I was physically and mentally so exhausted that for a long time the only emotion I felt was amazement.

I asked in a low voice, "What do you want?" The man did not answer.

I had often seen such madcaps roaming scot free on the streets. I did not have much curiosity any longer — something that happens when you become habituated to a thing. Also, madmen were very much like sane ones. They were repetitive in their own ways. That is why I was not curious about them.

"What do you want?" I asked the man again. "Tell me, what is it you want? money?"

The man slapped me hard on my face. He gnashed his teeth and said, "Yes, money. You have known money too well, haven't you?"

I hadn't noticed before, but a few men had gathered around to watch the fun. I realized that they knew this demented person very well — he probably lived amongst them. That's why they had become used to him. As soon as he slapped me, they roared in laughter.

I had not yet begun to feel insulted because I hadn't quite fathomed what was happening. Only a few spectators were there. I could not figure out why they would be so overjoyed at my being slapped. I felt very self-conscious and uneasy. I asked in a harsh tone, "What makes you laugh?"

My words had no effect. They laughed even louder. Strange! They were really enjoying my encounter with the crazy man. I hung my head in humiliation. I couldn't bear to look at those people any more.

The rickshaw puller was my neighbor. We lived in the same area of the town. I looked at him. He was huddled miserably in one corner waiting for more unforeseen calamities. I needed to give him some courage, otherwise he would run off leaving me all alone. I said, "Don't be afraid, Kaloo."

Kaloo remained silent. One middle-aged man in the crowd laughed out loud at my words and said to the man next to him in a taunting but nonchalant way: "Uncle, save your own skin first!"

I realized that I had fallen into the hands of a stubborn maniac. I began to feel frightened. My heart was pounding hard. Till then I had feigned the careless attitude of a brave guy. It had taken a lot of effort to do that.

The monster-like madman was constantly targeting me. Ripples of excitement flew from him and he sang loud praises of Pakistan. The fervor of the crowd had dwindled; they appeared to be somewhat disappointed. As if to provoke the madman, a young boy remarked, "He's a gentleman, Dervish Baba, let him go."

I felt apprehensive at the tone in which the remark was made. It was clear that the Dervish Baba had a special grudge against gentlemen. Strange! This same feeling is shared by lowbred women also! Dervish Baba came into his own again — he gritted his teeth, laughed and beat at this chest. Then he said, "Flying on an easy wing, eh?"

man, all the better for the maniac and his disciples. They bloomed in their elements. Who knows how long the Dervish would continue to play with me? I felt impatient. I was also too tired to participate with any zest in this game. Whatever curiosity I had in the beginning had also vanished, especially after receiving a slap. The rickshaw puller had mingled far into the crowd and made himself a stranger. He was very clever, indeed. He saw which way the wind was blowing. I looked at my watch. It was one-thirty in the morning. The lunatic kept on circling around me. This constant circling had probably taken on a dance-like rhythm within him.

I looked out of the corner of my eye and saw that his face had become even more fearful. I sneaked a glance at the crowd and saw that they looked very satisfied. They were getting what they wanted in ample measure.

crank and had built up an affinity with him. They knew that he would continue to live with them unless he took it in his mind to do otherwise. They had thus accepted him, and selected those elements in him which could be a source of amusement for them. As for me, I was but a stranger to all of them — a foreigner, almost. I took this path to my work and now, at this odd hour of night, I had become a puppet, a totally helpless fellow who was being tortured by a demented creature. Maybe I would never see this lunatic again. These thoughts flitted through my mind as I brushed the dust off myself. I had no longer any defiance. It was easy to forgive now. Actually, as I stood up I had decided to forgive the madman.

After this cruel scene, the crowd thickened and the spectators gathered close to one another. Everyone was laughing, but without any sound now.

The madman jumped upon me. I had fallen down. I got up with a jerk. I decided to defend myself, even though I did not want to be violent. But if needs be, I would. That proved to be my undoing. The lunatic thrashed me with fists and blows. As best as I could, I tried to protect myself with my hands.

The people had started clapping again. I still remember something that occurred at this point.

The crazy guy was trying to push me back into the crowd. I resisted, and stood my ground where I was. I did not want to be an onlooker of madness. I shuddered even to think about it.

The loony was grinding his teeth and saying, "It is the order of the King." I became curious and asked, "Which King?"

"The new one," he said. Meanwhile, two police constables joined the crowd. But they too were keeping a low profile and watching the fun. On hearing about the order of the king, the two constables burst out laughing. Some people clapped at random.

The madman had stopped his beating. Now he was adamant that he would push me back into the crowd. I knew what this meanness meant. That is why I resisted with all my might.

The policemen pushed through the crowd with lathis in their hands. They waved their lathis at the madman and said, "Dervish Baba, why don't you go your way in peace?"

This advice worked. The madman moved away from me and stood apart. The policemen broke up the crowd. The rickshaw puller came up to me and stood by humbly.

"Let's go," I said. The policemen turned the rickshaw and pointed towards the next lane. "Don't go this way," they said.

I saw that two other nuts were lurking around the band. I thanked the constables for their caution.

"You arrived just on time," I said to them. "Who knew what would happen otherwise?" One of them laughed out at my remark.

"What would have happened?" he said. "You would have gotten more beatings and you would have mingled with the crowd and clapped. But be careful going down that lane."

I asked, "Why?" "Down that lane is a brothel, and beyond that a graveyard."

My rickshaw puller had no objection going that way and started down the lane. This incident occurred about a year and a half ago, on a Wednesday night. I had noted it in my diary and even jotted down a few details.

On a Wednesday Night

A Short Story by Sayeed Atiqullah

Translated by Parveen K Elias



CHARIER '95

I could not think of a reply. Why suddenly talk of those who live in luxury? If I replied in the affirmative, I could be in for trouble. Who knew if my safety would be assured even if I said no? So I kept mum. They saw that silence is golden. Let's see.

Dervish Baba started off again, "There's fire in your baby's hair. The fire is blazing. And you roam around in the fish market, hahh!"

The fish market did not seem to be the right place for roaming in relaxation. So he was not talking of breathing the carefree air of luxury, rather of an insolent and irresponsible person. The people around were clapping their hands. And what diabolic laughter rang out! Now I began to realize the situation. Possibly this crackbrained often targeted people returning home in the late hours of night and formed this kind of gathering. People laughed and clapped their hands. If it were a gentle-

Suddenly the insane man slapped at his two thighs and yelled, "Yaa Allah!"

I stiffened in fear. My throat became dry. Before I could figure out what to say, or do, another heavy slap fell right on my left ear. I fell down at least two feet away, and heard the madman say, "The order of the King!"

I never knew what it felt like being beaten without reason. Of course there was no need to be upset over this. The spectators knew very well, and so did I that this man was totally out of his mind — a stark lunatic. We could not know the emotions within him which precipitated his actions. That is why it was impossible for us to judge his words or actions.

But I noticed one difference between me and the spectators. I believed that the spectators often witnessed a scene like this one. They lived in the same neighborhood with this

cultivation of togetherness go hand in hand with creativity, and even Prospero, magically powerful though he was, failed to be a creative person while living in exile on an island.

In the twenties when Begum Rokeya wrote in Bengali, feminism was much more difficult to practise than it is today. She did not have any formal education and was married to a non-Bengali widower at 18. She became a widow at 28. Her husband wrote extraordinary pieces on the gender issue, making full use of the English she had learnt first from her brother and later from her husband.

These were exceptional persons, but what they achieved in their exceptional way applied what the average bilingualist was capable of achieving in his commonplace manner, given the desire to do so.

To take a contrary example, Henry Vivian Derozio, a Eurasian born and living in Bengal, was a creative writer and an influential teacher. He died young; but even if he had lived long, one would not have expected him to write as sig-

ethnic groups of Pakistan.

Bilingualism in Tower Hamlets has yet another positive significance. There exists among many of the Bangladeshis settled here not one — but two cleavages, both on the linguistic line. For apart from their separation from the English-speaking majority community, many parents find themselves separated from their own children as well. This is because whereas the children know and speak English parents do not, and should the children lack Bengali parents-children communication would be very difficult indeed. Knowing both English and Bengali the children would be able to have the right kind of relationship with their parents in respect of communication, and, perhaps more. At the same time the children would work as a bridge between their parents and the majority community outside. Some parents are not adequately equipped in Bengali either, for them their children's knowledge in, and practice of, the mother tongue would be useful. Despite their educational backwardness and also because of it, Bengali parents have strong emotional ties with the villages they have left behind; in an inverted sense they are like those members of the English ruling class who were to live like exiles in India during the Raj. In case their children know only English and discard Bengali, there would be a fearful cultural separation between the two generations. Indeed the separation already exists, monolingualism would widen it further with disastrous consequences.

However, it is worth noticing that if and when bilingualism is practised by children of mixed marriages in a situation in which complete monolingualism prevails just outside the family premises, the result is not helpful. One knows of mixed-marriage children finding themselves confused, even lost, when they practised the language of both parents, while living in a community in which one of the two parental languages is not used in schools. In circumstances like these, the parent who speaks the 'foreign' language gives in, to the relief of his/hers spouse and child.

As a community, Bengalis are particularly conscious of their language. For them language constitutes the most important element of identity; and it is in language that they

Flames of Memory

Abu Taher Majumder

We travelled together
you and I
Sat side by side
Inside —
Nearer the sky —
The paradisiacal chamber of the PIA
was aglow
your left hand was in my right —
... a woman of itself,
and mine the man's bared breast
she curls inside."
It was my first long-distance flight
yours too Jotsna
Along the route of the blue
And emotions and feelings
With headaches and reelings
Yours was a psychological excursion
Mine to the realm of East-West literary relations...
I told you: you don't have to travel so far
to understand my mind...
You said: The relationships undulated
Beside the coast of the Karnaphuli
And with the green grasses embracing the horizon...
We missed our messages at home...
Your fingers were indulgent
Your palm was warm
Inviting
In the rendezvous of meshy desires
The impulses travelled to and from
Our glances met and flew
To the distant star bridal and balmy
There were short-circuits and explosions
and silence fluttered in piercing eloquence
... we knew that a bar was broken between
Life and life; we were mixed at last!
The rude arms of the seats dissolved
My courage faltered
Uncertainty haunted the dove of love
I was transfigured
And only heard:
Hello, there, a cup of cold orange juice
Or coke or anything —
But cold ...
There's something wrong...
My heart muttered —
"For god's sake hold your tongue
And let me..."
My tongue remained tied
The golden moments flew back
To the palaces of Aphrodite and Cupid
Much wind blew over the Scotch Highlands Caern
Much water flew down the Thames the Dee
The Buriganga and the Karnaphuli
And "I... Heard the mermaids singing ..."
In "... a melancholy strain..."
Time efface many things —
But deeper burn the flames of memory
And the scarf of dream wraps
The scars of the moments of glory

Bilingualism, Identity and Education

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ings, the other (the borrowed language) which superficially may look as beautiful as the other is, very often only a flower floating on the surface without the roots. She has a word of caution too. "If education in a foreign language poses a threat to the development of the mother tongue, or leads to its neglect, then the roots of the mother tongue will not be sufficiently nourished or they may gradually be cut off altogether." And she adds, "If the foreign language is merely a water lily floating on the surface without proper roots, a situation may gradually develop in which the child will only have two surface flowers, two languages, neither of which she commands" in the way a monolingual would command her mother tongue. Thus double semilingualism. And if the roots have been cut off, nothing permanent can grow any more." (emphasis added).

Well, the danger is real and the solution to the problem lies in making the borrowed language grow out of the knowledge of the mother tongue, so that it is possible to have proper bilingualism instead of double semilingualism. Michael West did not speak of a threat; but he certainly noticed English as an imposition on the Bengali learners, and was aware of a resistance growing up from within out of a fear of the loss of one's national identity.

Clearly, there is an aggressiveness in the colonial situation of bilingualism. The Bengali student had no choice; he was obliged to learn his master's language. The days of colonialism are officially over. The Bangladeshis in Britain have come to this country voluntarily with the hope of escaping from the poverty they were born into. But speaking from the language point of view, is the situation really different? Isn't there a threat to, and an imposition on, the child? There certainly is, and colonialism without colonies persists in the area of human relationship. True, what with the collapse of the old form of imperialism and what with the emergence of democratic ideals, the idea of putting everyone into the melting pot of monolingualism has been

overtly abandoned, but inequality remains and the more powerful continue to dominate over those who are weak.

The question of identity is important indeed. How can there be learning without the learner? He is the measure as well as the creator. For genuine knowledge is more than an acquisition, it is a creation. The first person singular who learns is made of the Socratic and Cartesian individuals rolled into one, and is, at the same time, more sensitive than responsive. Unless this living identity is properly nurtured, all attempts to educate him would be nothing more than a counterproductive torture.

A child's right to his mother tongue is inalienable. This is not a mere constitutional obligation backed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but a cultural and psychological need. As another historical character in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, Mowbray, has put it, to be deprived of one's mother tongue is to face "speechless death."

Puf in modest terms, what the Bangladeshi students in Tower Hamlets need at the moment are: (a) instruction through English at the primary level, with Bengali as the second language; and (b) acceptance of Bengali as a subject of study at the secondary level, not in the half-hearted manner as it is done at present, but earnestly from year VII onwards, granting it a status equal to that of modern European languages. This would be far from an ideal arrangement, and would fall clearly short of the fruitful necessity of using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction. But the circumstances in Britain are peculiar. The two measures are suggested in view of the facts that the Bengali child having poor or no English in his home, needs a proper exposure to English to make up his deficiency, and that however desirable it might be, it would be impossible to arrange for instruction at the secondary level through the medium of Bengali. However, it would not be enough to accept the propositions; equally important would be the attitude in which English and Bengali should be taught. English must not come as a threat, and

should, in no circumstances, be allowed to make the learning of the mother tongue a floating, rootless water lily. The sense of identity should be nurtured with care with a view to removing the ill effects of the loss of one's bearings and moorings and, at the same time, accelerating the development of the positive benefits linguistic identity.

A person without his identity is much worse than a person without his passport, for he is indeed a destitute and a prisoner. Losing his collective memory, he is likely to be both isolated and lost. His loneliness may be like that of a crow in a foreign land. The situation in which a Bangladeshi finds himself is often of fear and inferiority. If he knows English well he may, hopefully, find a job, but if he has forgotten his language he has lost contact not only with his mother but also with his own self. Language is both a tool and a tie. It allows the individual to express himself and communicate with others; and, at the same time, connects him with his family and home, and also with his past-past which is an essential part of his intellectual and emotional being. Language is an ever-widening reservoir of history, tradition, literature and culture, on which an individual can perpetually draw, much to his creative nourishment. Without a collective memory, the individual is a prisoner of both dryness and darkness. Culturally, he becomes a slum-dweller without hope and with rising despair.

No less important is the fact that it is only when a person is rooted that he can create and contribute. No man is a mere job-seeker or applicant for social security; he is a creative being. Give him his sense of confidence and belonging, and he will be able to bring out his best. An uprooted individual is not unlike an uprooted tree, incapable of bearing fruits.

In British India, the Bengalis were in an unfortunate situation. But despite their being aliens in their own land, Bengalis put the bilingualism that was forced upon them to advantageous use. As a contrast, the Anglo-Indians, who were Eurasians living in India, suffered, because of their monolingualism. Discarding the na-

tive tongue, they accepted English, wholeheartedly. They were favoured by the British rulers. But despite state patronage, they failed to make any meaningful contribution to Indian culture. Culturally, they were barren, unacceptable to the English as kith and kin because of the colour of their skin which was black, and to the Indians because of their language which was English.

The best of the Bengali writers in the age of colonialism were bilinguals. But they had the good sense, which is an essential part of one's genius, to realize that they would never be at their creative best if they strove to become Anglo-Indians. One of the most powerful among them, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, used to sigh, in his early years, for the shores of Albion. He had renounced the religion as well as the language of his parents, and adopted the European life-style. It was his ambition to be an English

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writer and indeed he made his debut in English. But a genius that he was, Madhusudan did not take long to know that he must write in Bengali, making full use of his acquired knowledge of English. Repentant, he turned to Bengali and made significant contributions to the development of Bengali literature. Bankimchandra Chatterjee, the first novelist in our language, wrote his first novel in English, but realized like Madhusudan, that he was born to be a major Bengali writer and not a minor one in the English language. Iswarchandra Vidyasagar was a Sanskrit scholar, and had also learnt English; he put the knowledge of both languages to the use of his creativity and wrote in Bengali, enriching its literature. Rabindranath Tagore knew English well, the book that won him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913 comprised poems he had translated into English from the Bengali original. He would not have been the great and influential writer that he was, had he forsaken his identity. Satisfaction of societal instincts and

significantly as some of his Bengali students did; simply because he was torn between his patriotic linkage with Bengal and his linguistic linkage with England. He, we recall, knew no Bengali. The case of Iswarchandra Gupta is also illustrative. There was hardly any conflict in him; for he was an unadulterated Bengali if there was one; but he also suffered, because, in his case, of his lack of knowledge in English.

The failure of the Anglo-Indians was repeated, decades later, by an ethnic minority in Bangladesh, called the Biharis, whose language was Urdu and who had come as refugees from India to Bangladesh. This unfortunate group refused to be bilingual even when the government of Pakistan, whose patronisation they looked up to, had accepted Bengali as one of the two sate languages of Pakistan. When Bangladesh won its independence, the Biharis expected to be repatriated to Pakistan but the Pakistan government refused to take them because they belonged to none of the native

think they have realized their best creative selves. Bengali literature has a history of more than a thousand years; and today no less than 190 million speak it, making the Bengalis the sixth largest language group in the world. Bangladesh had fought during the days of Pakistan for transforming a state which threatened to be monolingual, into a bilingual one and has, eventually, established a monolingual state. To deprive the members of this linguistic group settled in Britain of the opportunity to cultivate their mother tongue would be to force them into a condition of slum-dwelling, making them shrink and withdraw. They would be in despair and constitute a spot of weakness and discontent, and also a drag on collective progress. On the other hand, to allow them to develop on bilingual lines would be to help them contribute meaningfully to the variety and richness of a multicultural society. A garden of diversity is just what we need. In the colonial days Bengal had added to the prosperity of Britain. That was a forcible extortion as Edmund Burke and other liberals have noted. Bangladesh can make a new contribution, this time voluntarily. The Bangladeshis are here because they are needed; they can grow into useful citizens influencing collective decisions and making the society they have opted to live in more prosperous, human, vivacious and variegated.

It has been pointed out, and rightly so, that colonialism harms not only the colonized but also the colonizers themselves, degrading them as human beings. A cruel person is cruel to all — outsiders as well as insiders. Democracy needs a tolerant society and the acceptance of bilingualism for Bangladeshis would amount to nurturing democratic values to the benefit not only of the Bengalis but of the majority community also. It would mean a step taken towards the removal of a persistent inequality; and inequality is, we know, positively anti-democratic and a breeding ground of the subversive spirit in man.

London has, in the past, been a sanctuary for revolutionaries and a bastion of democracy. Dr Johnson, the great Londoner, did not exaggerate in saying, "When a man is tired of London he is tired of life; for there is in London all

that life can afford." Indeed there is. For there is in it, among other things, the difference between the privileged and the deprived, the two nations that Disraeli spoke of. Let the glorious aspects of this great city flourish to the detriment of the signs of misery and woe that William Blake had once noticed writ large on the face of every Londoner, so that it can no longer be said of the city what Shelley had said — "Hell is a city much like London / A populous and smoky city" (*Peter Bell the Third*). Let it be a city of friends, and not of alienated individuals lost in different kinds of smoke, literal as well as metaphorical.

Bangladeshi children need bilingualism so that they can, through proper education and adjustment, make this adopted country a real home for them. To try to educate them like Yahoos, Calibans, or even Fridays would be degrading even for the educators themselves. And for the practice of genuine bilingualism, as distinguished from double semilingualism, it is necessary to have good teachers. Teaching needs teachers; better the teacher recruit bilingual teachers with full commitment to their work. And the work would not be merely rule-governed, it has to be creative in large. Needless to say that teaching itself has to be a matter of joy, employing not only teacher-fronted exercises but also interpersonal exchanges between students themselves as well as between teachers and students. The purpose would be to help students liberate their creative energies, feel confident and rooted and to equip them for the task of building a better society, working with a sense of togetherness, and creating harmony in diversity.

Democracy requires equality of rights and opportunities. Let not Tower Hamlets speak against the claim of democracy in Britain. Bangladeshis in Tower Hamlets are a deprived community. They need fair treatment and proper education for their children, and through them, for themselves.

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